

6. ‘Temple of Knowledge and Reason’: culture and politics at 3 Blackfriars Road, Surrey

As we have seen in the previous chapters, by the early nineteenth century the very name of the Crown and Anchor tavern clearly signposted its political associations and identity. The tavern’s longstanding presence on the metropolitan landscape, combined with its early liberal-aristocratic connections, helped to secure its place as a bastion for London’s politicised middling classes. If the Crown and Anchor tavern had come to symbolise the moderate and measured opposition to the political landscape during the Reform agitation of late 1830, events south of the Thames signalled that plebeian radicals with more pressing intent had found a new home. On the evening of 8 November, a crowd of almost 2000 assembled at the Rotunda, Richard Carlile’s newly leased premises in Blackfriars Road, Surrey, during a period of intense unrest in the Reform crisis. The magistrates of the city, wrote one contemporary observer, were ‘all of the opinion’ that the ‘heated harangues’ at the Rotunda were the source of the rioting that gripped the city.¹ Their attention on the building was also fuelled by rumoured plans of riots during the King’s expected visit to the city, and of assassination plots against Prime Minister, Lord Wellington, and Home Secretary, Robert Peel.

Carlile was also well aware of the focus of the authorities on his new building. Anticipating a riot on 8 November, he reportedly instructed the cleaner at the Rotunda to make six staves out of the rails of some staircases to ‘imitate those of Constables’, paint them tricoloured and inscribe them with the word ‘Rotunda’.² Whether Carlile really intended the staves to be used in defending the premises or whether they served a purely provocative symbolic purpose is unclear. The mood of the crowds who gathered at the venue that evening suggests that Carlile could have had both purposes in mind. By early evening, an angry crowd of about 1500 people proceeded in unison from the Rotunda, over Blackfriars Bridge and into the city, shouting ‘Down with the police’ and ‘No Peel’—a hostile affront to both the new metropolitan police and the man responsible for their inception, Home Secretary, Robert Peel. At the head of the cavalcade marched a flag-bearer—proudly and provocatively raising a tricolour flag emblazoned with the word ‘Reform’. It was a call to march. Joined by others along the route through the Strand, including many women, they proceeded

¹ *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 14 November 1830.

² Home Office Papers, HO64/11, November 1830, fo. 249.

to Downing Street, where several scuffles ensued. The A-Division of the new police force was quickly summoned from Scotland Yard. With a police line formed several men deep across King Street, a 'general fight ensued' and, in the skirmish, it was reported that 'many received broken heads'. The police line held strong and prevented the crowd from menacing the House of Commons. Moreover, the police gained a crucial symbolic victory—the triumph of the evening reported by *The Times* was that the tricolour flag was successfully captured by police.³ As James Vernon notes, symbolic icons such as the tricolour flags were often targeted by rival groups, 'as if destroying a flag would destroy the resolve of their opponent'.⁴ The triumph with which the police captured the flag shows the authorities understood its significance as a potentially powerful impetus to action.

Characteristically, Carlile's public pronouncements did little to allay the authorities' fears. By eight o'clock on 9 November, the theatre was filled to capacity. With magistrates in attendance, and police numbers bolstered by many 'respectable' householders in the area invested as special constables, Carlile barricaded the doors to the theatre, but went ahead with his planned lecture.⁵ Military officers were stationed at Blackfriars Bridge in case of riot—rumoured to begin at the Rotunda at 11 o'clock that evening. Yet by midnight all remained relatively quiet. Some stone throwing and scuffles with police were reported, but fears of assassination attempts proved unfounded. The tricolour flags remained intact, the staves remained concealed and the Rotunda's doors were not breached.

Despite the anticlimax of the evening, the incidents of early November reveal that, by 1830, London's plebeian radicals (and the tricolour flag) had found a new rallying point. Between 1830 and 1832, the Rotunda became the pre-eminent arena of London radical activity featuring such luminaries as Richard Carlile, William Cobbett, Henry Hunt, John Gale Jones and Daniel O'Connell, as well as providing the headquarters for the highly influential National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC).⁶ The Rotunda also provided the platform for a new generation of less orthodox, freethinking radicals such as the Reverend Robert Taylor, Eliza Sharples and an eccentric duo, John 'Zion' Ward and Charles Twort. London's diverse radical groups and ideologies assembled under the Rotunda's roof during the two years of Carlile's lease in vocal opposition to 'Old Corruption'.

3 *The Times*, 9 November 1830. See also *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 10 November 1830.

4 James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A study in English political culture c.1815–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 115.

5 *The Times*, 11 November 1830. See also Theophila Campbell Carlile, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press, as Told in the Story of the Life of Richard Carlile* (London, 1899), p. 122.

6 For more on the National Union of the Working Classes, see Chapters 7 and 8 of this study.

The Rotunda was among the new venues that had transformed London's urban cultural and political landscape at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and which offered new possibilities for meetings and assemblies. As Thomas Markus contends, towns in this period were configured in entirely different ways, and not only did they appear different, they also 'felt' different because of the changed composition of the built environment and altered relationships between old and new spaces.⁷ Where patrons of the Crown and Anchor could draw on the cultural understanding of the space that had developed over decades, the expanding public sphere provided unprecedented opportunities for new radical spaces with a new 'feel' and new modes of operating. James Epstein has argued that a marked feature of popular radicalism in this period was the search to gain access to and control sites of assembly.⁸ Plebeian radicals tried hard to make the Crown and Anchor their own, but they were never more than one of a multitude of constituencies using its ample facilities, and their attentions did little to shift the place of the Crown and Anchor in the popular imagining or in political language. In the metropolis, the struggle for access and control was arguably, albeit briefly, most successful at Carlile's Blackfriars Road Rotunda.

With the Rotunda as a new institution on the political landscape, Carlile needed to move quickly to establish its radical credentials. In so doing, he turned to the very symbols that had once been used so effectively by caricaturists to denigrate the radical cause. He invoked political shorthand, not only with the tricoloured painted staves, but by adorning the facade of the Blackfriars Road Rotunda with two enormous tricolour flags—the effect intensified by the backdrop of an otherwise uniform terrace-house streetscape. Inside the venue, smaller tricoloured flags, framed by sprigs of laurel (the radical symbol for victory), lined the passages of the building. The layered meaning of agency and threat embodied in the tricolour allowed Carlile a potent insignia under which to open the Rotunda; he publicly pledged 'a brave and glorious struggle and a successful war under its tri-colored banner against aristocratic or clerical despotism [and] corruption'.⁹

There could be no mistaking the cultural understanding Carlile intended to create at his new premises. The tricoloured flag had long carried a potent message of dissent in Britain and the 1830 French Revolution saw British radicals embrace a renewed pride in the ideals embodied in the tricolour. After a hiatus of some years, it re-emerged in Britain alongside the cap of liberty as political

7 Thomas Markus, *Order and Space in Society: Architectural form and its context in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1982), p. 1.

8 James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the language and culture of popular politics in modern Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 113.

9 *Prompter*, 12 November 1830.

shorthand for plebeian agency and action.¹⁰ The tricolour represented a potent unifying motif of liberty, with a pernicious twist: it provided an unequivocal indication of menace and revolution. As Henry Vizetelly was to recall years later, the tricoloured flags were as 'irritating to the peeler [police] of those days as a red rag is to an infuriated bull'.¹¹ Moreover, as one report to the Home Office maintained, it also represented for many a 'symbol of treason'.¹²

Many of the leading historians of early nineteenth-century radicalism, from E. P. Thompson and Iain McCalman to James Epstein, Iorwerth Prothero, Joel Wiener and David Worrall, have noted the presence of the Rotunda on the radical landscape of the period. This body of work has tended to focus on specific Rotunda identities, rather than looking at the impact of the Rotunda on the nature of radicalism during this period. E. P. Thompson, for instance, resurrected the sober and industrious members of the NUWC,¹³ whom Prothero also considered synonymous with Rotunda radicalism.¹⁴ McCalman and Epstein have focused on Richard Carlile and flamboyant Rotunda orator and entertainer the Reverend Robert Taylor as examples of the less orthodox elements evident in radical culture at that time.¹⁵ Worrall has examined the theatrical aspects of Rotunda radicalism, specifically the performance of the *Captain Swing* play by Taylor.¹⁶ Wiener's account of the Rotunda remains one of the most extensive to date.¹⁷ His chronological and descriptive account of the building, however, is limited in its scope by his interest in the institution first and foremost as an episode in the life of Richard Carlile. Further, work in other scholarly disciplines such as sociology, science, literature and natural history has also explored the earlier cultural institutions that inhabited the premises in the decades before

10 On the reintroduction of radical symbolism in the early nineteenth century, particularly the cap of liberty, see James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political language, ritual and symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 80–1.

11 Henry Vizetelly, *Glances Back Through Seventy Years: Autobiographical and other reminiscences* (London 1893), vol. 1, p. 63.

12 Home Office Papers, HO40/21/25, November 1830, fo. 260.

13 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 891–2.

14 See also Joseph Hamburger, *James Mill and the Art of Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 288, who conflates the National Union of the Working Classes with 'Rotundaite' in the index.

15 Iain McCalman, 'Popular Irreligion in Early Victorian England: Infidel preachers and radical theatricality in 1830s London', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (eds), *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 51–67; Epstein, *Radical Expression*, pp. 138–40.

16 David Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, censorship and Romantic period subcultures 1773–1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 340–60.

17 Joel Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 165–90.

Carlile's lease.¹⁸ These earlier tenants—namely, the Leverian Museum and the Surrey Institution—were important public institutions in their own right.

This study builds on this body of scholarship to explore the influence and impact of the premises at 3 Blackfriars Road from a broader perspective, with particular focus on the layers of identity associated with the site between 1798 and the early 1840s, how this influenced and impacted upon radical culture, and what it tells us of the nature of the public sphere in this period. The remaining three chapters explore how, and why, the Rotunda engendered such passions as displayed by the hundreds who answered Carlile's call to protect the building and its tricolour flags.

