From Magazine to Meeting: Francis Place, the Crown and Anchor Tavern, and the Founding of the London Mechanics' Institution

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This article considers the relationship between the *Mechanics' Magazine* and the founding of the London Mechanics' Institution through the prism of Francis Place, who was involved in each. By examining the relationship of the magazine with the Crown and Anchor Tavern, where the early meetings of the London Mechanics' Institution took place, this article reveals important aspects of the culture of the 1820s out of which Birkbeck emerged. With a particular focus on the economic aspects of 1820s radicalism and a reliance on numerical calculation, the article considers some of the controversies which faced the institution as it came into being.

In her history, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People*, Joanna Bourke describes Francis Place as one of the major protagonists in the founding of the London Mechanics' Institution (LMI), but points out that 'he is often ignored in discussions about [its founding], even though Place had been responsible for drafting the first plan and constitution for the Institution'.[1] In his own lifetime Place complained bitterly that his role in the founding of the LMI had been overlooked, with much of the credit accruing to George Birkbeck, despite his own significant efforts. This article is intended in part to correct that oversight and to acknowledge the role that Place played in establishing both the LMI and the *Mechanics' Magazine* out of which the institution evolved. In doing so, however, Place reveals the importance of the connection between print and physical gathering in the formation of the LMI, a product of the particularity of the London context within which it was formed. Place provides a lens through which to examine the materiality of urban history and the physical structures that populated the area around the Strand where the LMI was first established.

Unlike its most immediate precedent, the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute, which began as a physical institution before spawning a journal, Birkbeck College began life as a publication, the *Mechanics' Magazine*, *Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette* edited by Joseph Clinton Robertson and Thomas Hodgskin. Recognizing that there was a considerable market for cheap serialized print, but no publication targeted at mechanics and artisans, Robertson and Hodgskin attempted to fill this void by offering an inexpensive (3d.), 16-page publication once a week, starting on 30 August 1823. By the seventh issue, published on 11 October 1823, the editors were already proposing to establish a physical outgrowth of the magazine in the shape of the LMI. By the tenth issue, the magazine was advertising a meeting of the LMI that was to take place in the Crown and Anchor Tavern on 11 November 1823. The rapidity of the transition from printed word to physical gathering is indicative of the close relationship between the two modes of knowledge distribution — magazine and meeting. This relationship was made possible in part by Francis Place, who had a hand in founding both the magazine and the institution and was intimately acquainted with the Crown and Anchor Tavern (*Fig. 1*).

Place was a breeches maker and political activist, frequently described as 'the radical tailor of Charing Cross'. He was a member of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) in the 1790s. After retiring in 1817 he went on to become a full-time reformer. As Mary Thale has pointed out, he had a hand in nearly all of the great political reform debates of the early nineteenth century, including 'the Combination Laws, the Anatomy Bill, the establishment of the London university, the Reform Bill, the Penny Postage, the

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[1] Joanna Bourke, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 16.
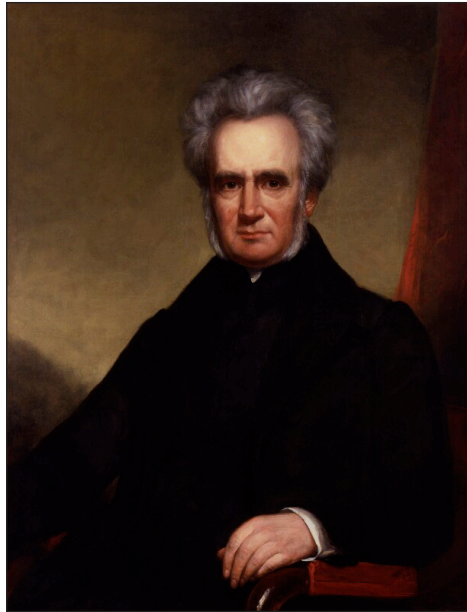
Fig. 1: Samuel Drummond, portrait of Francis Place (1833), oil on canvas. National Portrait Gallery.

Chartist movement and the anti-Corn Law League'.[2] Place is ideally situated to expose the links — and indeed some of the divisions — between the world of print and sites of assembly in the reform projects of the early nineteenth century, not least because he grew up in the vicinity of the Crown and Anchor Tavern, one of the key sites for extra-parliamentary debate since the eighteenth century.[3] While the idea that an institution of higher education could be founded in a tavern might strike many as odd, or even amusing, Place reveals the logic of this 'Birthplace of Birkbeck College' to be unsurprising; and, in fact, by tracing the connections between Place and the Crown and Anchor, we might even consider it inevitable.[4]

Place's involvement in both the *Mechanics' Magazine* and the LMI was largely down to his intimacy with Thomas Hodgskin, whom he described as 'an old acquaintance of mine one whom I had regarded much in the light of a member of my own family'.[5] Hodgskin had consulted with Place before launching the *Mechanics' Magazine*, and Place had concurred that, given the popularity of periodicals such as *The Mirror*,

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[2] *The Autobiography of Francis Place*, ed. by Mary Thale (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. x, hereafter, *AFP*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

[3] See Christina Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790–c. 1845* (ANU Press, 2010), pp. 105–77, doi:10.26530/OAPEN_459482.

[4] I take the phrase 'Birthplace of Birkbeck College' from A. L. Macfie, *The Crown and Anchor Tavern: The Birthplace of Birkbeck College* (the author, 1973). This was a small pamphlet put together in honour of the 150th anniversary of the founding of Birkbeck.

