

The Norman Stewart Institute: a short history

William Sprowl

This building was erected by John Stewart and Daniel Stewart, Richmond, Virginia
and Bryce Stewart, Clarksville, Tennessee USA in furtherance of their uncle
Norman Stewart's desire, and their own, to benefit their native place.

1885

The above inscription is part of the stained glass plaque which the author framed and fixed on the wall inside the Rothesay Library in Stuart Street. It was taken from the now demolished Norman Stewart Institute. The history of this well known local building is interesting and in many ways unusual.

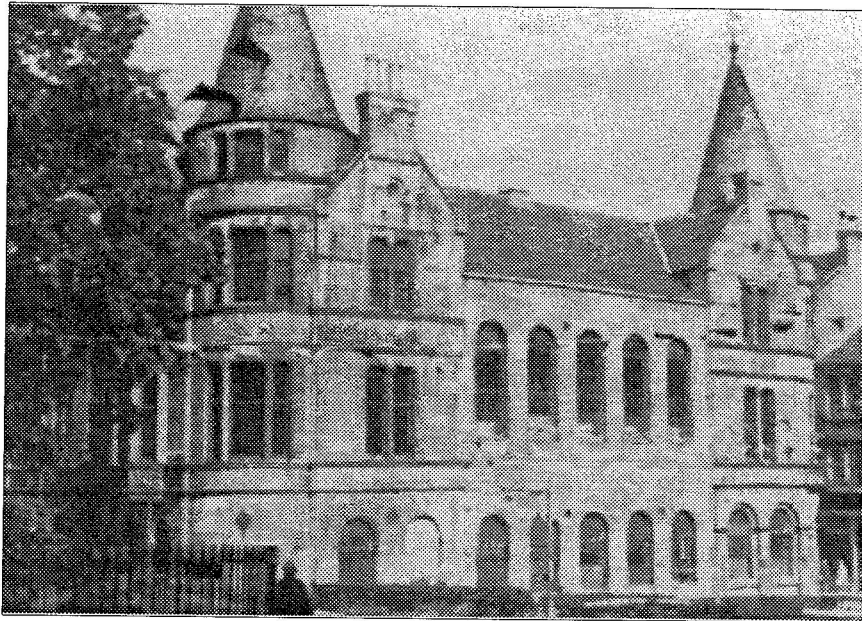


Photo 1: Norman Stewart Institute from the south east.

In 1882 rumours were heard in the town that a family from Rothesay, who had settled and prospered in Richmond, Virginia were about to build a public institute in their native town. On 30th September 1882 the *Rothesay Chronicle* reported that ex-Provost Daniel McBeth, a partner in the local firm of solicitors McBeth and Maclagan, acting as agent for Mr. Bryce Stewart, of Clarksville, Tennessee, had succeeded in purchasing, for £2,600 "that central property occupied on the Montague Street front by the Working Men's Club and extending back to Castlehill Street and bordered by Peddie's Lane." Several members of the Stewart family had been born in this property which they now intended replacing with "a handsome building suitable for, and to be utilised as, reading and recreation rooms." Also on this site was a grocer's shop, a fruit bazaar, a baker's shop and bakehouse as well as several dwelling houses.

The project about to be undertaken by John, Daniel and Bryce Stewart was the carrying out of a provision in the will of their late uncle Norman Stewart whereby £1000 had been left to the Royal Burgh of Rothesay. By investment this sum had grown to £4,000!

The three brothers intended adding a similar sum to build a well equipped institute for the people of Rothesay. At the next annual meeting of the Working Men's Club, which was held at the beginning of November 1882, the chairman, ex-Provost McKirdy, told the members about the final plans for the new institute: "On the ground floor it was intended to have extensive refreshment rooms and a business room. On the first floor there would be reading rooms for both sexes, a writing room, probably an amusement room for the 'fair sex', and a room in which technical classes could meet. On the upper floor there would be a billiards room and amusement rooms for men, as well as two good smoking rooms."

The former librarian of the Mechanics' Institute, Mr. David Somerville, was first to express disappointment that there was to be no provision for a library in the building. The chairman replied that he had suggested the matter of a library to Mr. Bryce Stewart, and that he thought it very likely that room would be provided for a library, but they could not see their way to provide the books. The question of the management of the Institute was then raised. It was stated that this was not yet decided, but that it was likely that it would be managed by a joint committee of members of the Working Men's Club and the Town Council. What actually happened was that the Stewart family appointed a Board of Trustees, consisting largely of clergymen and ex-Provosts, to attend to the management of the Institute. The members of the Working Men's Club were completely ignored.