This chapter introduces the site itself and its varied inhabitants. With few traces of architectural evidence remaining in the historical record, it will begin, as far as is possible, by 'reconstructing' the building, for an understanding of the physical structure of the space itself is necessary to understand the nature of Rotunda radicalism. It surveys the venue's 'prehistory' as the Leverian Museum and the Surrey Institution before turning to the period of Carlile's tenancy. Its identity as a venue of knowledge and learning for the working classes, in the context of other outlets for working-class education, is then examined. The intellectual and educative legacies of the site neatly articulated with Carlile's key ambition for the Rotunda: to provide a 'general lecturing and discussion establishment' dedicated to the principles of 'freethought and free discussion'. This, he believed, would usher in a new era of radicalism, lead to total reform of the social, political and economic systems and realise the emancipation of the British working classes.¹⁹ To properly understand the history of the building, therefore, we have to take a longer view, for this approach also tells us more about the tumultuous period of its most notorious tenant.

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Located on the Surrey side of Blackfriars Bridge, the Rotunda was built in 1788–89 for James Parkinson by the eminent London builder James Burton (alias James Haliburton) to house the significant natural history collection of Sir Ashton Lever.²⁰ The collection, originally housed in Lever's famous

18 See the sociologist Charles Tilly, 'Spaces of Contention', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2000), pp. 135–59, who uses the Rotunda example of early November 1830 to illustrate 'spatial patterns in contentious politics'. Scholarship from the other disciplinary fields will be evident in the following references.

19 *Prompter*, 13 November 1830.

20 For a brief account of the Leverian Museum, see Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1978), pp. 28–32. On Lever, see P. E. Kell, 'Lever, Sir Ashton (1729–1788)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16530>> (hereafter *ODNB*). On

Holophusikon museum in Leicester Square, comprised a tremendous assembly of natural curiosities, antiquities and artefacts sourced from around the world, many from the South Pacific expeditions of James Cook. Amassed over a 12-year period, the 26 000 items in the collection were initially displayed at Leicester House in 1775.²¹ It was hailed as one of the finest natural history collections ever exhibited in Britain, rivalling any similar collection on the Continent.²² Lever marketed his new London enterprise aggressively and, like others controlling many of the public cultural institutions that bloomed in this period, he sought to define its status by boasting the patronage of many aristocratic supporters including the 'Royal Highnesses the Dukes of Cumberland and Brunswick'.²³

Lever's collection came at great financial cost. The collection reportedly amounted to a colossal £50 000. The opening of the Leicester Square museum to public admission failed to offset the cost of the investment. In the nine years of its operation, Lever maintained that he raised only £13 500 from admissions.²⁴ Facing increasing debt, by 1784, he was forced to dispose of the collection. Lever nevertheless remained convinced that the collection was worthy of being the 'Object of National Attention' and he, alongside other natural history collectors, lobbied hard to see it remain in the hands of the British public.²⁵ Lever, determined that the collection was too rare and valuable to be dispersed by 'common sale', successfully petitioned Parliament to dispose of the contents of the museum by lottery. The scheme ultimately proved another financial failure. The lottery was drawn in March 1786 after selling only 8000 of the 36 000 tickets available. Land agent James Parkinson secured the collection after his wife, Sarah, purchased the winning ticket for him.²⁶ Without the means to house the massive collection, Parkinson immediately sought to dispose of his winnings by sale. When the collection again failed to attract any significant interest, Parkinson decided to construct a purpose-built facility for it. Despite an uncertain beginning, it was to be an institution that could have easily been cited by Habermas as an example of the public sphere in action.

James Parkinson (not to be confused with the surgeon and radical associated with the Newgate circle), see H. S. Torrens, 'Parkinson, James (bap. 1730, d. 1813)', *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21370>>. On James Burton, see H. M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* [hereafter *BDBA*], fourth edn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 203–4.

21 'Lever's museum consisting of natural curiosities and productions of art. Petition of Sir Ashton Lever', *Journal of the House of Commons* (1803 reprint), 1784/06/07, vol. 40, <<http://www.bopcris.ac.uk/bop1688/ref1572.html>> (hereafter 'Petition of Sir Ashton Lever').

22 See reports of witnesses called to attest to the significance of the collection to the House of Commons committee in 'Petition of Sir Ashton Lever'.

23 *Now Open, Patronised by their Royal Highnesses the Dukes of Cumberland and Brunswick, the Leverian Museum...Leverian Museum broadside* (London, n.d.)

24 'Petition of Sir Ashton Lever'.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Torrens, 'Parkinson, James'.

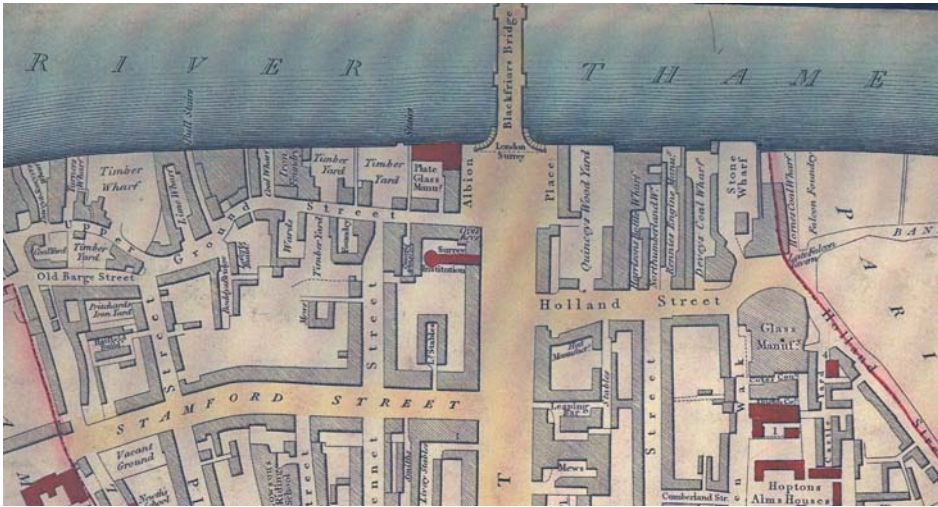


Figure 6.1 Map of Blackfriars Road, Parish of Christchurch, Surrey, c. 1820. Note the Surrey Institution shaded red, centre left.

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The site at 3 Blackfriars Road offered considerable scope for Parkinson's venture, occupying an ample 1000 square yards (1.4 ha) on the Surrey side of the Thames, just a few doors down from the entrance to Blackfriars Bridge (Figure 6.1). Construction of the building, designed jointly by Parkinson and Burton, began in 1787 and by December the doors of the Leverian Museum opened.²⁷ Guarding over the humble exterior of the 'four-storey yellow stock brickwork' terrace house was an 'elegant portico of the Ionic order', which was adorned with a female Romanesque statue of Contemplation (Figure 6.2).²⁸ Upon entering the premises, visitors were met by the 'beautifully romantic appearance' of two columns of hexagonal stone extracted from the Giant's Causeway in the north of Ireland. The entrance hall also featured a flat ceiling from which rose an oval-shaped dome with skylights to help illuminate four glass cases displaying arrows, daggers, tomahawks and other 'different curious weapons' placed (somewhat incongruously) alongside the skeleton head of an elephant and the stuffed 'Favourite Dog, of a particular friend of Sir Ashton Lever's'.²⁹ It was, after all, early days in the history of public museums and the arrangement of exhibits.

²⁷ Burton's legacy survives today in the Bloomsbury area of London, which he was largely responsible for developing in the late eighteenth century.

²⁸ Akermann is quoted in Sir Howard Roberts and W. H. Godfrey (eds), *Survey of London* (Bankside: London County Council, 1950), vol. xxii, pp. 115–17.

²⁹ These descriptions of the collection, and those that follow, are taken from *A Companion to the Museum* (Late Sir Ashton Lever's) (London, 1790), pp. 4–5.

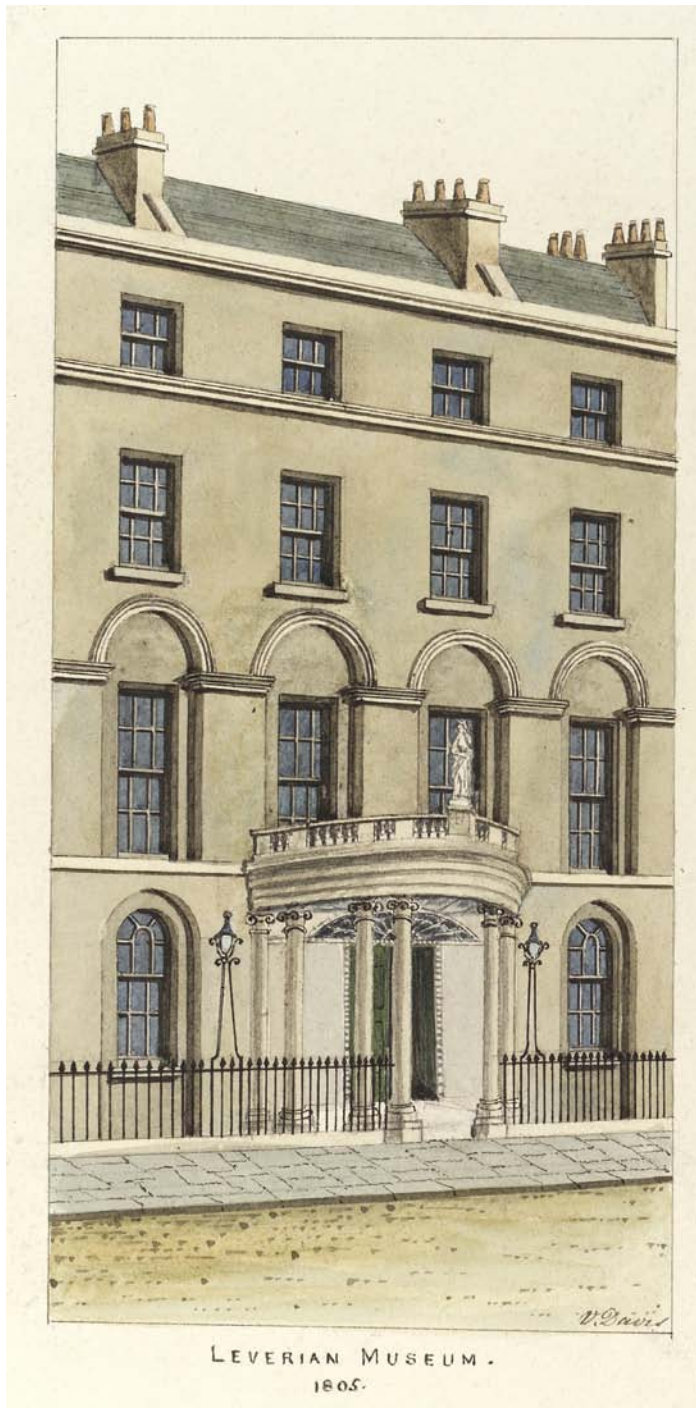


Figure 6.2 Front facade of the Leverian Museum, 3 Blackfriars Road.