[5] London, British Library (BL), Add MS 27823, fol. 240.

it seemed reasonable to suppose that a work on art and mechanical science would command a sale of a very considerable number and at the least produce as much money as would cover the expense of conducting it and give some profit perhaps a considerable profit to the undertakers of the work.[6]

As James Mussell has discussed, the *Mechanics' Magazine* was a product of 'a combination of technological innovation, philosophical radicalism, and entrepreneurial opportunism'.[7] Place's account of the founding of the LMI speaks to each of these motivations but is perhaps most illuminating on entrepreneurial opportunism and how it overlapped with philosophical radicalism.

Place's assessment that there was a commercial opportunity that could generate profit is characteristic of his vision, which was trained as much on the practicality of a commercial enterprise as on the idealism of the pursuit. The *Mechanics' Magazine* was a sensible undertaking in Place's mind not because of the educational benefits, which perhaps go unstated because assumed, but because of its potential profitability. There is an economic logic to Place's narrative of the founding of both the magazine and the institution, which governed much of his thinking, and, as I suggest below, was a result both of formative experiences in his youth and a commitment to the moral force of calculation as an abstract principle.

Place's economic thinking, and his concern with the profitability of the venture, was partly responsible for the fractiousness that surrounded the founding of the LMI. It also gives Place's narrative of the founding of Birkbeck its characteristic flavour. Among the controversies that dogged the early years of the institution was the profitability — and by implication the sustainability — of the enterprise, and how reliant the LMI should be on the patronage of the wealthy. This was a central debate that shaped mechanics' institutions throughout Britain, including the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute, which was the immediate inspiration for the LMI. As John Gardner has recently discussed, the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute was set up in 1823, after a split with John Anderson's institution, largely as a result of the perceived paternalism of the lectures.[8] Anderson,

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[6] Ibid.

[7] James Mussell, '"This is Ours and For Us": The *Mechanic's Magazine* and Low Scientific Culture in Regency London', in *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Thinking*, ed. by David Clifford and others (Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 107–18 (p. 107).

[8] John Gardner, 'A Disruptive and Dangerous Education and the Wealth of the Nation: The Early Mechanics' Institutes', in *Institutions of Literature, 1700–1900: The Development of Literary Culture and Production*, ed. by Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 196–214. The following account of Anderson's Institution is indebted to Gardner's work.

a professor of natural philosophy at Glasgow University, stipulated the formation of a new university in his will and Anderson's Institution was set up in 1796. Among its early lecturers was George Birkbeck, who had been lecturing at the Sunday Society in Birmingham and who was persuaded to join Anderson's Institution in 1799. Seeking apparatus that he needed for his teaching, Birkbeck came into contact with the people who made the tools he needed, and observed that they had a thirst for knowledge, but were barred from education because of their poverty.[9] Anderson's Institution meanwhile did not have sufficient money to pay its lecturers, so Birkbeck began offering free lectures on Saturday nights which attracted large audiences. In August 1803, with the institution in debt to Birkbeck to the sum of £200, Birkbeck resigned. Place's concern that the LMI should be on a secure financial footing, and that the best way of managing that was through patronage, was based on the experiences of Anderson's Institution.

After Birkbeck's resignation, Andrew Ure was appointed as his replacement, continuing the tradition of Saturday night lectures, and over a twenty-year period devoted considerable time and money to improving the mechanics' class. But in May 1823 the class carried a resolution to split from Anderson's Institution and form the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute, in part because, in John Gardner's words, students perceived Ure's lectures were 'trying to teach them "puerile" gentlemanly affectations', instead of the science they expected.[10] The new institution was set up to avoid the paternalism of the well-meaning governors of Anderson's Institution, and from the beginning the students would choose their own lecturers. Later, a similar pattern was to be followed in Manchester, with the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society splitting into the Manchester Mechanics' Institute in 1829 over the twin issues of autocratic governance and the appropriateness of the courses being offered.[11]

This was the broader context in which Place and his friends debated the best structures for the LMI. Many among the founding members believed that it should be run by artisans and mechanics and that they did not need the interference of the ruling classes. Place, with his emphasis on practical financial considerations, took a more moderate view, believing that such an approach failed to take into account the scope of the undertaking:

[9] 'Public Meeting for the Establishment of the London Mechanics' Institute', *Mechanics' Magazine*, 15 November 1823, p. 179.

[10] Gardner, p. 204. For other accounts of the founding of the mechanics' institutes, see Séamus S. Duffy, 'The Armagh Mechanics' Institute (1825–1831)', *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, 13.1 (1988), pp. 122–72 (pp. 122–23), doi:10.2307/29745300.

[11] See Eileen Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture', in *Robert Owen: Prophet of the Poor: Essays in Honour of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of his Birth*, ed. by Sidney Pollard and John Salt (Bucknell University Press, 1971), pp. 84–114.

I was perfectly satisfied that to establish an Institution at all commensurable to the wants of the Mechanics would cost a sum of money far beyond any which would be raised by them. The matter was new to them. They were called upon all at once to abandon old habits, and adopt new ones, and it seemed to me quite certain that the number who would consent to pay 20/- a year for any sort of instruction was a comparatively very small number. It was maintained by my coadjutors that as a large number in Edinburgh paid 15/- for a sessional course of instruction we needed not doubt that a sufficient number could be found in London able and willing to pay 20/- for an annually uninterrupted course. I differed with them, and was certain that if 1000, and a much smaller number I was certain would not cover the current expenses, were constantly members, still 1000 pounds a year would afford nothing towards an outfit, and nothing towards discharging a debt if one should be incurred in providing and fitting up a proper place for them. Robertson and Hodgskin who knew next to nothing of the habits and feelings of London workmen and had not well calculated the cost of such an establishment as I contemplated, could not be persuaded that my opinion was correct, they were fully persuaded that the working men would of themselves furnish the means necessary to establish the Institution.[12]

Place lost the argument and he agreed to help establish the institution on the principles suggested by Robertson and Hodgskin, assisting in the printing and circulation of a handbill outlining a 'Proposal for an Institution for the Instruction of Mechanics', though he continued to believe that the institution would struggle to be financially solvent without remaining on friendly terms with the potential patrons and influential parliamentarians.

