

The Mechanics Institutes: Pioneers of Leisure and Excursion Travel

by Susan Barton

In July 1841, the excursion organised by Thomas Cook to a temperance rally in Loughborough 'took a trip into history'. Less well known than this famous journey are the pioneering rail excursions organised by the Mechanics' Institutes during the two preceding years. This paper is concerned with the story of the excursion undertaken by the Mechanics Institutes of Leicester and Nottingham during the summer of 1840. With the opening of the Midland Counties Railway in May 1840, there existed for the first time in the East Midlands a means of quick mass conveyance between the region's towns which enabled people to travel for leisure purposes in a manner without previous local precedent. The Mechanics utilised the potential of steam-powered rail travel to visit the exhibitions in Leicester and Nottingham in 1840. These exhibitions were organised by their respective Mechanic Institutes with the aim of providing education, entertainment and raising funds. The reciprocal visits between the two towns' were a tremendous success and provided inspiration for subsequent leisure excursions and the imminent development of the tourism industry.

The Mechanics' Institutes were founded during the first half of the nineteenth century to promote education amongst skilled workers and artisans or 'mechanics'. Leicester's Institute was founded in 1833 and Nottingham's in 1837. They were concerned with education in the broadest possible sense, from basic instruction in literacy and numeracy to lectures on the latest scientific ideas. Education was not just about learning skills and facts, but involved cultural and personal development, hence the provision of libraries, classical music concerts, travel as well as the exhibitions with which this paper is concerned. The Mechanics' Institutes were not only innovators and pioneers in the field of adult education, but in the development of mass tourism through their pioneering rail excursions. There had been a few excursions by rail at normal fares, such as that on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway on 16 September 1830, the day after its opening, and even earlier than this on horse-drawn railways such as the Swansea to Mumbles line of the Oystermouth Railway. The first excursion at reduced fares took place in 1839, on the Whitby and Pickering Railway using horse-drawn trains for transport to Grosmont church bazaar.¹ It was the work of the Mechanics' Institutes, however, which pioneered the way for the development of cheap, popular excursion travel utilising the power of the steam-driven locomotive to convey large crowds of people to a single destination for a particular event. The first of these excursions took place in 1839 when the York Mechanics Institute visited by special train the 'Leeds Public Exhibition of Works of Art, Science, Natural History

1. R. Marchant, 'Early excursion trains', *Railway Magazine*, (1954), pp.426-29

and Manufacturing Skill' organised by the Leeds Mechanics' Institute together with the town's Philosophical and Literary Society.² Another early Mechanics' excursion at reduced fares took place on 13 May 1840 involving the Newcastle and Carlisle Railway.³

The Leicester and Nottingham Mechanics' Institutes followed the example of their northern sister organisations when during the summer of 1840 they arranged excursions between the two towns to visit each others exhibitions. It was this particular trip which was to be an inspiration to Thomas Cook whose famous excursion from Leicester to Loughborough for a temperance rally took place a year later. Cook himself acknowledged this fact in his own account of the arrangements for his excursion:

I believe that the Midland Railway from Derby to Rugby via Leicester was opened in 1840 ...The reports in the papers of the opening of the new line created astonishment in Leicestershire, and I had read of an interchange of visits between the Leicester and Nottingham mechanics institutes ... About midway between Harborough and Leicester ... a thought flashed through my brain - what a glorious thing it would be if the newly-developed powers of railways and locomotion could be made subservient to the promotion of temperance! ⁴

This admission contradicts the earlier author of Cook's story, W. Fraser Rae, who states that Cook 'is none the less an originator, because he never heard of anyone doing what he had accomplished' and 'nothing more can be proved in opposition to his claim' to being the originator of excursion travel 'than the probable fact of the idea which flashed upon him in his lonely walk ... having passed through other minds either beforehand or contemporaneously.'⁵ Fraser Rae was perhaps a little over enthusiastic in his claims as his book was written to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the firm of Thomas Cook and Son, and was commissioned and published by the company. Fraser Rae is also mistaken in his assertion that the Mechanics' excursions were not publicly advertised and were open only to their own members, crediting Cook with running the first advertised excursion open to the general public. This can be disproved as the *Leicester Chronicle* on 25 July 1840 carried an advertisement from the Leicester Mechanics Institute addressed to the 'Ladies and Gentlemen' who were not members 'intending to join the party' for the excursion to Nottingham.⁶ The number who travelled, approximately 450 people, with a further 2,400 on a second excursion later that summer, far outnumbered the membership of the Institute which totalled between 600 and 700 at this time.⁷