V. Davis, 1805. Copyright Wellcome Library, London.

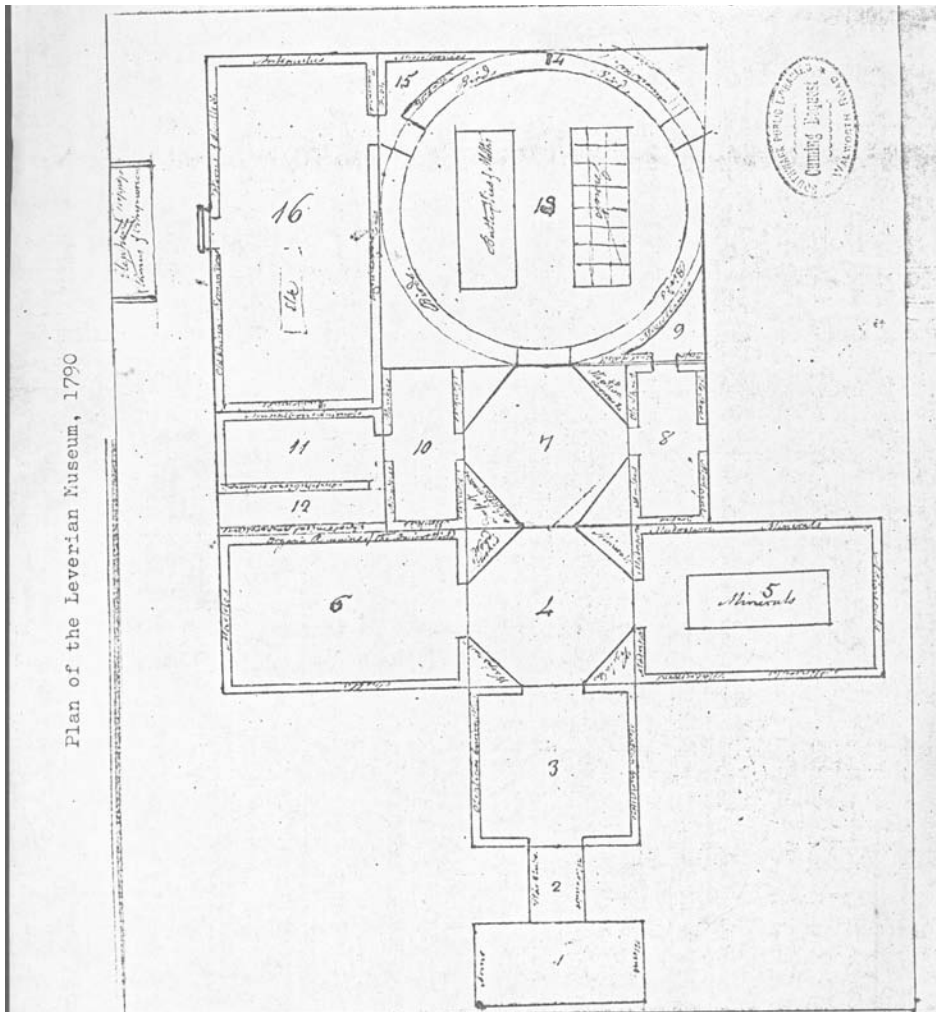


Figure 6.3 Floorplan of the Leverian Museum, prepared by a visitor, c. 1807. This appears to be the only plan for the premises at 3 Blackfriars Road to have survived in the historical record.

Possibly drawn by Richard Cuming. Copyright Southwark Local History Library.

Moving along the passage, visitors entered the first of the main exhibition rooms (Figure 6.3). Further examples of weaponry and garments collected from the Sandwich Islands adorned the vestibule—an arched passage leading into a spacious anteroom with arched ceiling. Dedicated with the inscription ‘To the Immortal Memory of Captain Cook’, the room was again lighted by ‘central openings in a domed ceiling’ and housed hundreds of curiosities and artefacts from Cook’s South Pacific expeditions. From there, visitors moved through to the Saloon. The Saloon was outfitted with four ‘elegant deep mahogany glass cases’ containing ‘curious exotic plants’ from around the globe, including

filigree moss from Lapland and 'curious unknown plants' from Botany Bay, New South Wales.³⁰ To the right and left of this room were the North Room and South Room respectively, both of 'handsome proportions' lighted by skylights and housing similar ephemera and, not surprisingly, hundreds more 'curiosities'.

Visitors to the museum then progressed through to the Fish Room, which provided access to three smaller rooms to the right and one room to the left.³¹ The arrangement of the displays channelled visitors from the rooms in the wings back to the central Saloon and Fish Room, which, in turn, provided a passage through to the Leverian's most elegant and commodious apartment: the Rotunda. Decorated in the style of a 'Grecian temple', the room (later to become known as the Rotunda's small theatre) was captured in perpetuity by the magnificent drawings of celebrated nature artist Sarah Stone (Figure 6.4). The dome, entablature and an upper viewing gallery were supported by 'eight Doric columns, of Derbyshire marble, whose entablature [was] crowned by a balustrade of the same materials', as is clearly visible in Stone's illustration.

Early public museums such as the Leverian played an important role in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, reflecting the changing nature of urban society and culture as it sought to separate 'culture' from the sphere of the state and the court. Before the late eighteenth century, collections of such material remained in the hands of private aristocratic or noble collectors and were open only to private audiences.³² Recently, scholars of the history of the museum have begun to question the simple dichotomy between the transition from private collections to public forms of display, recognising that the evolution of museums is 'as much a story of continuity as it is of change'.³³

In the eighteenth century, the rising middling classes were keen aspirants to what were formerly aristocratic cultural realms such as art and other cultural collections. Their enthusiasm provided opportunities for private entrepreneurs such as Lever and Parkinson with an eye for commercial ventures. As cultural scholar Tony Bennett notes, such venues allowed another public outlet for reasoned critique, rational exchange and debate. Moreover, in providing an outlet for genteel urban sociability, they also allowed the formative bourgeois public to develop a 'corporate self-consciousness'.³⁴

30 For a detailed description of the collection, see *ibid.* The companion includes a drawing by Sarah Stone of the 'Grand saloon and Gallery' (small theatre) of the building. See also J. C. H. King, 'New Evidence for the Contents of the Leverian Museum', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 8 (1996), pp. 167–86.

31 The description of the floorplan is taken from Anthony Ella, *Visits to the Leverian Museum* (London, 1805).

32 Andrew McClellan, 'A Brief History of the Art Museum Public', in Andrew McClellan (ed.), *Art and its Publics: Museum studies at the millennium* (Cornwall: Blackwell, 2003), p. 4.

33 Samuel J. M. Alberti, 'Owning and Collecting Natural Objects in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in Marco Beretta (ed.), *From Private to Public: Natural collections and museums* (Sagamore Beach, Mass.: Science History Publications, 2005), p. 141.

34 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, theory, politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 25–6.



Figure 6.4 Rotunda, Leverian Museum, drawn by Sarah Stone. This room would later be known as the small theatre of the Rotunda.

From *A Companion to the Museum Late Sir Ashton's*, 1790. Copyright City of London, London Metropolitan Archives.

The development of this 'corporate self-consciousness' required distinctions between those who belonged and those who did not. Many private collections were open to the public, but retained an exclusivity based on social class. According to Samuel Alberti:

[A]s in other aspects of the public sphere, civic and metropolitan elites retained control of museums throughout, and although admission criteria of these various groups became ostensibly more inclusive, privileged access continued to be granted to expert and esteemed visitors—exclusively middle-class, and usually men.³⁵

35 Ibid., p. 153.

In the case of the Leverian, the gender exclusions are less clear-cut than Alberti suggests. Stone's drawings of the Leverian Museum provide evidence that women (and children) were part of the museum's clientele.³⁶ Nevertheless, the social exclusivity based on class that Alberti refers to is certainly evident in the history of the Leverian. Before Lever moved his collection to London, the sheer numbers attending his public openings in Manchester saw him exclude those who came by foot.³⁷

By allowing public entry, both Lever's and Parkinson's museums saw a blurring of the boundaries between not only public and private, but between high and low culture.³⁸ The cost of admission, however, was clearly another means of defining those who were eligible to be admitted to the venue; a fee for entry potentially excluded the majority of the population. Such tangible measures were only part of the system that defined the eligible inhabitants of the space; the higher status individuals associated with the venture (including aristocratic patronage) also defined who could be part of the 'corporate consciousness'.

Another means by which a venue could help define itself (and its clientele) was location. This was particularly relevant to London with its intense population growth of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and its new opportunities for sociability, class-based geographical division and urban cultural institutions. The location of such a new institution was vital to attracting the 'right' clientele. Ironically, Lever's original move from Manchester to Leicester Square proved disastrous, and Parkinson also took a gamble in relocating the collection to the purpose-built facility in nearby Surrey away from the centre of the metropolis. Although only a short a distance from the centre of London, it was located on the southern side of the Thames—an area not normally frequented by the literati 'Fashionables of the West End'.³⁹ As John Barrell contends, for the 'politest classes'—the aristocrats and Members of Parliament—London 'east of the still notional line of Regent Street must have been, if not terra incognita, then still much of it largely unexplored'.⁴⁰

36 See Figure 6.4. *A Companion to the Museum (Late Sir Ashton Lever's)*. See also King, 'New Evidence for the Contents of the Leverian Museum', pp. 167–86. Tony Bennett considers that museums provided women with an opportunity to participate in the public sphere. See Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, pp. 29–33.

37 Kell, 'Lever, Sir Ashton'. Richard Altick notes that one keen visitor who was turned away circumvented Lever's rule by returning atop a cow. Altick, *The Shows of London*, p. 29.

38 Ibid., p. 5.

39 David Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies: Expounding literature and the arts in Romantic London', in Donald Schoonmaker and John A. Alford (eds), *English Romanticism: Preludes and postludes* (Michigan: East Lansing Colleagues, 1993), p. 45. My thanks to Gillian Russell for providing me with this reference.

40 John Barrell, 'London and the London Corresponding Society', in James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds), *Romantic Metropolis: The urban scene of British culture, 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 100.