Staying on friendly terms with those with influence was a strategy Place had deployed throughout his life. In the 1790s, as a member and later chairman of the general committee of the London Corresponding Society, Place had seen the importance of literacy and of a curious mind fertilized through reading to the development of political consciousness. The LCS was a complexly networked and diverse federation of divisions that, inspired by the French Revolution, and in particular by Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, was 'established to provide a reform in the Representation of the people in the house of commons'.[13] Though attended by men of a wide diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, in subsequent accounts both Place and Thomas Hardy, the LCS's founder, emphasized that it was a society comprised primarily of tradespeople and shopkeepers,

[12] BL, Add MS 27823, fol. 244.

[13] *AFP*, p. 129. For a discussion of the structure of the LCS divisions, see John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 16–74.

and emphasized too that it gained respectability from its close association with the more gentlemanly Society for Constitutional Information.[14] In describing the good effects of the society, Place says that the LCS 'induced men to read books, instead of wasting their time in public houses, it taught them to respect themselves, and desire to educate their children'.[15] In subsequent years, as his financial means increased with the success of his business, Place was able to amass a considerable collection of books, which he kept in an upper room above his shop at 19 Charing Cross Road (*AFP*, pp. 22–23). Place was careful to keep this library out of sight of his customers, who could be prejudiced about tailors with bookish aspirations, but he read avidly after the shop closed and the library became an important meeting room — or a 'sort of gossiping shop' as Place called it — where he cultivated and advised political figures.[16] The library thus became both a resource and stage setting in which he could impress figures like Francis Burdett, Joseph Hume, Joseph Parkes, John Cam Hobhouse, George Grote, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and also his son John Stuart Mill, who, owing to the friendship with his father, Place helped to educate in the library.

Place, it should be acknowledged, is a controversial figure. One recent assessment has suggested that historians have become over-reliant on his account of the founding of the LMI, which emphasized the arguments which dominated its early years. We have, Helen Hudson Flexner suggests, accepted a narrative of the development of the institution in which, partly due to Place's involvement, it passed out of the hands of mechanics and artisans and into the control of middle-class radicals.[17] 'Historians extrapolate to claim that a middle-class, paternalist management was responsible for "working class alienation"', Flexner claims, making the point that this narrative is inconsistent with other evidence, notably that from the LMI minute books and especially from the stipulation that 'two-thirds of the management committee *had* to be working class' (p. 13). Doubtless this reassessment is overdue. Place's account is

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[14] For a detailed examination of the social composition of the LCS, see Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 112 (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[15] *AFP*, p. 198. The links between the LCS and the LMI continued with John Thelwall, a prominent figure in the LCS who was tried for treason in 1794, and who was a close acquaintance of George Birkbeck going on to lecture at the LMI, as discussed by Judith Thompson in this issue of *19*.

[16] 'My library which was a room built by me up two pairs of stairs in what was formerly a back house lighted by a large sky light, warmed in the winter in part by heated air, and made as to temperature as comfortable as it was quiet [...]. [It] was a sort of gossiping shop for such persons as were in any way engaged in public matters having the benefit of the public for their object, and it was well frequented' (BL, Add MS 35154, fol. 195).

[17] Helen Hudson Flexner, 'The London Mechanics' Institute: Social and Cultural Foundations 1823–1830' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2014), p. 12, emphasis in original <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1417470/1/Flexner%202014%20UCL%20PhD%20London%20Mechanics%20Institution.pdf> [accessed 8 August 2024].

far from neutral and he is clearly influenced by his later disillusionment with the LMI and his frustrations with the motivations of other founding figures.[18] He is particularly withering in his assessment of those men who seek to gain glory for themselves and consistently emphasized his own role in its founding, which he maintains has been overlooked despite his insistence that he never seeks glory for himself. What Place provides, then, is a consciously one-sided account, with little pretence of neutrality or disinterest. But his account is valuable in other ways, not least because it reveals some of the social fault lines out of which the LMI grew, and some of the complexities of the issues involved in setting up an establishment for the education of working people in the 1820s at a historical moment when 'the working people' were still in the process of understanding themselves as an identifiable 'class'.[19] While Flexner disputes the claim that the LMI gradually passed out of the hands of the mechanics and was taken over by 'middle-class radicals', we should be alert to any simple opposition between 'working class' on the one hand and 'middle class' on the other, and the conflation of 'artisans and mechanics' with 'working class'. These are retrospectively applied and ossified categories that tend not to match up to the lived experience of class politics in the early 1820s. Place's own experiences can help mobilize a more fluid understanding of Londoners' affiliations and resentments, while exposing the role that the traffic between print and physical gathering played in fuelling these dynamics.

One index of the fluidity between cultural identities might be found in the 'Abstract of Rules and Orders for the Society'.[20] This printed document states the purpose of the LMI: 'The object proposed to be obtained, is the instruction of the Members in the principles of the Arts they practice and in the various branches of science and useful knowledge.' There is a studied vagueness in the phrase 'the principles of the Arts they practice' as the document avoids defining the vocations of the members too narrowly beyond considering them as 'Arts', though it has some suggestions of knowledge that members will find useful, planning a series of lectures on 'Natural and Experimental Philosophy, Practical Mechanics, Astronomy, Chemistry, Literature, and the Arts'. They will also provide elementary schools for 'Teaching arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, and Trigonometry and their different applications, particularly to Perspective, Architecture, Mensuration and Navigation'.