In both Leicester and Nottingham there was a desire by the Institutes to purchase or build premises which could contain all the organisation's resources and activities under one roof. With this objective in mind both wished to raise funds towards this expensive venture. Another unwritten objective could have been the desire to promote the cause of political reform. At this time the Chartist movement was a growing force among working men, few of whom, other than those who were freemen by birth or apprenticeship, had the right to vote at this time.⁸ An article in the *Leicester Journal* on

2. R. J. Morris, 'Leeds and the Crystal Palace: A provincial-metropolitan link bringing education to society', *Victorian Studies*, 13, 1970, pp.283-300
3. Marchant, 'Early excursion', as n.1
4. J. Pudney, *The Thomas Cook story*, p.53. London: Joseph, 1953
5. William Fraser Rae, *The Business of travel: a fifty years' record of progress*. p.23. London: Thomas Cook & Son, 1891
6. *Leicester Chronicle*, 25 Jul.1840
7. *Leicester Journal*, 28 Aug. 1840; A. Temple Patterson, *Radical Leicester: a history of Leicester, 1780-1850*, p.238. Leicester: University Press, 1954
8. J. Simmons, *Leicester, past and present: ancient borough to 1860*, 1, p.148. London: Eyre Methuan 1974.

28 August 1840 announced a plan to reform chartist organisations as the National Charter Association of Great Britain in order to reconstitute their scattered forces and bring pressure to bear on the government to introduce democratic reforms. John Biggs, the Vice-President of the Leicester Mechanics, was an advocate of political reform, but by moral force rather than violent struggle. The exhibition would therefore present an opportunity to demonstrate the intelligence, capabilities and good behaviour of respectable working men and so dispel some of the arguments against their enfranchisement.

Inspired by a successful exhibition held by the Derby Mechanics' Institute the previous year (1839), both the Nottingham and Leicester groups decided to organise exhibitions in their respective towns. The two exhibitions took place during the summer of 1840, displaying a spectacular collection of loaned scientific and artistic objects. The exhibition in Nottingham opened in the Exchange Rooms on 8 June and ran until 4 November 1840 while Leicester's opened on 8 May in New Hall, Wellington Street and ran until the autumn of that year. Naturally, there developed a friendly rivalry between the Nottingham and Leicester Institutes. The exhibitions also coincided with the development of mass transportation in the area, the opening on 5 May 1840 of the Midland Counties Railway North Midland section, linking Derby, Nottingham, Loughborough and Leicester. The *Leicester Chronicle* of 2 May 1840 carried advertisements announcing both the opening of the Leicester Mechanics' Exhibition and the new railway.⁹ Members of the Leicester and of the Nottingham Mechanics Institutes decided to show their mutual respect and good wishes by visiting each other's exhibition. A project was accordingly set on foot in Nottingham to raise a large party to proceed to Leicester together by the Railway to view the exhibition.¹⁰ To this end it was arranged that a party should visit Leicester by train on Monday 20 July and a return visit from Leicester to Nottingham should take place a week later on 27 July 1840. The Committees of the two Institutes negotiated with the Directors of the Midland Counties Railway, and came to an agreement whereby an entire train was to be provided to convey passengers from Nottingham to Leicester for half the normal return fare of 6s. each way First Class, 4s. 6d. each way Second Class and 2s. each way Third Class. The railway directors were to charge only for the outward journey, the return trip to be free. The same arrangement was to apply to the reciprocal visit from Leicester to Nottingham the following week. The reason for the agreement to charge for the trip in one direction only, enabled the Mechanics to avoid paying the government's heavy taxation on fares of an eighth of a penny per passenger per mile, which would have increased costs considerably, perhaps by more than a quarter of the gross receipts.¹¹ Within two years this taxation rate was altered by Act of Parliament to 5 per cent. of gross receipts.

By June 1840, therefore, there existed a set of circumstances which when combined led to the innovation of one of the first major tourism initiatives and which proved to be the inspiration for the development of the early excursion trade. These circumstances were the provision of a leisure facility in the form of the popular exhibitions and associated entertainment in the two towns concerned, large numbers of people wishing to travel to visit the exhibitions, and for the first time the physical means of conveying large numbers at a cost which was affordable to many skilled

9. *Leicester Chronicle*, 2 May 1840

10. *Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, 24 Jul. 1840

11. Marchant, 'Early excursion', as n.1, p.426

working and lower middle-class people. The Leicester Exhibition was accompanied by a weekly paper, *The Leicester Exhibition Gazette*. In it the expected visit by the Nottingham group was first announced a week before it was to take place and also the Leicester Committee's intention to organise a similar trip to Nottingham. It was announced that on the following Monday a party of members and friends of the Nottingham Institute would be leaving Nottingham by a special train at 8.30 in the morning. Upwards of 200 people were expected to join the excursion, which it was hoped, would promote good relations between the two institutions.

