

MEMORIES

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Stuttering start to The Beaney's life

Early in 1889, Dr James George Beaney made an offer to Canterbury City Council to found The Beaney Institute for the Education of Working Men, by converting the Medical Hall building where he served his medical apprenticeship to become a doctor. Dr Beaney's generous offer was rejected by the council whose Mayor did not want another educational institution established in the City. Instead, the Council wrote to Dr Beaney to ask if he would like to build them a new town hall. Needless to say, on receipt of the council's letter, 61-year-old Dr Beaney withdrew his much more generous offer.

On July 12th 1890 the Kentish Gazette reported that this was "a piece of the coolest presumption that we think has ever been known in connection with such a proposal.

"A distinct offer was made for one thing to be done, and this offer is treated indifferently and something of quite another character is put before the gentleman making the offer, and the offer is now withdrawn, as it deserves to be."

Thousands of people flock to 'The Beaney' every year. Yet few know the story behind its origin. Richard West, founder of The Chaucer Education Project, explains how Dr James George Beaney's first offer to build a library was snubbed by the city council...

The article added: "The incident will serve as a useful lesson to other places, when there is an offer to build them a new Public Library, to accept it, and not spoil the intending donor's mind, by foolishly suggesting something different.

"The Corporation evidently thought that a dwelling for their noble selves was of infinitely more importance than a suitable dwelling for books and museum objects.

"There should be a little library education infused into the minds of the Canterbury Corporation, and if the ecclesiastics at the cathedral will kindly take this matter in hand they will accomplish

a very necessary and useful work."

Dr Beaney's offer followed the establishment of Mechanics' Institutes across Britain during the 1800s. The first was the Edinburgh School of Arts, which opened on 16th October 1821 and held the first lecture "for the instruction of mechanics in such branches of physical science as are of practical application in their several trades". More than 300 people packed the hall to hear Dr Andrew Fyfe give the first lecture on chemistry. Several hundred more were turned away at the door.

In 1855, the name changed to Heriot-Watt College.



Dr James Beaney

Women were admitted in 1869, following a campaign by Mary Burton, an educational and social reformer, twenty years before other institutions were forced to do so by legislation.

The success of the Mechanics' Institutes helped change public opinion. Education was increasingly no longer regarded as a privilege but as a right.

Whilst newspapers like the Gazette promoted Mechanics' Institutes, others argued that it would make working men question their lowly status, leading inevitably to revolution and anarchy. That seems consistent with the view taken by the City Council in Canterbury.

Dr Beaney died on 30th June 1891 in Melbourne, Australia. Following details of his bequests, the new Mayor of Canterbury Councillor William Mason expressed a more positive response. At the

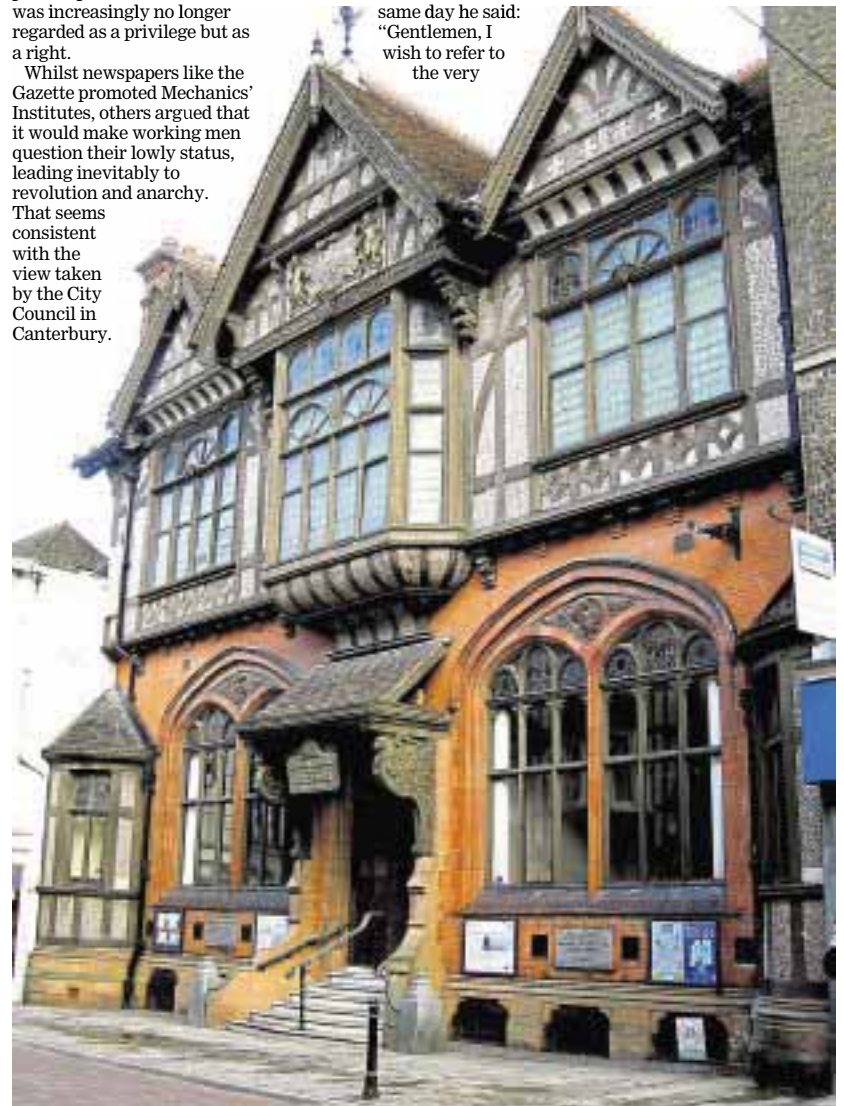
General Purposes Committee that same day he said: "Gentlemen, I wish to refer to the very

magnificent bequest which the late Dr Beaney has made to the City of Canterbury. I find by the papers, which no doubt you have read for yourselves, that Dr Beaney has bequeathed the very handsome sum of £10,000 to provide a Free Library for the working men... it will enable us to provide a suitable building which, I trust, will be a monument to his memory".

The Beaney Institute for the Education of Working Men was opened on 11th September 1899 by Mayor George Collard. According to Architect and City Surveyor A H Campbell's list of completed projects, the final construction cost of the Beaney Institute was £17,000.

Many people over the years owe much to Dr. Beaney's persistence in overcoming obstacles and the subsequent forward thinking Mayor's attitude.

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