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[18] For some candid comments by Place on Hodgskin, Robertson, and Henry Brougham, for example, see his diary entry for 23 September 1826. *The Affairs of Others: The Diaries of Francis Place 1825–1836*, ed. by James A. Jaffe (Royal Historical Society, 2007), p. 145.

[19] The classic study here is, of course, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Gollancz, 1963).

[20] *Rules and Orders of the Mechanic's Institution for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge among the Working Classes, Established November 11, 1823* ([London Mechanics' Institution], 1823).

The *Mechanics' Magazine* likewise had a capacious understanding of its audience and the forms of instruction that might be useful for it. The first issue announced that subsequent issues were to contain useful information for the artisan, including:

> Accounts of all New Discoveries, Inventions, and Improvements, with illustrative Drawings, Explanations of Secret Processes, Economical Receipts, Practical Applications of Mineralogy and Chemistry, Plans and Suggestions for the Abridgement of Labour; Reports of the States of the Arts in this and other Countries; Memoirs and occasionally Portraits of eminent Mechanics, &c. &c.

> The Mechanic's Magazine will contain also a due portion of that lighter matter, which those who toil most, stand most in need of, to relieve and exhilarate their minds — as, Essays on Men and Manners, Tales, Adventures, Anecdotes, Poetry &c.[21]

The capaciousness with which the authors of these two documents (they are both unsigned but we know from Place's narrative that he had a hand in each) understood their audience provides an important lesson in the history of class construction: the 'working class' did not yet, if it ever did, exist, but was in the process of becoming. Who was imagined to be included in this group was not a stable and settled set of actors with identifiable professions, but a hugely various body with diverse interests and needs.

Put more crudely, the idea of the working class as proud workers who toiled in factories that were built in large cities as part of the process we call the Industrial Revolution does not obtain in London in the 1820s. The language deployed to describe the audience of the *Mechanics' Magazine* and the LMI was not just that of 'the working class', but also that of 'artisans', 'mechanics', and 'labouring people'. That is, these are people who are distinguished by the fact they had professions, and whose identities were bound up in their professions, unlike the ruling elite who were often beneficiaries of inherited wealth. The audience Robertson, Hodgskin, and Place imagined included people, like those Birkbeck had encountered in Glasgow, who worked with machines (hence the emphasis on technological innovation), but not necessarily in factories. As the example of Birkbeck suggests, the primary audience for the mechanics' institutes were those interested in the possibilities that cooperation between science and industry might offer; but in the early 1820s, as Mabel Tylecote points out, 'members of the mechanic class were […] few in number, and the concentration of mechanized industry

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[21] This prospectus was printed in the first issue of the *Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette*, 30 August 1823, p. 16.

and factory "hands" in particular areas had not yet taken place.'[22] The intended student body for the institutes was necessarily much more capacious, despite the use of the term 'working class'. It included skilled craftsmen, like Place himself, who had undergone a rigorous training as an apprentice and a journeyman before becoming a master tailor, as well as a broad range of professions that can be glimpsed by looking at the members' register for the LMI, helpfully compiled by Flexner. These include artists, architects, beadmakers, brass-founders, cabinetmakers, carpenters, carvers, chemists, clerks, coachmakers, coopers, druggists, engravers, fruiterers, glass-painters, gunmakers, hosiers, jewellers, joiners, painters, printers, schoolmasters, shipbuilders, shipbrokers, shoemakers, smiths, warehousemen, watchmakers, weavers, and a dizzying array of other professions, with varying degrees of skill and prestige, which get flattened by the later imposition of the idea of the 'working class'.[23]

This is not to say that the term 'working class' was unimportant to the LMI founders as they authored a workable structure and set of operating principles. From the institution's earliest days, it was important for members to have working-class representation on the General Committee. As Flexner points out, 'two-thirds of the management committee *had* to be working class'. The LMI meeting minutes show how this happened in some detail. In September 1824 an election was held to vote in fifteen new members of the General Committee. The minutes make clear that two separate elections took place, one of working-class members who would occupy ten positions, and one of members 'not of the working class' who would occupy five.[24] What qualifies a person to be a member of each category, however, is unspecified, and it is notable that Place's son (also Francis) was one of the 'working-class' members elected in the September 1824 election, much to the annoyance of Robertson, who thought that a master tradesman at the head of a flourishing business should not count as a 'common worker'.[25] These skirmishes, however, suggest that in 1824 the meanings of the term 'working class' remained unsettled and could often mean something broader than its later associations. Especially in the context of London, with its larger population and denser networks of still-influential guilds, the stark opposition between 'working class' and 'not of the working class' in the LMI papers disguises a complicated and dynamic social situation.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that the LMI was being formed at precisely the moment when this diverse range of skills and vocations was under threat

[22] Mabel Tylecote, *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire before 1851* (Manchester University Press, 1957), p. 2.

[23] Flexner, Appendix A.

[24] London Mechanics' Institute, Minutes of Quarterly General Meetings, 4 vols (1 March 1824–1858), University of London, Birkbeck Library Archives and Special Collections, BBK 1/2/1, Vol. 1, fols 28–30.

[25] Bourke, p. 33.

from industrialized forms of labour, as regular, unskilled employment in large factories that mass produced goods for a new kind of commercial market became more commonplace, slowly eroding the artisanal way of life. Indeed, Place himself attests to the resistance of weavers to setting up a mechanics' institution in Spitalfields on the grounds that people like Birkbeck would be promoting the use of new machinery that would destroy their livelihood.[26] The tension between older artisanal forms of labour and the machines of the industrial age was occasionally registered, but rarely understood as an impediment to the business of teaching working people about the technologies which were changing the nature of their professions. These larger historical shifts are much easier to recognize in retrospect, and at the time the felt experience of London workers registers in less clearly teleological modes as immediate responses to immediate pressures and impulses. Doubtless, one of the impulses to form both the *Mechanics' Magazine* and the LMI was the acknowledgement of a quickly changing labour environment, but (particularly in Place's narrative) this is seen most frequently as a recognition of the commercial opportunities made available by the necessity for working people to keep themselves informed of changes affecting their livelihoods, rather than as a political struggle.