Those thirsting for urban sociability, however, could be fickle. As Richard Altick contends, purely commercial museums, even in the centre of London, tended to have a short lifespan in the early nineteenth century.⁴¹ It is difficult to gauge the extent to which the South London location contributed to the Leverian's failure. Parkinson's venture never entirely succeeded as a commercial operation and, by 1806, Parkinson already had several failed attempts to sell the collection to successive government administrations. When his application was finally referred to Sir Joseph Banks for a decision, Banks refused to recommend that the government purchase the collection.⁴² Infuriated by the decision, Parkinson was forced to offer the collection for public auction. Despite attracting great public interest in both Britain and on the Continent, it took two months to clear almost 8000 lots. At final calculations, the auction had raised a disappointing £6600.⁴³

With the contents of the Leverian finally disposed of, it took Parkinson almost two years to find new tenants for the premises. By 1808, his wait was over when proprietors of a new public venture, a scientific and literary institution, took up the lease. The Surrey Institution—another archetypal space of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere—had its genesis in the success of the Royal Institution, which, as historian Jon Klancher notes, was founded in 1799 by a 'consortium of aristocratic landowners with the intention of amalgamating science to commerce, philosophy to technology, and literary traditions to the newest conditions of modernity'.⁴⁴ The success of the Royal Institution spawned many imitators, including the Surrey, and these scientific and literary institutions became an important part of the new assembly of public cultural arenas for rational exchange and debate.⁴⁵ For almost 15 years, the Surrey Institution became a haven for the knowledge-thirsty rising middling classes, offering scientific and literary lectures and discourses each week, along with reading and 'conversation' rooms. Many of Britain's most notable scientists, engineers, authors, artists and architects appeared at the Rotunda theatre during the Surrey's heyday.⁴⁶

41 Altick, *The Shows of London*, p. 4.

42 Parkinson believed this was because Banks hated Lever and 'therefore hate[d] the collection'. See Torrens, 'Parkinson, James'.

43 Ibid.

44 Jon Klancher, 'Transmission Failure', in David Perkins (ed.), *Theoretical Issues in Literary Study*, *Harvard English Studies*, vol. XVI (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 173–95, quoted in Peter J. Manning, 'Manufacturing the Romantic Image: Hazlitt and Coleridge lecturing', in Chandler and Gilmartin, *Romantic Metropolis*, p. 229.

45 For a detailed history of the Surrey Institution, see Frederick Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', *Annals of Science*, vol. 57 (2000), pp. 109–41; Geoffrey Carnell, 'The Surrey Institution and its Successor', *Adult Education*, vol. 26 (1953), pp. 197–208. See also Gillian Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen: The sociability of Romantic lecturing', in Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (eds), *Romantic Sociability: Social networks and literary culture in Britain, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 128–32. David Hadley calculates that about 30–32 such literary and scientific institutions operated around London between 1798 and 1837. See Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies', p. 46.

46 Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 121.

Prior to opening the new institution, James Parkinson's architect son, Joseph T. Parkinson, was engaged to undertake considerable renovations to ensure the premises were fit for purpose. According to science historian Sophie Forgan, a scientific society needed to embrace a number of different functions including operating as a museum and providing in addition a library, an observatory or laboratory and rooms for lectures, classes, meetings and for the officers.⁴⁷ How those functions were 'embodied into rooms and articulated within the building', argues Forgan, 'had implications for the structure of scientific discourse'.⁴⁸ When Joseph Parkinson planned his modifications to the Surrey premises, he was able to draw on the model of the Royal Institution. With the building already accommodating the museum and meeting room requirements, he added a 60 ft (18 m) library with galleries on three sides, and a new chemical laboratory.⁴⁹

The laboratory was promoted as one of the Surrey's most valued assets and patrons of the Institution attended lectures and demonstrations on subjects such as the 'elements of Chemical Science' and 'Pneumatics and Electricity'.⁵⁰ The room was hailed as one of the finest examples of an experimental laboratory in the country, though science historian Frederick Kurzer contends that, like much of the Surrey, it was employed predominantly for supporting the 'performance of lecture experiments rather than in the pursuit of specific research projects'.⁵¹ It is clear though (as Kurzer himself acknowledges) that some research from the Surrey's science programme did lead to important discoveries. As an example, the public experiments of Sir Goldsworthy Gurney at the Surrey laboratory led to new developments in gas illumination and he was subsequently invited to design the new lighting for the House of Commons chamber.⁵²

Joseph Parkinson also modified the building's prime asset, the Rotunda room, into a circular theatre capable of seating up to 500 people. The new space was described by London chronicler Rudolph Ackermann as 'one of the most elegant rooms in the metropolis' and was captured in a Rowlandson aquatint, which featured a Frederick Christian Accum chemical lecture (Figure 6.5).⁵³ Along with the upper gallery, a lower gallery was added by the younger Parkinson and was described as 'curiously constructed, being sustained by iron columns

47 Ibid., p. 95.

48 Sophie Forgan, 'Context, Image and Function: A preliminary enquiry into the architecture of scientific societies', *British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 19 (1986), p. 91.

49 On Joseph Parkinson and the renovations to the building, see Colvin, *BDBA*, pp. 736–7. See also Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 118. It is difficult to discern from the available descriptions and plans whether Joseph Parkinson converted the room numbered 16 on the 1790 plan as the library or constructed an entirely new room to the right of the Rotunda. See Figure 6.3.

50 Rendle Collection (Southwark File), n.d., fo. 288, London Metropolitan Archives Library.

51 Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 120.

52 G. B. Smith, 'Gurney, Sir Goldsworthy (1793–1875)', rev. Anita McConnell, *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11764>>

53 Ackermann is quoted in Roberts and Godfrey, *Survey of London*, p. 116.

and their projecting cantilevers or trusses'.⁵⁴ The Rotunda was 36 ft (11 m) in diameter; the ground section contained nine rows of seats, which rose above each other in 'commodious gradation'.⁵⁵ The first gallery contained two rows of seats and the upper gallery three rows. Light filled the room from the ceiling dome and warmth was provided in the winter through flues containing heated air, which were concealed in the walls, making the building a comfortable all-season venue.



Figure 6.5 'Surrey Institution', Thomas Rowlandson.

From Rudolph Ackermann's *Microcosm of London*, 1809. Copyright Wellcome Library, London.

The scientific lecture theatre, as Forgan notes, began to develop a particular form by the early nineteenth century. They often assumed the shape of an 'amphitheatre or hemisphere' modelled not on the stage theatre, but on the anatomical theatre that originated in Padua and that featured raked seating upwards from the floor in a circular pattern.⁵⁶ The premises at Blackfriars Road proved ideal for this purpose; the Surrey inherited the circular gallery and Joseph Parkinson's seating modifications allowed for an imitation of the style

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Forgan, 'Context, Image and Function', p. 101.

adopted in the Royal Institution.⁵⁷ The shape of the theatre certainly added to the performance of the lectures. From the lecturer's perspective, observes Forgan, all eyes 'gazed down upon him'.⁵⁸ Parkinson's modifications, which won him a place in the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, also clearly impressed Ackermann, who described the premises as an 'academic mansion'.⁵⁹

Alongside rational scientific instruction, the Surrey's literature and cultural program was equally lauded by the Institution's management.⁶⁰ The proprietors assembled a rich array of arts and cultural programs presented by some of the leading humanities figures of the day. Among the most prominent and esteemed presenters of the Surrey's cultural programs was the literary luminary Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, according to his contemporaries, delivered magnificent lectures on the writings of Shakespeare and provided critical analysis of classical poetry and literature.⁶¹ Music instruction was also catered for with esteemed composer and organist Samuel Wesley delivering lectures on music for almost two years at the Surrey.⁶² Wesley was subsequently replaced by Dr William Crotch, former professor of music at Oxford University and Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, who oversaw the Surrey's music program for 12 years.⁶³ The field of architecture was also well represented at the Surrey, with London architect James Elmes providing instruction on architectural history, as well as a critique of the design and function of the new urban architecture.⁶⁴

Kurzer notes that while the managers of the Surrey insisted on a high intellectual standard for the lectures, they also recognised the importance of the performance as an element of instruction, directing that the presentations at the Institution should also 'blend instruction with rational amusement'.⁶⁵ This directive allowed for the engagement of such flamboyant figures as Gregor von Feinaigle (formerly Gregor Feinoegl). A mnemonist and educator, Feinaigle gave a series of lectures at the Surrey in 1811.⁶⁶ A former German monk, he anglicised his surname and adopted the prefix 'von' as a pretence to aristocratic heritage.⁶⁷ Feinaigle's show involved teaching orphans to remember complex sequences of dates, poetry or mathematical equations, which he demonstrated to audiences before

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Roberts and Godfrey, *Survey of London*, pp. 115–17.

⁶⁰ On lectures at the Surrey, see Gillian Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen', pp. 128–32.

⁶¹ Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', pp. 134–5.

⁶² Philip Olleson, 'Wesley, Samuel (1766–1837)', *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29072>>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 133.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

⁶⁶ Feinaigle would later start an institution in his own name in Dublin. The Feinaigle Institution would establish schools that operated on his system of regular examinations and free of corporal punishment. See Terence Richardson, 'Feinaigle, Gregor von (1760–1819)', *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9252>>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

signing many of them to a series of lessons to learn the memory techniques.⁶⁸ Feinaigle's biographer, Terence Richardson, admits Feinaigle did cultivate an 'air of mystery' from both his past as a monk and the 'sources of his arcane techniques', but maintains he was 'no charlatan'.