Of course our friends here will not be behindhand in repaying them in their own coin; and we should like to make at least as goodly a party as the one we hope to give mental entertainment to on Monday. Due notice will be given when the time of the return visit is fixed; and the names of parties wishing to join it will be received in the Hall.¹²

As it turned out the estimate of 200 and upwards was a huge underestimate. A party of over 400 passengers left Nottingham Station at around 8.45 a.m. on a special train, consisting of 14 first- and second-class carriages, and two third-class carriages, powered by two engines. Between 400 and 500 tickets were sold and 'Not less than 420 took their places, 100 in the first class, 150 in the second and 150 in the third class'. The train of 16 carriages and two engines was the longest ever seen at that time on the Midland Counties line and drew considerable attention, with villagers stopping to stare as it passed through the countryside. From the figures it can be seen that the number of people spending 6s. or 4s. 6d. on their tickets outnumbered those paying the third class fare of 2s., by a ratio of five to three. This is indicative of the problem experienced by many Mechanics' Institutes in attracting genuine mechanics or artisans. Their membership tended to be what today would be defined as lower middle-class rather than the working-class for whom they were nominally intended.¹⁴ By 1840 the artisans had to a large extent disappeared, and had been replaced by clerks and shop assistants.¹⁵ More passengers, however, travelled to the exhibition on this and on the return visit than the local membership of the respective institute and it is not possible to tell from the figures which category contained the most members. Even so, the cheapest ticket cost 2s. and admission to the exhibition another 6d. The hosiery trade, the major employer in Leicester, was at this time in the grip of a severe depression with high unemployment and under-employment. A quarter of Leicester's population was said to be receiving poor relief during February 1840.¹⁶ Economic hardship could perhaps account for the diminishing working-class membership of the Leicester Institute.¹⁷ At these prices, therefore, the excursion would have been beyond the means of most working-people and affordable to only a minority of the working-class, those with regular relatively high earnings and time to devote to the pursuit of pleasure and education rather than the struggle to make ends meet. They would also have possessed best clothes to wear to give an appearance of respectability and so reassure their middle-class fellow passengers as to their distance from the so-called 'dangerous classes'.¹⁸ The *Nottingham Review* gives a splendid account of what must have been, for almost all members of the party, their first experience of rail travel, and

12. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, 13 May 1840

13. *Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, as n.10; *Nottingham Review*, 24 Jul. 1840

14. Toshio Kusamitsu, 'Great Exhibitions before 1851', *History Workshop*, 9, (1980), pp.70- 89

15. Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, as n.7

16. Simmons, *Leicester*, as n.8, p.163

17. Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, as n.7

indeed the first experience of travelling at speed for people whose fastest movement previously would have been by horse-drawn conveyance. The train

set out in the presence of an immense concourse of spectators who had assembled in the Meadows. We need scarcely say, how they bowled along; what a 'hith' was made on passing a bridge or another train of carriages, how the objects on either side seem to flit from view; horses, cows, calves, colts, and sheep, scampered off in surprise; and cottagers, labourers, and villagers gazed and wondered at the sight..... The grove of Clifton, the bridge over the Trent, the Red-hill tunnel with its darkened shadows, all engaged attention, and furnished topics of conversation.¹⁹

The excursionists arrived at the Leicester station in Campbell Street, near the site of the present Post Office buildings and to the rear of the modern London Road Station, at five minutes past ten o'clock, where a large crowd was waiting to welcome them. A deputation from the Leicester Mechanics' Exhibition made formal introductions between the Nottingham Institute's president, John Smith Wright, a banker of Rempstone Hall, and the Committees of both Institutes. A procession was then formed by the Leicester deputation and joined by some of the Nottingham party before proceeding to the exhibition. This led to some criticism as the visitors had not been informed of the intended procession and many had already made their own way there. For this reason only 150 people joined in the parade walking four a-breast from the station to the New Hall in Wellington Street, at the corner with Belvoir Street, where they were greeted by the Duke of Rutland's band playing 'God Save the Queen', and who provided further musical entertainment.²⁰