Arguably, the size of London insulated artisans from the dramatic shifts in labour practice experienced elsewhere in Britain, enabling the artisanal trades to co-exist with industrialized forms of labour for longer.[27] Place certainly seemed aware that London artisans and mechanics were not directly comparable with the mechanics of Glasgow, from where several of the other founders (Robertson, Hodgskin, Birkbeck) had come, and from where the LMI found its most immediate precursor. One way to understand the disagreement about the costs involved in setting up the institution outlined above is to see it as two different claims for authority. Robertson and Hodgskin were able to argue on the basis of their knowledge of similar institutions in Scotland; Place, meanwhile, insisted on the importance of his knowledge of the workers of London.[28] Place's knowledge and claim to authority had been hard-earned by a lifetime living in the vicinity of the Crown and Anchor, where the LMI was to hold its earliest meetings.[29]

Place was born in 1771 in a sponging house (a debtor's prison with milder restrictions) that was run by his father, Simon Place, in the vicinity of Marshalsea

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[26] *The Affairs of Others*, ed. by Jaffe, p. 45 (10 March 1825).

[27] Gardner similarly suggests that the diversity of workers at the LMI was quite different from elsewhere in Britain (p. 205).

[28] The immediate inspiration for Robertson and Hodgskin was the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute which was formed on 3 July 1823, following a dispute between the mechanics' class at Anderson's Institution and the managers, as discussed above. Place refers to this as the 'Andersonian Institution' in his narrative (see BL, Add MS 27823, fol. 241).

[29] For an alternative account of the founding of the LMI, emphasizing differences of political economy, see Gregory Claeys, 'Political Economy and Popular Education: Thomas Hodgskin and the London Mechanics' Institute, 1823–8', in *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1858: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis*, ed. by Michael T. Davis (Macmillan, 2000), pp. 157–75.

Prison in Southwark, a little over a mile away from the Crown and Anchor as the crow flies.[30] A 1779 Act of Parliament stopped the trade of sponging houses, so in 1780 Place's father bought the lease to a public house on Arundel Street called the King's Arms, on land owned by the Duke of Norfolk:

> The Duke of Norfolk than whom it might upon the whole be difficult to find a greater scoundrel used sometimes to look in at my father's house, sometimes he used to send for my father at the Crown and Anchor Tavern and there they used to get drunk together. (*AFP*, p. 85)

This extraordinary constellation of personages — the aristocratic duke and the perennially destitute Simon Place — reveals something more about the class politics of Place's London: that in this time and place there was little class segregation. Indeed, in this stretch of the Strand, one of the major thoroughfares connecting the City to the West End, one could encounter the pickpockets, thieves, and sex-trade workers who took advantage of the market a little to the north in Covent Garden as well as the famously socially diverse patrons of the theatres at Covent Garden and Drury Lane; one could encounter lawyers and barristers in the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court immediately to the east; and one could encounter immigrant populations, rag shop owners and pornographers who occupied the space at the back of St Clement's Church between Wych Street and Holywell Street — a place reputedly so 'backward' and anachronistic that it had to be ripped out of existence to make way for the semicircular street Aldwych in the early twentieth century. This was a place of social mixing, an urban contact zone where people from diverse walks of life would encounter one another as they squeezed through the dangerously narrow Temple Bar, which marked the division between the cities of London and Westminster.[31]

It was here that the Duke of Norfolk's estate lay, stretching from Strand Lane in the west to Milford Lane in the east and from the River Thames in the south to the Strand in the north. The King's Arms laid in fact directly to the south of the Crown and Anchor, separated only by a small passageway that connected Arundel Street with Water Street (*Fig. 2*). The Duke of Norfolk that Place derides in his *Autobiography*, and who oversaw the estate when Simon Place was the publican, was Charles Howard, the 10th Duke of

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[30] The best account of Place's life can be found in Dudley Miles, *Francis Place: The Life of a Remarkable Radical 1771–1854* (Harvester Press, 1988).

[31] For more on the region, see Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers, 1795–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 217–31; Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 30; and Ian Newman, 'Civilizing Taste: "Sandman Joe", the Bawdy Ballad, and Metropolitan Improvement', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 48.4 (2015), pp. 437–46 (p. 444), doi:10.1353/ecs.2015.0037.

Norfolk. This duke died in 1786 and the 11th Duke (also Charles Howard) immediately set about transforming the estate, recognizing the potential of this location to provide a central role in the social and commercial life of the city. His plans came to fruition rapidly, in part because his accession coincided with a large number of leases on the estate expiring in 1786, when Francis Place was fifteen years old, now working as an apprentice breeches maker. The 11th Duke commissioned the landlord (or 'vintner' as tavern keepers were known) of the Crown and Anchor, Thomas Simpkin, to buy up a number of dilapidated properties that lay behind (to the east of) the original tavern, which had occupied the site since at least the 1720s. Within two years, Simpkin had built a large extension on the back of the tavern, which housed two large dining rooms with an assembly room on the upper floor that could hold up to two thousand people, built to accommodate balls and elegant gatherings, and which in the 1790s became one of the most important locations for extra-parliamentary political discussion (*Fig. 3*).[32]

Fig. 2: Site plan of Crown and Anchor based on a survey by Robert and H. R. Abraham Architects (1836). Arundel Castle Archive PM1 90. Reproduced by kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Norfolk. Highlighted are the Crown and Anchor (with its expanded post-1788 configuration), and the smaller King's Arms public house where Francis Place lived.

