

James Wilkinson's original speech he made at the official opening of the Literary Institute June 1862

'It may not be uninteresting to give a brief account of the Keld Mutual Society, and the circumstances which led to the building of a Literary Institute. The whole is a result of a thought, which was this – How can we expect young men to avoid places of evil resort, unless more suitable places be provided for them, or how can we expect them to improve their leisure time, without suitable employment? Hence the necessity of a comfortable place of resort, with instructive and profitable employment. The natural reply to such a thought was – What better than a comfortable room, with a good supply of interesting and instructive books, with slates, pencils, pens and ink, and other conveniences? Such a room was provided adjoining the chapel, where I met with twelve young men, on the 18th May 1854, for the purpose of forming this society.

All were invited, rules were drawn up, officers appointed and rates of charges fixed. This being done, the society set out on the principle of self-reliance. Many who did not understand us looked on, wondering what we were about to do; others, more intelligent, were doubtful of the success of the experiment, so that we had not much hope of encouragement from others, but we felt confident if the numbers of thirteen members could be kept up, or should it ever be raised to the number of twenty members, the society would be sufficiently strong to sustain itself. Since the commencement of the society, the number of those who have become members is 54. The number of members at present is 34. Our library was commenced by a present of 100 volumes of second-hand books from some kind friends in Leeds. Some three or four contributions of the same kind have been made by friends at a distance, which we were thankful to receive, but the largest portion of the library, which now numbers 361 volumes, has been purchased by the society. The library is a loan library to the members. The reading room has always been well supplied with newspapers, for which, in part, we are indebted to friends at a distance; to all of whom we ever feel greatly obliged. With respect to our financial affairs, we commenced paying 2s 6d entrance fee and 6d per month subscription, to which we have kept since the commencement. The society has raised by entrance fees, subscriptions, the sale of old newspapers the sum total of £65 2s 6 ½ d. But the society has not in this been entirely self-relying. We once had a donation of 2s 6d from a friend. The expenses of this society, including the purchase of books and all incidental expenses have been £62 3s 8 ½ d which leaves at present a balance of £2 18s 10d. The society at one time borrowed £4, which was paid back with interest, in twelve months; apart from that, every year's accounts give a balance in favour of the society. Acting on the principle of self-reliance, our plan has always been first to get in money, and then spend it to the best advantage.

The society worked on very comfortably where it commenced till the year 1860, when its peace was disturbed by the rebuilding of the chapel and other causes, in fact, the place had become too strait for us. From the room adjoining the chapel, we removed to the school room, and tried to make a joint concern with the day school; but here we did not find the comfort and convenience we had left, and there was little hope of either settling down or making any progress there. We therefore met to consult upon what was best to be done, when different plans were proposed, but the strongest feeling was in favour of a new building. The result was to try and purchase an old, useless smithy, and to try and raise a new and more useful and ornamental building. Having had a reasonable offer made for the old building, we again met to try to fix upon a plan, and to make out an estimate of cost, when we came to the conclusion that we could erect a building with the use of the old chapel roof, for about £70.

Then the question came up – how was the money to be raised? We had just finished our chapel, which cost more than £300, and all the money was not raised, but we hoped would soon be; yet we thought it rather soon to make another appeal to our friends, but we resolved to try, thinking we might find some nook or corner where we had not been to beg for the chapel. The first application was made to Mr James Backhouse of York, and to Thomas Smith Esq. the lord of the manor. From Mr Backhouse I received an answer, the substance of which was: ‘my dear Friend – By the kindness of interested friends, I shall have £40 for thy reading room & c. To this £5 has since been added. From Thomas Smith esq. I received for £5 5s 0d. Thus encouraged, we decided on our plans and commenced action, and built our Literary Institute, which instead of £70 has, with other expenses connected, cost £118 1s 6d, towards which £101 5s 11d has been subscribed, leaving a balance remaining of £16 15s 11d. We trust that the building will be a lasting benefit to the neighbourhood, as well as an ornament to our village.

The society has had to carry on its operations in the face of many difficulties, through the continued and increasing poverty of the lead mines, and as a consequence many members have had to leave the neighbourhood to seek employment elsewhere, and others have been prevented joining the society from the same cause; yet the society has worked on in unbroken harmony, making gradual progress.

We find great comfort, as well as convenience, in our new building and hope, with better times, to make more progress. It will be a great matter to have our Literary Institute free from debt, that we may carry on our operations without encumbrance. We are very grateful to our many kind friends who have aided us in our undertaking, and hope that many more this day have not only come to the opening of our Institute, but to the finishing of the debt.’

Source: Craig, W.J. The Keld Institute, British Mining No.3. Reproduced with kind permission.