The directive for 'rational amusement' alongside instruction from the Surrey proprietors was also fulfilled by celebrated writer and critic William Hazlitt who was said to have delighted his audiences for three successive seasons with lectures on the 'English Poets from Chaucer', the 'English Comic Writers' and 'Drama of the Elizabethan Age'.⁶⁹ Hazlitt's lectures, as Peter Manning notes, provided much more than simply an outlet for knowledge and information; observers applauded them as performances, 'intense, immediate theatre', as testified by the repeatedly large audiences.⁷⁰ The Secretary of the Surrey Institution, P. G. Patmore, had a long association with London's literary elite (even in less celebratory times such as during John Hunt's imprisonment in Coldbath Fields prison) and it was he who convinced Hazlitt to undertake the series of lectures in 1818.⁷¹ Hazlitt received 200 guineas for the work, which he considered 'very well for ten weeks work', which included the royalties for the printed editions of the lectures.⁷² Hazlitt attracted a wide range of London cultural and political literati to his lectures at the Surrey including William Godwin, John Keats and Henry Crabb Robinson as well as artists Benjamin Robert Haydon and William Bewick, and radical writers John Hunt and William Hone.⁷³

The new lecturing institutions tapped into the emerging middling-class drive for respectability through education and self-improvement.⁷⁴ Although lecturing was a well-established form of entertainment and instruction at multipurpose venues such as the Crown and Anchor tavern, the emergence of scientific and literary societies provided a new stage for the practice.⁷⁵ Such

68 Ibid.

69 *Surrey Institution Circular*, 1 October 1822, Guildhall Library Collection, London. For Hazlitt's account of his 'Comic Writers' lectures, see his letter to Macvey Napier, 26 August 1818, reproduced in Hershel Moreland Sikes (ed.), *The Letters of William Hazlitt* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 185. Gillian Russell notes that in any regard, 'in analyzing lectures, it is important not to overestimate the "rational" at the expense of the "entertainment"', as the more serious scientific instruction was 'bound up with its status as a social event'. See Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen', p. 125.

70 Manning, 'Manufacturing the Romantic Image', p. 230.

71 Patmore and Hazlitt became close friends following Hazlitt's lectures at the Surrey. In 1854, Patmore published a detailed account of his relationship with Hazlitt and other friends of London's literary circles in *My Friends and Acquaintances: Being memorials, mind-portraits, and personal recollections of deceased celebrities of the nineteenth century: with selections from their unpublished letters* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1854). See Sikes, *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, p. 181n.

72 William Hazlitt to Francis Jeffrey, 12 May 1818, reprinted in Sikes, *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, p. 182.

73 Manning, 'Manufacturing the Romantic Image', p. 230. The lectures were so successful that Hazlitt repeated them at the Crown and Anchor tavern during 1818.

74 Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies', p. 45.

75 Forgan, 'Context, Image and Function', p. 96. See also Ian Inkster, *Scientific Culture and Urbanisation in Industrialising Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), pp. 80–107. For a discussion of public lecturing in this period, see Russell, 'Spouters or Washerwomen', pp. 123–44.

institutions helped establish a new middling-class identity, providing a forum for intellectual exchange, collectivity and association.⁷⁶ Although the Surrey was modelled on the Royal Institution, and therefore drew on the cultural conventions of the 'parent' institution, it soon established its own feel and a distinct identity. Despite the Surrey's geographic isolation from the 'fashionable West End' (or perhaps because of the intellectual freedom of expression it allowed), as David Hadley notes, the 'Romantic era's most significant [literary] criticism... was offered in the least pretentious of London's literary institutes'.⁷⁷ This, he argues, 'may testify eloquently to the impulse and aspirations which had led professionals, bankers, shopkeepers, writers, and some highly skilled artisans, to found a Surrey Institution'.⁷⁸

Despite the relative silence in Habermas's original work of the role of such institutions in the formation of the public sphere, it is evident, as Roy Porter argues, that the nature and practice of the scientific and literary institutions made them key outlets for rational exchange and discussion.⁷⁹ As Paul Elliott adds, such institutions allowed members of the public to 'buy into' the 'Enlightenment rationality and advertise their membership of the club of public rational discourse'.⁸⁰ The explicit rule against political or theological discussion at such institutions could account for Habermas's oversight, though radical political ideas, while not officially on the lecture calendar of the Surrey Institution, certainly circulated at the site. The Surrey's membership, argues Hadley, was 'more down-market, more Dissenter, and even more earnest' than some of the 'Fashionables of the West End' who declined to travel there to hear their friend Coleridge lecture.⁸¹ He describes the Surrey's political influences as 'catholic', as evidenced by the catalogue contents of the library: 'Beccaria, Burke, Letters of Junius, Leveller pamphlets, Locke, Milton, Montesquieu'.⁸² Manning concludes that there were many Quakers and Dissenters in the Surrey audience, who, Crabb Robinson recalled in his diary, were served an 'indiscreet and reckless' reading of Voltaire, 'the modern infidel'.⁸³ The Surrey was also not

76 Jonathan Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban association and the middling sort', in Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 95. For a useful analysis and overview of the scholarship in this field, see Paul Elliott, 'The Origins of the "Creative Class": Provincial urban society and socio-political marginality in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Social History*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2003), pp. 361–87.

77 Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies', p. 58.

78 Ibid.

79 Roy Porter, 'Science, Provincial Culture and Public Opinion', *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, vol. 3 (1980), pp. 20–46.

80 Elliott, 'The Origins of the "Creative Class"', p. 366.

81 Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies', p. 45.

82 Ibid., p. 57.

83 Crabb Robinson, quoted in Manning, 'Manufacturing the Romantic Image', p. 231.

unique in this more marginal political milieu; Ian Inkster's study of scientific culture in Britain argues that Dissenters and other marginal groups were often a dominant force in other such institutions.⁸⁴

Hazlitt's literary lectures in particular often came with biting political commentary. At the core of his political beliefs were the 'revolutionary principles of 1688 and 1789',⁸⁵ and Hazlitt's friend, the painter William Bewick, recorded that when members of the audience disagreed with his political sentiments, Hazlitt would 'calmly turn back the leaf of his copy and deliberately repeat the sentiments with great energy and a voice more determined than before'.⁸⁶ It appears Hazlitt's detractors were fewer in number than those who revelled in his lectures for he became a favourite Surrey Institution orator. One correspondent to *The Times* regretted Hazlitt's frequent but 'unfortunate and irrelevant political allusion', contending that he was wrong in venting them before a mixed audience assembled for amusement and instruction in science and literature.⁸⁷ More disturbing for the correspondent, however, was the audience reaction: 'so well dressed and respectable an audience emulating the uproar of one-shilling gallery behaviour.' Whether it was the liberal political views of the Surrey patrons or the commercial imperatives of the venture, the proprietors could not ignore that the theatre was filled with 'most respectable audiences' even during Hazlitt's most notorious performances.⁸⁸

The audience reaction to Hazlitt's lectures suggests that the prevailing image of the sober intellectual climate of the Surrey and other such institutions of the bourgeois public sphere should be reconsidered. Forgan also notes that until the mid-nineteenth century, even audiences of the serious educational instruction utilised their voices to indicate their approval or disapproval with 'boos and cheers "hear-hear" and such'.⁸⁹ Such reaction indicates the continuities between more traditional popular modes of entertainment and the new forums for rational-critical discourse and debate. The Surrey was clearly operating as an institution of the bourgeois public sphere, adopting many of the official rules and the informal conventions of the parent institution. It is evident, however, that by populating the venue with both audience and orators, the demarcation lines between such ventures and those of a more plebeian nature were more fluid than a simple bourgeois-plebeian binary allows.

84 Inkster, *Scientific Culture and Urbanization in Industrialising Britain*.

85 Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies', p. 45.

86 T. Landseer (ed.), *Life and Letters of William Bewick*, 2 vols (London, 1871), quoted in Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 135. The correspondent was undoubtedly unaware of the involvement of Mr Alsager, commercial editor of *The Times*, on the Committee of the Surrey Institution. It was Alsager who proposed that Hazlitt be engaged to deliver the course of lectures on the English poets. See Augustine Birrell, *William Hazlitt* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922).

87 *The Times*, 12 November 1818.

88 The observation comes from the *Morning Chronicle*, 23 February 1818.

89 Forgan, 'Context, Image and Function', p. 102.

Despite the initial strong appeal to the middling classes, institutions such as the Surrey came under heavy financial pressure to maintain their activities. For the Surrey's proprietors, the end came in 1823, after many years of expenditure 'exceed[ing] its investment income by some £700 per annum'.⁹⁰ In a final bid to rescue the venture, the managers proposed levying the proprietors with an additional annual subscription. It was summarily rejected by the majority of proprietors, 450 of whom together had initially provided the significant sum of £22 500 to establish the Institution. And it appears that the location of the venue could, once again, have played a role in its demise. At least one contemporary observer blamed the failure of the Institution on the site itself, which he considered 'most injudicious, since it was completely out of the mighty stream of human beings which never ceases to its flow through the centre of the metropolis'.⁹¹ The demise of the Surrey, however, just like the Leverian before it, could also have been due to the voracious appetite for new forms of urban sociability. As Richard Altick notes, this period was marked not only by the instability of popular taste, but also by its 'restless demand for innovation'.⁹²

Having decided to close the Institution, the Surrey proprietors now sought to recoup some funds from the defunct venture. The premises were stripped of their 'entire substance' starting with the library's collection of journals and books—successfully auctioned above its valued price—along with the shelves, furniture and clocks that once adorned the room. The circular theatre was 'dismantled to its walls and foundations', with the iron rails, seats, staircases and mahogany handrails, iron pillars and front railings sold for £28; the three rows of circular seats round the upper gallery sold for £7 each.⁹³ Cultural appendages, such as the bronze statues of the 'different fathers of science and literature, such as Homer, Bacon, Locke and Newton', were also removed.⁹⁴ There remained little tangible trace of the once-celebrated 'academic mansion'.

Following the Surrey's demise, the premises were used intermittently by a variety of inhabitants and exhibitors, including some reportedly less reputable penny gaff productions and a wax works.⁹⁵ By 1826, it was reported that the exterior of the building was now inscribed 'Rotunda Wine and Concert Rooms' and was frequented by 'lovers of a good glass of wine' who were entertained every Tuesday and Thursday evening with professional singing and music.⁹⁶

90 Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 136. Hadley notes the initial set-up cost borne by the 450 proprietors. Hadley, 'Public Lectures and Private Societies', p. 56.

91 W. Swainson, *Taxidermy: With the biography of zoologists* (1840), quoted in Torrens, 'Parkinson, James', ODNB.

92 Altick, *The Shows of London*, p. 3.

93 Kurzer, 'A History of the Surrey Institution', p. 138.

94 Akermann is quoted in Roberts and Godfrey, *Survey of London*, p. 116.

95 Altick, *The Shows of London*, p. 32.

96 *Every Day Book*, 18 July 1826, held in the collection of printed ephemera catalogued as the 'Surrey Rotunda' and held in the Wellcome Institute Library, London (hereafter Wellcome Collection).