The exhibition itself consisted, in the words of its advertisements, of 'upwards of 200,000 objects in natural history, antiquities, the fine arts and mechanical science, kindly contributed by the Nobility, Gentry, Manufacturers and others of the County and town of Leicester and the adjoining counties, with many valuable additions from the Metropolis'. Included in the catalogue of exhibits were an Egyptian mummy, fossil remains of a complete ichthyosaurus donated by Mr Lee of Barrow-on-Soar, natural history specimens, working models of a gas works, a lighthouse, mills and steam engines, weaponry and armour, articles from Pompeii and Herculaneum and many valuable sculptures and works of fine art from among some of the finest contemporary artists and old masters. The artists included Watteau, Jan Steen, Lucas Van Leyden and Van Dyck, Titian, Veronese, Turner, Rubens, Gainsborough, Sir Thomas Lawrence and Holbein. Leicester's John Flower also had works exhibited including a portrait by him of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Another image familiar and popular with Leicester people and exhibited there was Singleton's Portrait of Daniel Lambert.²¹ Some of the articles exhibited were to become part of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society collection which was later to form the basis of the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery when it opened on the New Walk as the Town Museum in 1849. The highlight of the exhibition for many visitors was a circular canal 60 feet in length with a working steam-boat and a railway on the bank which had a moving locomotive and train. The engine was an electro-magnetic locomotive, called Jupiter by its designer and builder Mr Uriah Clarke.²² It amazed visitors by its half a hundred-

18. Kusamitsu, 'Great Exhibitions', as n.14, p.74

19. *Nottingham Review*, as n.13

20. *Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, as n.10

21. *Leicester Mechanics' Institute exhibition catalogue*, 1840

22. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, 10 Aug. 1840

weight carriage moving continuously for hours with no visible means of power or propulsion. Mary Kirby, author of the *Flora of Leicestershire*, visited the exhibition during the summer and from her description in an essay included in *Leaflets from my Life* obviously enjoyed herself.²³

While most of the exhibits had an ostensibly educational value some of them were closely related to fairground attractions and bizarre sideshows, intending to astound the audience as much as to educate. Some exhibitors travelled with their specially made display items from one exhibition to another. Items of doubtful origin at the Leicester exhibition included 'the key of the Tower of London, taken away during the riots of Lord George Gordon' and 'the bed slept on by Richard III the night before the battle of Bosworth Field'.²⁴ The writers of the *Leicester Exhibition Gazette* showed with a sense of humour a realisation of the incongruity of placing together education and popular entertainment by including presumably fictitious letters to the editors from a person claiming to have sent a piece of Noah's Ark to the exhibition which had gone astray. Another notice apologised for an unsuitable exhibition made by a person attempting to perform a comic song. It was stated that 'the committee do not consider comic singing or FUN, among the legitimate amusements of the Exhibition'.²⁵

On the day of the visit by the Nottingham Mechanics, between 11.00 am and 12.00, it was announced from the orchestra that there was to be an 'ordinary' at the Three Crowns Hotel at 3 o'clock at a cost of 2s. 6d. each. Meals were arranged for the Leicester committee and their visitors at the newly refurbished Three Crowns for 130 people, at the Saracens Head for 50 or 60, at the Craven Arms for another 50 and smaller parties met in other public houses.²⁶ The main celebrations took place at the Three Crowns. A newspaper advertisement describes the Three Crowns as an 'Old Family Hotel and Posting House - with anxious attention to the accommodation comforts of the Nobility, Gentry, Clergy, Families, Commercial Gentlemen, and the Travelling Public generally, the Proprietor begs respectfully to announce that he has fitted up the above Establishment, particularly the Commercial Travellers' Room in a modern and superior style'.²⁷ The announcement also states 'Parties large or small, visiting Leicester, can be supplied with Dinners on the shortest notice'. The Three Crowns' party included John Ryley, (President of the Leicester Mechanics) in the Chair, John Smith Wright (President of the Nottingham Institute), John Wells (a former mayor of Nottingham), John Biggs (mayor of Leicester and Vice-president of Leicester Mechanics), the Hon. and Rev. E. D. Erskine (Vicar of St Martins), F.B. Scott, Esq., and Mr Paget among many others.²⁸ After a sumptuous dinner had been consumed the cloths were removed and the toasts commenced. Toasts were made to the Queen, Prince Albert, the Royal Family, the Duke of Rutland and to the contributors to the Leicester exhibition, the Earl of Scarborough and to the contributors to the Nottingham exhibition, the Nottingham Mechanics and then the Leicester Mechanics Institutions. Speeches interspersed the toasts which were made to all involved on both sides. 'Many other toasts were given and the afternoon spent in the utmost hilarity and harmony'.²⁹

