

## Local History: The Curtis Museum Story



William Curtis

The group of Victorian buildings at the top of Crown Hill, originally the Mechanic's Institute and Museum, the Inwood Cottage Hospital, and the Assembly Rooms, was achieved in the space of only three years.

In the middle of the 19th century the railway had created a new boundary in the town, within which were its industries and commercial life; outside lay the fields. At the same time the population was growing and also widening its horizons beyond the traditional daily toil.

Early in 1877 the problems came to a head. The Mechanic's Institute had outgrown its premises; the Town Hall was too small to accommodate public entertainments. Miss Bell of Borovere wished to give the town a drinking fountain but there was nowhere to erect it.

Money was available for a purpose built hospital if a site could be found. In this emergency, Mr Hall offered to present as much of Crown Close and the Crown Gardens as might be necessary. The main condition was that the buildings should be designed by the same architect to harmonise in style and be erected as far as possible at the same time. The designs of Mr CE Barry were accepted, and the local firm of JH and E Dyer were entrusted with the building contracts. Work began in 1879. Patients were transferred to the new hospital on 6 October 1880. On 19 October the Assembly Rooms opened with a 'Dramatic Entertainment' entitled *'The Chimney Corner'* by the Pickwick Histrionic Club. The following week the Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Selborne, opened the Institute and Museum.

### THE MECHANICS INSTITUTE AND THE CURTIS MUSEUM

The Alton Mechanic's and Apprentice's Library, to give it its full original title, was founded in September 1837 after some two years of careful preparation. William Curtis, who since childhood had been intensely interested in the world about him, had found some likeminded friends, who derived great pleasure from an evening spent discussing scientific and literary subjects. The movement for Mechanic's Institutes was gaining ground in the country, and this local group became convinced of the general benefit of forming a society where they could share their interest in the natural sciences with the working men of the town.

By the time the first meeting was convened the idea had won the support of about forty men and a library of more than a hundred books had been collected. The meeting place for the first two years

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was a former hop store belonging to Crowley's Brewery, on the corner of High Street and Turk Street. Most of the lectures were given by John Wright Curtis, William's younger brother, who had just gained his doctor's degree from Edinburgh University. They were both keen naturalists, and William's special interest in geology was complemented by John's interest in botany and ornithology.

In 1839 the Institute moved to a more comfortable room which had been built as a ballroom by James Baverstock, and since used by George Saulez as a private school. William Curtis had the help of a committee, and of John Bryant, Alton's postmaster, as secretary. In 1844 the Institute moved once more, this time to Turk Street to a building provided by Crowleys for the girls of the British School. It was shortly after this that Charles Stewart came to Alton as the new headmaster of the boy's British School, and together they planned a regular course of lectures which probably helped to secure the future of the Institute.

By now the library had grown to six hundred volumes, and true to the principle of involving the men of the town, John Gale, a carpenter, was the librarian. In 1850 in a lecture to the Institute, William Curtis suggested the next objective by advocating the educational value of a varied and well-arranged museum. At the end of the year he pursued the point by holding two soirees in his own home at 8, High Street. Ninety eight people saw this private exhibition, and it was rated such a success that in the following March the members combined to stage a similar one at the Town Hall for the benefit of the Institute.

More soirees followed at the Institute, and then in June 1854, a most ambitious project was organised at the Town Hall, an Exhibition of Works of Art and Industry and of Natural Objects, which lasted three weeks. In addition a remarkable number of people living in Alton or much further afield, lent beautiful, valuable or just interesting items.

The proceeds of the exhibition were such that the Institute was able to buy a house in Market Street. The members did the conversion work themselves to provide a Reading Room and Library on the



*The displays at the Curtis Museum in the 1940s*



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ground floor, and a year later a Museum on the first floor. Local geology played a major part, but there were also the skulls of birds and animals and examples of taxidermy.

William Curtis's vision of the Institute as an educational society for the people of Alton had been achieved, and it flourished. The Mechanic's Institute was by now part of the life of the town which made it possible to raise the money for the new building in Crown Close by subscription and the sale of the house in Market Street.

A year after the opening in 1880, William Curtis died and the new museum was renamed in his memory. The Alton Urban District Council became responsible for the museum from 1920 and following the 1944 Education Act, it passed to the Hampshire County Council.