Entry was free as patrons were expected to buy their refreshments and the venue was said to have attracted large numbers, including women. The wine and concert rooms continued to operate through the following year and were joined in 1827 by a new spectacle, Cooke's Amphitheatre. During this time, a larger circular theatre was constructed at the rear of the premises for equestrian purposes, much to the dismay of local residents who protested against the 'horse performances'.⁹⁷ In 1828, the Rotunda expanded further its reputation for innovative public entertainment, becoming home to a revolving dioramic panorama illustrating 'all the principle events that have occurred between the Turks and the Greeks' painted on almost '20,000 square feet of canvas'.⁹⁸ Though the venue in this period appears to have had an entirely commercial outlook, there was a patina of plebeian political association when the new proprietors, a Mr and Mrs Ford, held a benefit concert in 1827 to aid those 'suffering and distressed' in the manufacturing districts of the country.⁹⁹

In that same year, Richard Carlile, now released from his long prison term at Dorchester, also had provincial England on his mind as he undertook a tour of the districts that provided such strong moral and financial support to himself, his family and his shop workers during the decade. During Carlile's 1827 tour, he suffered first hand the impact of the government's restrictive legislation on the spatial logistics of the radical movement. Carlile was repeatedly frustrated by the efforts of established clergymen and local magistrates to prevent the staging of his lectures by either restricting his access to lecture halls or closing down his meetings as they got under way. During the 1829 tour of the north of England, which he undertook with the infamous Reverend Robert Taylor, the 'infidel missionaries' were again frustrated by the efforts of the authorities and clergy in Nottingham and Leeds to prevent their discourses. They were evicted from five different lecturing halls.¹⁰⁰

Both Carlile and Taylor were acutely aware of the need for a new radical forum. Even before undertaking the 1829 tour, Taylor had identified the importance of feeling a 'tangibility of our great cause about us'.¹⁰¹ What radicalism needed, he felt, was a 'substance and a nucleus' in the form of a dedicated space from which to operate. Taylor had long recognised the benefits of obtaining a permanent lecturing establishment. In 1826, with the aid of several financial backers, he purchased the 'Areopagus' or Salter's Hall Chapel.¹⁰² Taylor offered £5 shares in the venture and it became the headquarters for his Christian Evidence Society.

97 *Prompter*, 13 November 1830. For local resident dissent, see 'Surrey Rotunda', fo. 61, Wellcome Collection.

98 *Description of the Historical, Peristrepthic or Revolving Dioramic Panorama, Now Exhibiting in Great Surrey Street, Blackfriars Road* (London, 1828). See also the report of the panorama in *Morning Chronicle*, 14 October 1828.

99 On the Rotunda Wine Rooms and the benefit concert, see 'Surrey Rotunda', ff. 73–4, Wellcome Collection.

100 See Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 155–60.

101 *Lion*, 23 January 1829.

102 *Devil's Pulpit*, vol. 2, 1832, 'Memoir of the Reverend Robert Taylor'.

His imprisonment in 1827 for a blasphemous discourse, however, forced the sale of the premises; Taylor's 'fine theatre of free discussion' was thus 'sacrificed to the manes of despotism'.¹⁰³ The difficulties Carlile encountered with venues while on his provincial tours were mirrored in the capital. Although many landlords could have been sympathetic to Carlile's political aims, his freethinking tenets and infidel ideals (which attracted much publicity during the 1820s trials) were entirely another matter. Carlile had attempted to turn his premises at 62 Fleet Street into a makeshift lecturing hall, but the inadequacy of these plans was quickly realised when Taylor began lecturing and commanded audiences far in excess of the 100 people the seating allowed.

The Blackfriars Road Rotunda secured for Carlile the capacity for large crowds as well as the 'substance' and the 'nucleus' that Taylor had dreamt of for the radical movement. By the time Carlile entered the premises in May 1830, however, the once 'noble apartments' had suffered from use by multiple tenants and neglect, and the building was in a dilapidated state. His straitened financial position following his lengthy prison term through the 1820s could hardly have allowed him to take on either the refurbishment costs or even the rent alone, which amounted to a heavy £400 a year.¹⁰⁴ With the assistance of wealthy freethinking allies, William Devonshire Saull and Julian Hibbert, as well as anonymous donations to the cause of 'rational debate', Carlile undertook refurbishments to make the building fit for public use at the considerable sum of £1300.¹⁰⁵

For Carlile, it was an investment with the promise of incalculable dividends; the Rotunda was to provide the catalyst for a new era of English radicalism. Carlile publicly declared that the Rotunda would help launch a 'war' against political and religious despotism, which he held responsible for the ills of British society. He anticipated that it would become a shrine for reform. In the opening issue of the *Prompter*, Carlile exalted at the birth of a new radical space, announcing that the Rotunda was

a capitol of public virtue, the nucleus for a reformation of abuses,—the real House of Commons, in the absence of a better—the palladium of what liberty we have...the birth-place of mind, and the focus of virtuous public excitement.¹⁰⁶

103 Ibid.

104 *Prompter*, 2 July 1831; Home Office Papers, HO64/11, June 1830, fo. 46.

105 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, June 1830, fo. 46, 29 November 1831. William Saull, radical philanthropist, freethinker and wine merchant, also lectured at the Rotunda in early 1832. See Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 164, 252; Iowerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London, John Gast and his Times* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1979), pp. 260–3, 308–11. On Julian Hibbert, radical and long-time financial supporter of plebeian radicals, see Campbell, *The Battle for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 245–50; Joel Wiener, 'Hibbert, Julian', in Joseph Baylen and Norbert Gossman (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* [hereafter *BDMBR*] (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 221–2.

106 *Prompter*, 13 November 1830.

Importantly, it was to be a public place where the disenfranchised and the disaffected would not only be heard, but where their collective discontent would be seen. No longer would the radical community be at the whim of landlords who controlled who spoke and what was uttered. Moreover, Carlile envisaged that, like the relationship between the Anti-Corn Law League and the Crown and Anchor, the Rotunda too could provide the 'centre' and a 'heart' for the real representatives of working people.

Carlile's primary intention for the Rotunda was to institutionalise the popular dissemination of knowledge. Carlile not only vowed to wage 'a war against despotism' at the Rotunda; a 'war' against the 'ignorance of the whole country' was central to his aims for the venture.¹⁰⁷ He believed that working people needed, and wanted, a venue for 'free, open and fair discussion', which would serve as a place of general instruction and learning for themselves and their children. Through free discussion—intellectual exchange unhindered by religious dogma or political orthodoxies—the 'necessary purgation and purification of the public mind' would be achieved to clear the way for the inevitable new order of society.¹⁰⁸ In a period marked by the competing claims over the British Constitution, Carlile maintained that it was free discussion that was the 'only necessary Constitution—the only necessary Law to the Constitution'.¹⁰⁹

The Rotunda offered an ideal setting for the lecturing function Carlile envisaged. The statue of Contemplation that adorned the front entrance of the building both symbolised its function as an educational institution and triggered public memory of the learned history of the site itself, at least in its Leverian and Surrey heydays. Carlile declared that in establishing the Rotunda as a forum of free speech, he was seeking to rekindle the 'character' of the Surrey Institution, which, along with the Leverian Museum, he described as 'an honour to the neighbourhood'.¹¹⁰ Carlile saw the Rotunda as an advancement on these institutions by allowing for 'freedom of speech and discussion in political and theological matters'.¹¹¹ Clearly, continuity existed between the various outlets of the public sphere that occupied the site over time.

By invoking the legacy of both the Surrey and the Leverian for a working-class audience, Carlile and Taylor could tap into a flourishing popular and radical culture during the 1820s and early 1830s. Over these decades radicalism frequently took the form of an 'intellectual culture', adapting to and influencing the working-class thirst for self-improvement and knowledge.¹¹² E. P. Thompson

107 Ibid.

108 *Prompter*, 4 December 1830.

109 Carlile quoted in Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 844.

110 *Prompter*, 13 November 1830.

111 Ibid.

112 On the drive for self-improvement in radical culture, see Patricia Hollis, *The Pauper Press: A study in working-class radicalism of the 1830s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Thompson, *The Making of*

has argued that during this period of ‘silent instruction’, a specifically working-class consciousness began to evolve and manifest itself, which rejected middle and ruling-class control of working-class culture—particularly in the field of education. Ruling-class views on the education of the lower classes were dominated by concerns over the effect on the ranks and status quo of English society. Established clergymen frequently expressed the view that to give a workingman more education than was necessary to read the Bible would ‘do him an injury’.¹¹³ They argued that the acquisition of political knowledge by those outside the political nation would ‘confound the ranks of society’ and thereby threaten the stability of that society.

When it became evident that working people were acquiring knowledge independently, E. P. Thompson and Patricia Hollis argue, the ruling-class strategy moved to control and direct the kind of knowledge that could be obtained.¹¹⁴ Although conservative Methodist ministers insisted that unmonitored literacy was the ‘snare of the devil’, the acquisition of ‘useful knowledge’ was thought godly and full of merit.¹¹⁵ Groups such as the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) provided an educational outlet for working people that centred on science, botany, mathematics and especially the applied sciences.¹¹⁶ The discussion of politics, however, was strictly forbidden. These groups were supported by radicals as diverse in social standing as the artisan Francis Place and the lawyer and Whig parliamentarian Henry Brougham, who believed that if working people were determined to acquire knowledge, it was essential that they should have access only to ‘suitable’ knowledge.¹¹⁷

Many working-class radicals regarded Brougham’s useful knowledge societies as ‘props to decaying superstition’ and ridiculed the SDUK as ‘education mongers’ who offered useless knowledge.¹¹⁸ These radicals, buoyed by the re-emergence

the English Working Class, pp. 781–820; Richard Johnson, “‘Really Useful Knowledge’: Radical education and working-class culture, 1790–1848”, in John Clarke, C. Critcher and Richard Johnson (eds), *Working Class Culture: Studies in history and theory* (London: Hutchison, 1979), pp. 75–102; Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 181–5. For a recent analysis of the phenomenon of self-improvement, as well as the debates in the historiography, see Anne Rodrick, *Self-help and Civic Culture: Citizenship in Victorian Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), especially ch. 1.

113 Hollis, *The Pauper Press*, p. 9.

114 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–18.

115 For a discussion of ‘useful knowledge’, see Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of ‘Culture’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), especially pp. 76–92; Johnson, “‘Really Useful Knowledge’”, pp. 75–102; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 811.

116 For a recent study of the SDUK, see Rebecca Brookfield Kinraide, *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and the Democratization of Learning in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Unpublished PhD dissertation (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2006). See also Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, politics and the people, 1790–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 101–24.