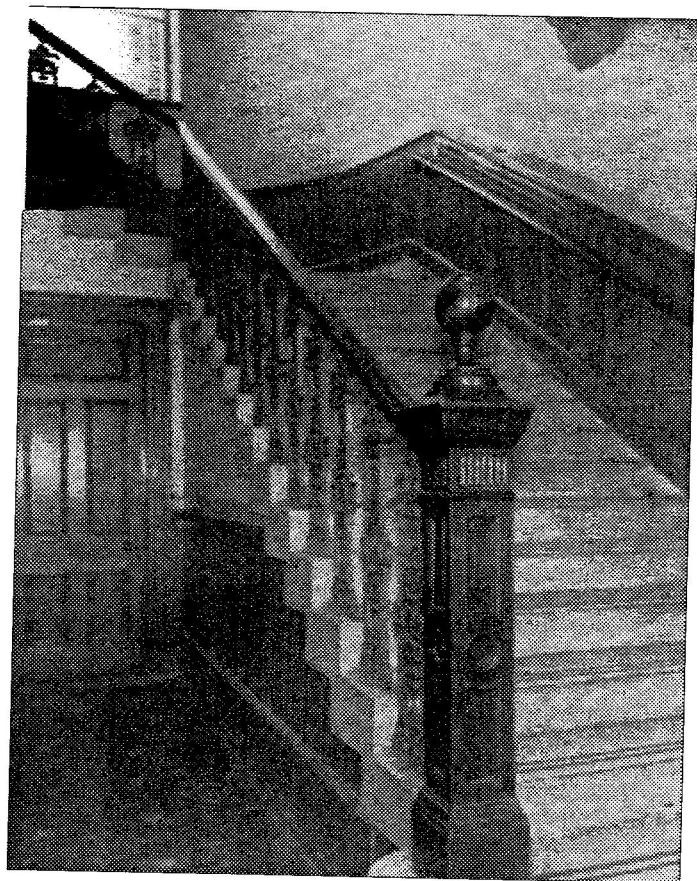


Photo 2: Stairway inside Norman Stewart Institute.

Shortly before the opening of the Norman Stewart Institute, as the new building became known, the *Rothesay Chronicle* reported on 16th May 1885 that the arrangements for accommodating the Working Men's Club in the building did not appear to be satisfactory to the members, the general feeling being that they would be better to get other premises of their own than to submit to the terms of the Stewart Trustees. (The club eventually moved to premises in Watergate which they occupied until the late 1960s when they were demolished.) Two weeks later it was reported that the club had practically ceased to exist as a local institution. The committee had, however, recommended the members to join the new Institute, which it was expected would "offer at least equal attractions in the way of newspapers, magazines, billiards and other games in large, airy, well lighted and equably-heated premises, the privileges of which the Trustees offer at 5/- per annum as formerly charged." Possibly as an attempt to persuade the members to join, the Trustees appointed the popular janitor of the Working Men's Club, "much to the satisfaction of the members

William Kilpatrick, to a similar post in the new Institute whose ways and desires he is acquainted with."

The
door
in v
Roth
"stil
acco

The Norman Stewart Institute was opened with a very quiet ceremony on 4th July 1885. The fact that this was American Independence Day did not go unnoticed! On 11th July the *Rothsay Chronicle* reported that the ceremony had been "an absurdly tame affair" for such an important occasion, adding that "It was rather too bad that the whole proceedings were so 'dry'. Even the teetotaler bailie would scarcely have objected to one round of wine to drink success to the building and pledge the health of the generous donors." The building, which was designed by Mr J R Thomson, a local architect, was described as being "of white sandstone in the Scotch (*sic*) baronial style, with two pointed towers at the Montague Street and Castlehill Street corners of Peddie's Lane". It seems that yet another example of civic vandalism took place, for which this Royal Burgh is well known, when someone saw fit to paint the white sandstone a dull battleship grey.

Fifty people joined the Institute and over 400 casual visitors made use of it during the first week of opening. Nonetheless, many people in the town were disappointed and dissatisfied with it, and on 2nd October 1886 the *Rothsay Chronicle* printed a letter which had recently appeared in *The Scotsman* under the heading "Rothsay's Free Library" and was signed "Liber". The former newspaper added that it believed the sentiments contained in the letter to be those of the people of Rothsay. The letter began:

"The statement in today's *Scotsman* as to what has been done in Dunfermline with Mr. Carnegie's gift of £5,000 suggests a disagreeable comparison as to how the Clyde town of Rothsay has expended a donation of double that amount, the munificent donor being Mr. D. Stewart, Richmond, Virginia. This sum, quite sufficient to have provided suitable accommodation, books and endowment for a Rothsay Free Library, has been laid out on an ornate building in a back street. It is true the structure contained a restaurant, some small halls, reading room and a large billiard saloon; yet for mere utility the Rothsay Stewart Institute is a failure contrasted with its Dunfermline compeer. There is no library, either for love or money, while the reading room is more scantily supplied with newspapers and periodicals than the bygone Working Men's Club."