[32] For further details on the development of this space, see Ian Newman, *The Romantic Tavern: Literature and Conviviality in the Age of Revolution*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 125 (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 69–80. For more details on the political function of the tavern, see Parolin, pp. 105–77.

Fig. 3: Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, view of the Crown and Anchor Tavern, now the Wellington Club, in Arundel Street, the Strand (1852). © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

This larger construction, described in Bourke's history of Birkbeck (pp. 12–13), was to play an important role in Place's life. Place's younger sister, for example, was engaged for a while to be married to a man who was apprenticed as a cook to Thomas Simpkin at the Crown and Anchor (they later quarrelled and the engagement was broken off) (*AFP*, p. 92). Elsewhere, Place recalls how he had been shunned in his new business by the son of a glazier and painter, who entered into a partnership with Simpkin at the Crown and Anchor. But perhaps the most significant connection between Place and the tavern were the numerous political meetings Place attended there. In 1795 he attended a meeting that celebrated the first anniversary of the acquittal of Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Corresponding Society who had been tried for treason alongside John Thelwall and Horne Tooke. The anniversary of the acquittal, celebrated on 5 November annually, became an important date in the radical calendar; the choice of venue, the Crown and Anchor, was a significant one because meetings in the tavern, including a general meeting of LCS members in July 1793, and a meeting of the Society for Constitutional Information to which several figures from the LCS leadership were invited, had featured prominently in the treason trials. The first anniversary meeting on 5 November 1795 was held at the Crown and Anchor to signal (at least in the minds of LCS members) the triumph of freedom over the tyrannical oppression of the government, who had taken on 'the people' and lost. Thus, the tavern was a powerfully freighted symbol of British liberty and the defeat of political oppression (to paraphrase the familiar, idealized language of the radical movement).[33]

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[33] For Parolin, 1809 is a turning point in the representation of the tavern in graphic satire. Previously, she argues, satirists represented working people outside of the tavern, but in Samuel De Wilde's print *The Reformers' Dinner* (1809) we see a butcher inside the tavern alongside more 'polite' reformers like Major John Cartwright and Francis Burdett (Parolin, pp. 131–32).

In the early 1800s Place was involved in successive election campaigns for Francis Burdett, who held frequent meetings at the Crown and Anchor to generate support for his election. In 1831 Place was once again in attendance at the tavern, where he had set up meetings to form the National Political Union, after the Reform Bill had been blocked by the House of Lords.[34] Also in 1831 he was involved in the organization of the Parliamentary Candidate Society, intended to identify good candidates for election, which met at the tavern.[35] On 19 June 1833 Place helped to organize a public meeting in the Crown and Anchor to help in the defence of two men who were arrested for stabbing two police officers as part of the Coldbath Fields Riots, in which the police had violently broken up a meeting of the National Political Union.[36] In 1837 he was present at meetings of the London Working Men's Association; and in 1842, was involved in the Metropolitan Parliamentary Reform Association, which met at the tavern.[37] In short, if Francis Place, as has been frequently claimed, had an outsized influence on the reform movement of the early nineteenth century, then the Crown and Anchor, which acted as headquarters for many of his political activities, must be seen as one of the central locations for extra-parliamentary discussions of reform.

The choice of the Crown and Anchor as a venue for the first meetings of the LMI is entirely of a piece with other reform-minded political causes with which Place was involved from the 1790s through to the 1840s. It was, indeed, a natural choice for many public meetings where large numbers were expected, as it was one of the few indoor venues which could accommodate crowds of up to two thousand people. Though it was a politically neutral commercial space available for hire, in the public imagination the tavern became particularly associated with progressive political meetings from the 1786 expansion, when it housed meetings of Charles James Fox's Whig Club, until it was sold in the 1840s. In 1848 the tavern was bought by Douglas Jerrold, the dramatist and journalist, who set up a new venture called The Whittington Club in the building, which combined adult education with the conveniences of a club, offering men, and — significantly — women, access to libraries and newspapers as well as instruction in languages, elocution, fencing, drama, and chemistry.[38]

Having sketched the longer history of Place's involvement with the tavern, I want now to return to the moment in the 1780s when the nearby King's Arms passed out of the hands of Place's father. Despite vows to the contrary, the 10th Duke of Norfolk reneged on

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[34] BL, Add MS 27791, fols 47–57; Add MS 27790, fols 54–59.

[35] BL, Add MS 27789, fols 320–42.

[36] BL, Add MS 27797, fols 238–44.

[37] BL, Add MS 27819, fols 47–48; Add MS 27810, fols 39–42.

[38] Newman, *Romantic Tavern*, pp. 73–77.

his promises to Simon Place to renew his lease and, according to Place's *Autobiography*, 'clandestinely' granted it, with two years left on the lease, to a man named Thomas who had formerly kept another public house at the bottom of Arundel Street called the Waterman's Arms (*AFP*, p. 86). Place's father was left in debt having relied on the new lease, which he had intended to sell for a profit, to get credit. Simon Place was immediately ruined and, unable to meet his debts, was taken to the Fleet Prison.