117 Philip O’Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 76–92; Hollis, *The Pauper Press*, p. 8.

118 Johnson, “‘Really Useful Knowledge’”, p. 79.

of the printed works of Thomas Paine (thanks largely to Carlile), held that as man was essentially a rational being, he therefore had an inalienable right to knowledge.¹¹⁹ They questioned the right of any one class to monopolise the power and benefits of knowledge and education, and believed the education of the poor was limited in the interests of the rich, the ignorance of the people being purposely perpetuated by 'Old Corruption' to secure their privileged position in society.¹²⁰

The dissemination of 'really useful' knowledge and the removal of ignorance therefore became principle objectives in radical reform. Working-class radicals sought social, moral and political improvement in society and insisted that it was through the acquisition of knowledge by working people that the radical struggle against the establishment would succeed. In this sense, radicals saw Rotunda education as a means of power and a weapon with which to bring down the ruling elite and established order. As John Gale Jones noted, knowledge would 'make the people bid defiance to any tyranny attempted to be put on them by their oppressors'.¹²¹ They recognised that the articulate consciousness of the autodidact was readily transformed into political consciousness.¹²²

The drive for respectable self-improvement amongst the working classes in the early nineteenth century revealed itself in a number of formal popular educational institutions.¹²³ Mutual improvement societies were a response to the working-class tradition of mutual and communal study. These societies sought primarily to promote efficiency in reading and writing, but also operated as reading and discussion groups, using the proceeds of a weekly contribution of one or twopence to fund the establishment of small libraries for their members' use.¹²⁴ This period also saw the rise of the mechanics' institutes, which, as the name suggests, began as educational clubs for mechanics, offering their members lectures and classes in the various fields of science.¹²⁵ They were, however, generally controlled by middle-class patrons and, like the SDUK, they came under fire from radicals for perpetuating the knowledge systems of the

119 O'Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of Culture*, p. 80; Hollis, *The Pauper Press*, p. 19.

120 Johnson, "'Really Useful Knowledge'", p. 78.

121 Home Office Papers, HO64/11, 1831, fo. 309.

122 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 781.

123 For more on working-class education, see Jonathon Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780–1870*, second edn (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

124 For a discussion of mutual improvement societies, see Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, pp. 58–91.

125 On the mechanics institutes, see Gregory Claeys, 'Political Economy and Popular Education: Thomas Hodgskin and the London Mechanics Institute, 1823–8', in Michael T. Davis (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1848* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 157–75; Edward Royle, 'Mechanics Institutes and the Working Classes, 1840–1860', *Historical Journal*, vol. 14 (1971), pp. 305–21; Michael Stephens and Gordon Roderick, 'The Working Classes and Mechanics' Institutes', *Annals of Science*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1973), pp. 349–60; Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, pp. 63–76.

dominant culture.¹²⁶ The exclusion of political and religious topics from the institutes' agendas particularly riled working-class radicals. Denying the people knowledge of their true political rights was seen as conserving the existence of the corrupt social order.

An extract from Francis Place's correspondence regarding the SDUK underscores this point:

My experience which is extensive in time, as well as over a considerable space, convinces me that if the project can be established it must be by workmen themselves, and conducted wholly by them. I am certain that it is impossible if attempted in any other way.

He attributed this recalcitrance directly to what E. P. Thompson later recognised as an emerging working-class consciousness:

In their present state they are too suspicious of evil intentions in those called their betters to consent to be led by them, or to conform to any plan which is not placed wholly under their control. Were it not for this feeling, the Mechanics' Institution would probably have three times as many members of the working classes as it has now.¹²⁷

Place was clearly no longer entirely satisfied to stand among a crowd of radical grandees at the Crown and Anchor. He recognised that knowledge directed by the middle classes would simply find no favour with class-conscious working families.

The 'Zetetic Societies', which arose directly out of Carlile's struggle with the government for freedom of publication during the 1820s, provide another example of working-class educational forums that flourished in this period. Originally acting as support groups during Carlile's long incarceration in Dorchester prison, these societies sprang up across Britain during the mid-1820s and functioned also as reading circles to disseminate political and theological knowledge in the spirit of the period's radical intellectual culture.¹²⁸ 'Zetetic' signified the acquisition of useful knowledge, and their charter was to cater for

126 Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London*, p. 79; Kinraide, *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, p. 14.

127 SDUK In-letters, Francis Place to Thomas Coates, 22 December 1833, quoted in Kinraide, *The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, p. 14.

128 This section on the Zetetic movement is based on Iain McCalman's account of the societies, which remains the most extensive written to date. See Iain McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, Unpublished MA thesis (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1975), pp. 83–171. See also Epstein, *Radical Expression*, pp. 112–19; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 798–9; Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1974), pp. 35–9; Gwyn Williams, *Rowland Detrosier: A working-class infidel 1800–34* (York: St Anthony's, 1965). On women's involvement in the Zetetic societies, see Iain McCalman, 'Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History*, no. 38 (1980), pp. 1–25.

the 'mental, moral and social improvement' of their members.¹²⁹ A brief survey of the Zetetic educational principles reveals how indebted the Rotunda educators were to the earlier pedagogy. Zetetics rejected religious-based education because they considered that it perpetuated social privilege, 'stupefied the mind with dull and constant repetition' and was 'useless to society'.¹³⁰ Traditional classical education was also rejected for similar reasons. Zetetics believed that study of obsolete languages and biblical history caused 'intellectual sterility'. Instead, they offered members lectures on political theory, art, science and history, and devoted monthly subscriptions to the purchase of a library. Zetetic knowledge was therefore a means of freeing workingmen from the domination of their alleged social superiors and eliminating an 'oppressive social and political system'.¹³¹ Carlile believed that Zetetic knowledge would enable people presently held down by ignorance or indoctrination to be elevated to their rightful place in society and to acquire enough social, moral and economic leverage to destroy the establishment, including the established church.

Carlile therefore tasked his Rotunda educators to spread knowledge where none had existed, or where ignorance had resulted in the indoctrination of people by superstition and Christianity. Some of his colleagues had impressive educational credentials. Robert Taylor, an ex-Anglican clergyman, had been a Fellow with the Royal College of Surgeons in 1807, and completed a Bachelor of Arts at Cambridge University in 1813. John Gale Jones had trained as a surgeon and apothecary. Carlile himself was educated in a village school before spending two years at a grammar school in Devon. As we saw in earlier chapters, he taunted authorities that his lengthy stint in prison enabled a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, the Enlightenment philosophers and radical political theorists. Eliza Sharples (who will we meet in greater detail in Chapter 8) attended a boarding school until her early twenties, where she described being 'educated in the prejudices' she now sought to remove from the minds of her audience. This, she believed, enabled her to sympathise with and understand the fears of her audience when renouncing Christianity.¹³²

Crucially, it was not through direct political education that Carlile and his Rotunda allies initially envisaged effecting the necessary changes to society, but through science and reason. 'Every step taken', wrote Carlile in December 1830, 'will be founded upon scientific evidence'.¹³³ At the Rotunda, however, there would be a vital difference to other working-class educational institutions

129 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 799. As Thompson notes, the theories of the Enlightenment 'came to them with the force of revelation'.

130 McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, p. 132.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

132 *Isis*, 11 February 1832.

133 *Prompter*, 4 December 1830. For the importance of science in early nineteenth-century radicalism, see also McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, pp. 130–4, 139–43; Epstein, *Radical Expression*, pp. 123–42; Johnson, "'Really Useful Knowledge'", p. 88.

offering scientific instruction: for ‘reason’ to prevail, Carlile pledged that there would be ‘no priestcraft, no disposition to deceive the people’.¹³⁴ He regarded science as the means by which to ‘disburden the mind of superstitious fears’ and the scientific basis of rational knowledge was stressed for its iconoclastic effect on superstition and Christianity; it opened people’s eyes to the absurdities of religion and revealed the material foundations of man’s nature.¹³⁵ Rational discourse and discussion would provide a basis for universal enlightenment, as well as the end of oppression and exploitation of working people. In this respect, the very conditions that Habermas identified as necessary for the development of the bourgeois public sphere were recognised by Carlile a century and a half earlier as crucial for the emancipation of working people. Moreover, in his repeated emphasis on the Rotunda as the first and only venue dedicated to free discussion, he clearly considered that the existing venues of the public sphere—of either bourgeois or plebeian origin—were less open to rational debate and discussion than Habermas would subsequently allow.¹³⁶

Carlile believed the dissemination of radical principles among the people could best be achieved by providing an outlet for as many variants of radicalism as possible. Both veteran radicals and newcomers alike assembled under the Rotunda’s roof during the turbulent political times of the early 1830s to castigate political and religious authority as bastions of an unjust, unequal and immoral society—from the veteran Jacobin debater John Gale Jones to the eccentric millenary duo John ‘Zion’ Ward and Charles Twort, and to Eliza Sharples, billed as the first Englishwoman to speak publicly on political and religious issues.¹³⁷ The most vehement and stinging attacks on religion and the clergy, however, came from Reverend Robert Taylor, whose showmanship and ridicule of the church and its practices continually delighted packed Rotunda audiences.

Of all the radicals associated with the Rotunda, the most organised and militant political activists belonged to the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC). The NUWC was a purely political group and its members generally distanced themselves from Carlile’s and Taylor’s often scandalous attacks on established religion. The group conducted its meetings at the Rotunda from mid-1831 to early 1832, espousing a political agenda concerned primarily with reforming the corrupt parliamentary electoral system in favour of universal

134 *Prompter*, 4 December 1830.

135 G. D. H Cole, *Richard Carlile, 1790–1843* (London: Fabian Society Pamphlets, 1942), p. 17.

136 *Ibid.*

137 On John ‘Zion’ Ward and Charles Twort, followers of Joanna Southcott and founders of the Shilohites, see W. H. Oliver, ‘John Ward—The messiah as agitator’, *Prophets and Millennialists: The uses of biblical prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978); J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular millenarianism, 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), pp. 152–60, 228–30; Jackie Latham, *Search for A New Eden, James Pierrepont Greaves (1777–1842): The sacred socialist and his followers* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), pp. 71–6, 111–21.

manhood suffrage.¹³⁸ In addition, some of the most noted radicals of the period graced the stages of the Rotunda. William Cobbett delivered a series of lectures on the French Revolution and, in late 1830, the Irish 'Liberator' Daniel O'Connell chaired several NUWC meetings on the situation in Ireland. Purely political groups, such as Henry Hunt's Radical Reform Association, a forerunner of the NUWC, as well as those radical propagandists such as Cobbett and Jones who eschewed Carlile's freethinking tenets, could feel equally at home in the Rotunda with infidels such as Taylor and Ward.