The letter goes on to complain in detail about the furniture and fittings, in particular the reading room door which tended to slam loudly, a complaint which was repeatedly voiced in letters which appeared in various newspapers in later years. The correspondent ended the letter by conceding that the Rothsay trustees had worked to order, and that the subscription of 5/- per annum was "a trifle", but "still one cannot forbear the reflection that with £10,000 something better could have been accomplished and the county town of Buteshire adorned with a free library".

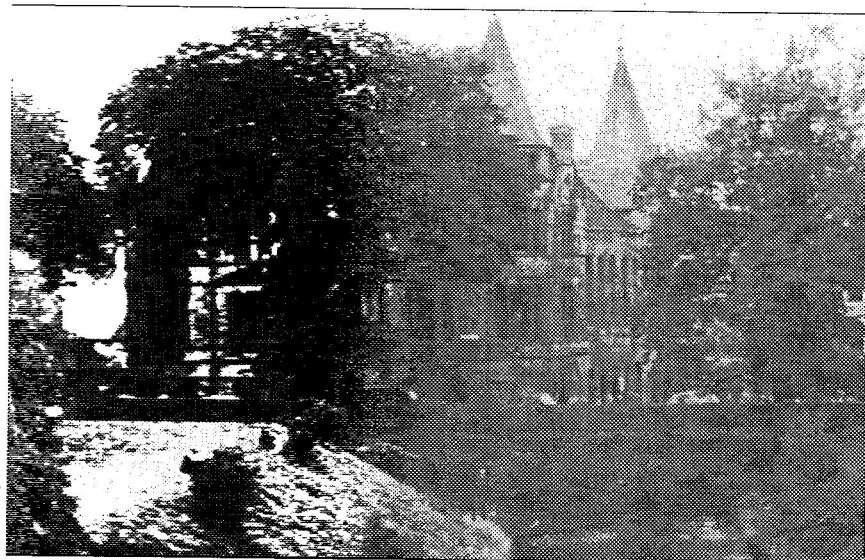


Photo 3: The Norman Stewart Institute and Castle moat.

It was not until five years later, in 1891, that subscription library facilities were begun in the Norman Stewart Institute. It appears that the Stewart family had suggested a library as the first new thing the Trustees should set about providing, and had themselves sent £100 to start it, in the hope that the financial success of the Institute would supply the funds necessary for its extension. A total of £600 was spent by the Trustees in 1891 to provide a library of 3,000 books. These were selected by Rev. Messrs. Hewison and Sutherland and were duly installed in the large room on the first floor which had been set apart for this purpose. On 31st. January *The Buteman* expressed its satisfaction at the prospect of at last having a good library provided for the community and commented that "the library, although by no means as large as might be desired for the population of Rothesay, will form a respectable collection in point of numbers, while in the region of quality it will be all that could be desired".

The Norman Stewart Institute was used as a meeting place by local clubs and associations, and acted as headquarters of Bute County Library until 1974. In January of that year the author became personally involved, and acting on the instructions of the Bute County Council Clerk of Works, Mr. Willie Galbraith, carried out a weekly survey of the cracks which had developed in the walls of the top floor rooms. One inch wide strips of glass, known in the trade as tell-tales, were fixed over the cracks with epoxy resin glue. As the cracks opened the glass broke. Within a few weeks the glass had to be replaced at an alarming rate, and the civil engineers were called in. Eventually in May inspection revealed that the building had become very dangerous.

The emergency evacuation of the stock of 25,000 books to vacant premises at the corner of Montague Street and Gallowgate, now occupied by Semi-Chem, had to be made before the unsafe building could be demolished. The author constructed wooden chutes to allow the boxes of books to be slid out of the windows on to lorries in Castlehill Street. The library staff were rewarded with a 'danger bonus' of the princely sum of £5.00 !!! This made for a much more dramatic end to the Institute's career, which had begun with that 'dry' opening nearly 90 years before in 1885.

References

Lawson, J.B, *Glimpses of Rothesay and Its People of 50 years ago*, John Smith & Sons Glasgow, 1923.

Ritchie C M, *A History of Popular Libraries on the Isle of Bute from 1700-1925*, unpublished MA dissertation, University of London, 1981.

The Rothesay Chronicle.

The Buteman.

Acknowledgement is due to Liz Doig for proof reading and valuable suggestions.

Bu

An

Seve
gene
howe
all o
olde
will p

Intro

There
by th
Colm
instan
first c
perso
sugg
one i
there
footin

Apar
perso
expect
King
Duna
McKi
Farm
by at
itself

It is n
or sub
subdiv
canno
know
1440-
which

Gener
the ex
perhap
Gaelic
centuri
identif
early c
chapel
chiefta

Return
comes
But m
generic