Francis's involvement in the transfer of the house from his father to Thomas is worth recounting in detail as it helps to explain the financial considerations which dominate Place's thinking as he narrates the founding of the LMI. In his *Autobiography* Place calculates that his father was intending to renew the lease on the King's Arms for between £200 and £300, though in Place's calculation it was worth around £1000. With two years left on the lease, the King's Arms was still under Simon Place's control — though because of his debts he was now in prison, and when released could no longer afford to operate it. Simon threatened to shut up the house entirely for the remainder of the lease, 'thus destroying the trade and increasing the dilapidation of the premises' (*AFP*, p. 86). This clearly was not in Thomas's interest so, after some negotiation, Thomas agreed to pay for the fittings, fixtures, and the 'goodwill'.[39] A day was appointed to decide on the price and agree on the sale. With Simon Place still in prison, Francis, who was 17 years old, and an attorney undertook the negotiations. Francis was dissatisfied with the negotiations of the attorney and so took over, demanding a large sum and threatening to sell the fixtures and fittings and shut up the house unless it was paid. Thomas acceded and Place secured a much larger sum than anticipated, and was thereby able to pay off the creditors, some smaller additional debts, and take a sum of £340 to his father. Place concludes his narration of the story with the following comment: 'He was greatly pleased and surprised, he gave me half a crown and told me never to be without a shilling in my pocket. This was the first money he had ever given me and the last' (*AFP*, p. 87).

I recount this episode at some length because it reveals much about Place's habits of mind and helps to explain some of the motivations behind his narrative of the founding of the LMI. Place was a numbers man and it is noticeable that in his narration, told half a century after the events being described, he is very precise with his figures. He remembers, or had recorded, the exact amount his father requires to discharge his debts (£200), the amount of profit after the sale of the business (£340), the amount his father gave him as a reward (half a crown) and the amount he was told to always have in

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[39] 'The privilege, granted by the seller of a business to the purchaser, of trading as the recognized successor of the seller; [...] the established reputation of a business regarded as a quantifiable asset and calculated as part of its value when it is sold.' See the entry 'goodwill' def. 4.b., in *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d. <https://www.oed.com> [accessed 8 August 2024].

his pocket (a shilling). This is an autobiography replete with what David Kurnick calls 'numberiness', or the 'charisma of quantification', where precise numbers are used to convey a sense of exactitude, when a more general description could lend a similar or equal argumentative force.[40] Throughout his writing, Place is drawn to the use of numbers and this charisma of quantification indicates a disposition towards the world, an attempt to contain and control complexity through the moral force of calculation.

Place's 'numberiness' was both a habit of mind and a philosophical position, encouraged by his connection with Jeremy Bentham, one of the founders of utilitarianism. There is not space in the present discussion to explain in detail the connection between utilitarianism and calculation, but it is important to note that within Benthamism (as it was known before John Stuart Mill popularized the term utilitarianism) there was a quantitative logic by which amounts of pleasure and pain could be measured to maximize the amount of pleasure and minimize the amount of pain for a society. In Chapter 6 of Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, there is a series of pseudo-mathematical calculations known as the 'hedonic calculus', intended to measure pleasure or pain, based on an episode's intensity, duration, likelihood, and proximity.[41] One way of viewing this is to consider it as the charisma of numbers brought to the level of ethical principle.

This is significant for the present purposes because Place was on intimate terms with Bentham. They first met in 1812 and subsequently met frequently in the library Place had assembled at the back room of his shop on Charing Cross Road. In the summer of 1817, after he had retired from business, Place spent two months with Bentham and James Mill at Ford Abbey. In his *Autobiography* Place refers to Bentham as 'my good friend and master' and at one point in his diary for 1827 Place notes that 'visits from and to Mr Bentham have not been hitherto mentioned, as each of our houses were frequently entered by either as his own'.[42] According to one acquaintance they would frequently walk together discussing political ideas, and Bentham would accompany Place on business calls 'to take orders from his customers, or deliver the garments he had made for them'.[43] Place discussed ideas with Bentham, read over his writings before they were published, and acted as an editor for him. Though Bentham was the

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[40] Kurnick's term is used in response to an essay 'Ulysses by Numbers' on the *Representations* blog, 13 January 2015 <https://www.representations.org/response-to-ulysses-by-numbers-david-kurnick/> [accessed 4 January 2024]. Kurnick attributes the use of charisma of numbers to the tools we now have available in the era of digital texts. My point here is that the charisma of numbers can also be observed to have its effect in earlier moments, such as in the milieu in which Place was operating in the 1820s.

[41] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Payne, 1789), pp. xl–lxvi.

[42] *AFP*, p. 250; *Affairs of Others*, p. 264 (19 June 1827).

[43] George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Fisher Unwin, 1893), I, p. 215.

more senior figure, Place was to Bentham what Thomas Holcroft had been to William Godwin: an important companion, oral instructor, and interlocutor with whom ideas might be tried out and tested before being committed to print. Once again, what is at issue here is the relationship between physical proximity and print.

That Place should have never attempted to make a name for himself as a moral philosopher as Bentham had done is notable, not least because it suggests that Place believed that his physical presence, his ability to say and do things — without necessarily feeling the need to cement his reputation through print — was enough. Indeed, it is notable that while Place was a prolific writer, drafting abundant letters, newspaper articles, resolutions, announcements, and handbills for various causes (including, notably having a hand in drafting the charter from which the Chartist movement made its name), as well as writing copious materials relating to his experiences as a political operator in London — including his account of the founding of the LMI and his own autobiography — the only publication which was printed in his name to appear in his lifetime was an engagement with Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), entitled *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principles of Population* (1822), which notably was concerned with population control using a mathematical logic to argue for the advantages of contraception.