Carlile's willingness to accommodate a diverse array of radical expressions could also have had less altruistic motivations, for commercial imperatives required him to attract as wide a patronage as possible. They also saw Carlile attempt to recoup some of the operating costs by offering £5 shares in the venture (a system employed for the establishment of the scientific and literary institutions such as the Surrey). He also offered the Rotunda's rooms for hire, with the fee for the large theatre ranging between one and two guineas a night. Faced with the significant sum of £1000 per annum to keep the building open, Carlile also charged admission to the lectures and performances. He aimed to attract Londoners from all levels of society by offering a binary pricing system similar to that employed in the traditional theatres of the day.¹³⁹ For instance, during his, Taylor's and later Sharples' lectures, patrons had the choice of admission to the boxes for fourpence, the pit for threepence or the gallery for twopence. Sharples offered half-price admission for Monday evening lectures and staged several gratuitous lectures on Fridays. Jones offered slightly cheaper lectures at one penny and at sixpence, while the NUWC charged their members one penny and non-members twopence to attend their meetings and debates to offset the cost of the hire of the large theatre.

The building itself was ideal as a space intended to cater for a diverse and often disparate plebeian radical movement. With the addition of the large equestrian enclosure during the late 1820s, the premises now consisted of two large circular theatres suitable for lecturing, the smaller of which (featured in Rowlandson and Pugin's print of a Surrey Institution lecture) seated about 500 people and was intended to be Robert Taylor's own venue. Carlile's description of the room rekindled the feel of its Surrey heyday, promoting it as an extravagantly outfitted room with marble pillars and balustrades, and a stage. A statue of Contemplation (possibly that which previously guarded the exterior of the building) also adorned the room, in keeping with its educative function. The

138 Henry Hetherington's radical newspaper, *Poor Man's Guardian*, records many details and advertisements of the NUWC meetings at the Rotunda, and elsewhere in London. For the 'Constitution' and the 'Objects of the National Union', see *Prompter*, 28 May 1831. A more detailed account of the NUWC is provided in Chapters 7 and 8 of this study.

139 For further detail on how the Rotunda operated according to theatrical modes, see Chapter 7 of this study.

dome, however, had a new feature. It was now decoratively painted with the 12 signs of the zodiac—the images employed by Taylor to demonstrate his astronomical theological theses.

The larger theatre was less decorative than the smaller but had the benefit of catering for much larger crowds, with capacity for about 2000 people. Carlile recognised the need for refurbishing and repair work: 'It is but roughly fitted up', he wrote in November 1830, 'yet well suited to such meetings as are held in it'. Carlile envisaged hiring it out primarily for 'political usage'.¹⁴⁰ His description suggests that a spatial hierarchy soon evolved at the premises and the various spaces within the Rotunda became coded with meaning: the rough and nondescript space of the large theatre for the purely political offerings of the NUWC, while the decorative, respectable and more intimate environs of the smaller theatre would be kept for Carlile's showmen (and woman)—the infidel orators Taylor, Sharples and Ward. Different cultural conventions could operate, it appears, within one venue. Even so, Carlile's plans were sometimes thwarted by logistical imperatives. Though the small theatre had 'communication' with both the entrance passage and the library room, the subsequent popularity of Robert Taylor's lectures and extravaganzas often meant having to rely on the generous seating capacity of the larger theatre. Carlile was forced to promise that when funds allowed the 'general appearance' of the space would 'correspond with its already general celebrity'.¹⁴¹

* * *

Before examining the Rotunda's radical education curriculum in more detail in the following chapters, it is worth reflecting on the impact of the venue on the early nineteenth-century 'march of mind'. The fierce battles for the freedom of the press during the 1820s and 1830s have tended to focus many scholars on the flourishing print medium and a crediting of the printed word with providing the main impetus for the 'march of mind'. Radical printers continued, despite a sustained campaign of intimidation and prosecution, to produce cheap papers defying the four-penny stamp tax. Carlile was arguably the key player in the struggle for freedom of the press during the 1820s and early 1830s. In 1821, he proclaimed that the printing press was 'the best weapon a man can yield against tyrants'; it had arrived like a 'true messiah to emancipate the great family of mankind'.¹⁴² In the *Republican*, Carlile claimed that if given the 'free exercise of the press for seven years' he would 'annihilate Christianity'.¹⁴³ After the immense initial success of the Rotunda, however, Carlile considered that rapid expansion of infidel ideology among the populace was due more to

140 *Prompter*, 13 November 1830.

141 *Ibid.*

142 McCalman, *Popular Radicalism and Freethought in Early Nineteenth Century England*, pp. 89–91.

143 *Republican*, 8 December 1820.

preaching and discussion than to the reading of books. Carlyle believed that by incorporating the principles of free speech into a theatre of learning (rather than relying solely on the printed word), he was providing the best form of political and theological instruction for the working people of England.

Such a change in opinion from one of the central figures in the battle for press freedom in the early nineteenth century warns against overstating the centrality of print as a radical weapon in combating ignorance and educating the masses. McCalman's detailed and extensive account of plebeian radicalism in his study of the radical underworld reminds us that much knowledge dissemination took place informally in multipurpose radical venues; it was closely related to, or incorporated within, other radical activities. As historians dealing with traditional methods of communication know too well, oral communication leaves few records; printed material leaves many. Historian David Vincent has argued that the oral transmission of knowledge—previously an intrinsic element of popular culture—declined sharply in the early nineteenth century as a direct consequence of the proliferation of print: 'the pursuit of useful knowledge inevitably involved a withdrawal from the essentially communal process of oral transmission, set the literate apart from the illiterate, and created new lines of demarcation within the working class.'¹⁴⁴

E. P. Thompson's image of a literate reading public, who absorbed radical knowledge through written ideological tracts and journals, similarly oversimplifies the processes and factors that shaped this 'intellectual culture'. The picture of autodidacts rising at five o'clock to read radical texts, though undoubtedly accurate, conveys a somewhat abstract and mechanical process and tends to obscure other forms of communication that contributed to this culture.

Associating the oral transmission of knowledge exclusively with the illiterate, or emphasising that an exclusively literate reading public was recruited during the 'march of mind', distorts the picture of early nineteenth-century radical culture. The new passion for knowledge was undoubtedly fed by the burgeoning political press, but the importance of additional, alternative or supplementary means of radical communication based on oral communication is clearly evident in the historical record. The scholarship of historians such as McCalman, Epstein and David Worrall (and for the later Chartist years that of Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell) confirms that oratory, visual demonstration, revivalism and theatricality were also essential to the communication of radical knowledge.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', in Robert Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 42.

¹⁴⁵ On the continuing importance of oral traditions in the early to mid-nineteenth-century radicalism, see Paul A. Pickering, 'Class Without Words: Symbolic communication in the Chartist movement', *Past & Present*, no. 112 (1986), pp. 144–62; Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People's Bread: A history of the Anti-Corn*

Furthermore, as Peter Bailey argues, in wider society in the early nineteenth century there remained 'still a vigorously oral culture whose psychodynamics remain close to those of primarily oral societies'.¹⁴⁶ More recent scholarship from Jonathon Rose on literacy and the British working class, and from David Vincent himself, views the acquisition of knowledge from oral and written sources as a symbiotic relationship.¹⁴⁷

It is clear that the reading habit itself could be a public act in the institutions of the public sphere and was often supported by some kind of fellowship and mutuality. Discussion and debate helped new radical followers digest often abstract and difficult texts. The continued popularity of debating clubs in taverns and coffee houses and the sermons of the dissenting chapels underscores the importance of public venues in both oral and visual education during this period, and for sating the need of working people for fellowship and community. The oral dissemination of knowledge continued to flourish in the semi-literate society of the early 1830s and remained a dominant educational medium often complementary to, rather than in conflict with, printed propaganda.

The enormous initial popularity of the Rotunda is perhaps the best indication of the importance of oral communication of knowledge in the early 1830s. While people had access to the ideologies of the Rotunda radicals in journals such as the *Prompter*, Sharples' *Isis* and Taylor's *Devil's Pulpit*, hundreds still flocked to the Rotunda to hear and see the explanation and demonstration of those theories. Moreover, the example of the Rotunda shows the symbiotic relationship between all these modes of radical communication. Along with other radical coffee houses, the Rotunda provided an outlet for the sale of illegal radical 'unstamped' newspapers. Hawkers traversed the passages and surroundings of the building supplying copies of Carlile's new publishing endeavour, the *Prompter*, and later the *Devil's Pulpit*, *Isis* and the NUWC's *Poor Man's Guardian*. In turn, these papers recorded and publicised the respective lectures, meetings and performances at the Rotunda, though Carlile intended to make the *Prompter* the true mouthpiece of the venue.

The increase in literacy levels in this period, the emphasis in early radical historiography on the role of the press in the 'march of mind', as well as the prominence of the battle for the freedom of the press in the story of the 1820s have tended to overshadow both the continuation of traditional modes of

Law League (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), especially ch. 9. On the continuing oral tradition more generally, see Adam Fox and Daniel Wolfe (eds), *The Spoken Word: Oral culture in Britain, 1500–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

146 Peter Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture', *Past & Present*, vol. 144 (1994), p. 147n.21.

147 See David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and writing in modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 89–102; Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, pp. 83–4.

communication and new forums for working-class rational discourse and debate. It also perhaps obscured Habermas's view of Britain's expanding political nation when he sought to define the nature of the public sphere.

By the end of its first year of operation, the Rotunda had already developed multiple identities. By drawing on the cultural conventions of the previous inhabitants of the site, Carlile established a venue known for working-class instruction and education. The scenes that opened this chapter from October 1830, as well as the continuing involvement in Rotunda radicalism of London's more militant and plebeian radicals, also established the venue's reputation as an outlet for more extreme political expression. The following chapter narrows the lens on Rotunda radicalism to examine the substance of Rotunda pedagogy and, crucially, the means by which it was communicated to its audience. It explores how the dissemination of the message was as important as the message itself. In so doing, it demonstrates how another layer of identity—as a venue for popular entertainment—evolved. It also charts a further phase in the venue's development, which cemented the most enduring of its identities, that of the space that proudly and vehemently defended its tricolour flags and one that remained seething with revolutionary possibility.