Moral calculation, with a fundamentally quantitative logic, permeates Place's writing, both at the level of ethical principle and, more pragmatically, in the world of business. Place was a successful tailor and breeches maker, who at the point of his retirement in 1817 was able to leave a business that made £2500 per year to his son Francis. Later he would attribute some of this success to his experience in the LCS, which enabled him to create a strong network of affiliates who would pay for his services and who could recommend him to others of their acquaintance. Place recalls attending a meeting to celebrate the anniversary of Thomas Hardy's acquittal on 5 November 1822, around twenty-five years after he had left the LCS. The meeting took place once again at the Crown and Anchor, and Place calculated that twenty-four people (note again the numerical precision) recognized and greeted him, twenty of whom were journeymen like him in the LCS, but who were 'now all in business all flourishing men. Some of them were rich most of them had families to whom they had given or were then giving good educations' (*AFP*, p. 199). Place links the progressive political campaign of the LCS to education in order to make the point that, whatever the immediate political concerns the LCS had engaged with, the overall benefit of forming a community of inquisitive minds was one of the lasting consequences of the 1790s radical movement — even if the more violently revolutionary influences within the society were to be disavowed.

Place later claimed that he withdrew from the LCS because he disapproved of the direction of the General Committee in later years and, in particular, its financially reckless desire to publish a magazine (*AFP*, p. 153). But more often he was defensive towards the LCS and continually insisted on the good it had done. In his account of the 1822 anniversary of Hardy's acquittal, Place observes that

> the society had been to a very considerable extent the means, and in some cases the whole means of inducing them to desire to acquire knowledge the consequence of which was their bringing up a race of men and women superior in all respects to what they would otherwise have been. (*AFP*, p. 199)

Here Place makes clear what he values about education, broadly conceived: that it is the means for both 'improvement' and self-determination; without education workers are kept in a state of ignorance where they have no choice but to remain in their assigned social position — and the squalor, drudgery, and loose morals Place associated with that position. For Place education was less about 'class mobility' in the sense of individuals moving from one class to another, and more about entire classes of people rising together, deserving better living and working conditions. All of which began with a desire for knowledge which became a desire for education. An educational system should be designed as a structure to make available the information that working people themselves would desire.

For this reason, it makes perfect sense that the *Mechanics' Magazine* and the LMI should form two tines of the same educational fork. Both were intended, in Place's mind, to sate the hunger for knowledge that was naturally produced by the abuse of power. Working people had been artificially kept in darkness due to a programme of social engineering that prevented working populations from participating in social privileges, including, though not restricted to, the economic advantages that the ruling classes kept for themselves. Education was the solution to this problem but, while for others like Hodgskin and Robertson that education could involve merely staying abreast of the technological advances that might enable working people to do their job better, for Place it involved an extensive reprogramming of the mental habits of the greater part of the population. For Place the task of the LMI was no less than to encourage artisans and mechanics 'all at once to abandon old habits, and adopt new ones'.[44]

The process by which the LMI grew out of the *Mechanics' Magazine* involved further interactions between physical gathering and print. According to Place:

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[44] BL, Add MS 27823, fol. 244.

> We talked over the matter in detail, and after two or three meetings it was argued that Robertson and Hodgskin should put the substance of our conversation on paper in the form of an address and send it to me, that we should then meet again and consider the propriety of publishing whatever we might agree upon as fit to be submitted to the mechanics of the Metropolis.[45]

Here we get to see the relay between print and physical gathering in greater detail. It was not that physical meetings were simply oral counterparts to the print marketplace, nor did printed material reflect straightforwardly things said in physical meetings. Print and conversation were much more fully enmeshed. Ideas discussed in person would become reorganized and reshaped specifically with print media in mind, and the process of remediation involved a considerable interchange between spoken argument and written word, as collaborators looked over and further discussed handwritten material before it was committed to print. But notably, print was not considered the endpoint, or ultimate destination of physical gathering, or indeed vice versa; rather, print could be a means by which interest in meetings could be generated, and physical meetings could be held to make decisions on what to say in print, which could then provoke further discussion both in person and in print, in a continuous relay between print, meeting, ephemera, and manuscript.

While Place was not necessarily interested in forms of writing that lent themselves to the codex-form book, he was interested in other forms of writing. It is these that help us to understand better the relationship between the world of print, as exemplified by the *Mechanics' Magazine*, and the world of physical gathering, as exemplified by the meetings of the LMI at the Crown and Anchor Tavern. Between these two media are a series of other forms of writing and meeting which smooth the pathways between magazine and meeting hall. They include more casual forms of meeting, such as gatherings in the library at the back of Place's tailor shop and ideas exchanged on walks, and a range of different writing practices, including manuscript jotting, letter writing, the drafting and redrafting of resolutions and proceedings, printed handbills, and newspaper announcements. The first formal meeting of the LMI took place only after two preparatory meetings to plan the business and draft proposals, and these meetings occurred after Place had written letters and made personal calls on individuals who he hoped might interest themselves in the institution.[46] The *Mechanics' Magazine* and the LMI, then, both existed as part of a complicated network of communication which helped to knit the workers of London together with the founders of both the magazine

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[45] Ibid.

[46] On the two preparatory meeting, see BL, Add MS 27823, fol. 248.

and the institution. To bifurcate this network into 'working class' and 'middle class' is to miss the communication networks that linked together this densely connected world whose ties were predicated on physical gathering both casual and formal as well as forms of writing, from handwritten notes, through printed ephemera, to formally printed publications. What this suggests is a different account of the relationship between print and physical gathering than the familiar one of competition, where print, by virtue of its portability and potential to lend permanence to ideas, is considered in competition with physical gathering, which has a superiority in terms of affective appeal because of its immediacy, but is ephemeral. There can be little question that at times this competition did exist (Ros Ballaster, for instance, has explored the productive rivalry between theatrical performance and the novel), but the *Mechanics' Magazine* and the LMI reveal not competition between print and immediate physical contact, but cooperation.[47] In the particular milieu of the reform movement of the early nineteenth century they form two possibilities within a wide range of tactics and technologies used in the effort to 'improve' the living and working conditions of a varied population.

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[47] Ros Ballaster, *Fictions of Presence: Theatre and Novel in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Boydell Press, 2020).