23. M. Kirby, 'Leaflets from my life': a narrative biography, Leicester and London: 1887

24. Kusamitsu, 'Great Exhibitions', as n.14, p81

25. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, 23 Jul. 1840

26. An ordinary in this context means a communal eating place. *Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, as n.10

27. *Leicester Chronicle*, 9 May 1840

28. *Nottingham and Newark Mercury*, as n.10

29. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, as n.25

The visiting party and representatives of their hosts reassembled at the Midland Station ready to board their departure train at a quarter to eight that evening. Onlookers were presented with 'an interesting and lively scene; the "Nottingham friends" as they had been termed in the most warm and cordial manner during the day, having regained their carriages, bid "farewell" amidst the cheers and greetings of assembled thousands'.³⁰ According to the *Nottingham Review's* reporter there was not an empty spot for nearly a mile down the line from where a view of the train could be had, which was not crowded. 'The whole population of Leicester appeared to be poured out!'. This was not the end of the days' festivities for the Nottingham excursionists who upon their arrival back home in Nottingham were greeted by the 'hearty congratulations of thousands of their fellow townsmen'.³¹

In order to demonstrate the goodwill between the two institutions, an early return visit of the Leicester Mechanics' Institute to the Nottingham exhibition was arranged for the following Monday, 27 July 1840. The same agreement was made with the Midland Counties Railway whereby a special train would be provided for the party's exclusive use, providing the excursionist with a return trip for only the price of a single fare. Information about the trip was given in the *Leicester Exhibition Gazette* and as many members and supporters as possible were urged to take advantage of the opportunity presented. 'We earnestly request every friend who can command a day to avail *herself* or *himself* of the opportunity of cementing the union so auspiciously begun between the two Institutions'.³² Anyone who wished to join the party was invited to put their names on a list to be taken at the Leicester exhibition. With less than a week to go before the excursion was to take place it was reported that the list already contained the names of 'many well able to represent the Institution'. The desire was expressed that 'the feeling of our friends and members should be unequivocally expressed by the presence of at least as large a party as that with which we were recently honoured'.³³ The Leicester Committee obviously did not wish to be outdone by the Nottingham Institute in terms of the numbers making the journey. An advertisement appeared in the *Leicester Chronicle* informing readers of the 'Return Visit to Nottingham', and asking those who intended to join the party to apply for tickets as soon as possible to Mr Jackson at the door of the Exhibition.

The Nottingham Exhibition, like Leicester's, featured natural history, mechanical, fine art and historical objects as well as musical entertainments. Among the most noteworthy were a model of York Minster, models illustrating manufacturing processes, Dr Fox's Change Ringing Machine, a powerful Oxy-hydrogen Microscope and an elegant fountain and circular canal with models of steam boats in motion. 'The whole representing, especially when illuminated, a most brilliant and enchanting sight'.³⁴ To emphasise the importance of the occasion verses were presented by both sides and printed as souvenirs in commemoration of the momentous events. These verses appear over sentimental and too contrived for modern taste, but this mattered little to people for whom the merit of a poem derived more from having been written by an artisan with little formal education than from its literary qualities.³⁵ There is less description

30. *Nottingham Review*, as n.13

31. *Nottingham Review*, as n.13

32. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, as n.25

33. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, as n.25

34. *Leicester Mechanics' Institute Exhibition Catalogue*, as n.21

35. See Appendix

available about the Leicester group's visit to Nottingham as both the *Leicester Chronicle* and *Leicester Advertiser* seem to have given little coverage of the Leicester Mechanic's activities compared with the *Nottingham and Newark Mercury* and the *Nottingham Review* who gave extensive news coverage of their local Mechanics group. This could be a result of the political affiliations of the papers' owners rather than lack of local interest or support in Leicester.

The excursions proved so popular that a second visit was organised by the Nottingham Mechanics' Institutes to visit the exhibition at Leicester again during the following month. This repeat visit was even better supported with a total 2,400 passengers joining the party at stations between Nottingham and Leicester. After adding more carriages and engines to accommodate the growing numbers of excursionists as the train progressed towards Leicester, the final total was 70 carriages powered by four engines.³⁶ The party was hours late in arriving and the crowds assembled at Leicester's station grew extremely anxious. A search party was despatched on an engine from Leicester to locate the awaited train. Eventually the party arrived safely but extremely late. For the journey home it was wisely decided to despatch two separate trains to accommodate the massive number of excursionists. This experience did not deter potential excursionists and other trips by rail were planned from Derby, Rugby and Swannington in order to improve access to the exhibition for an even greater number of people. The opening of Leicester Races in September also presented the opportunity to attract even more visitors or to encourage return visits, and a grand concert was held to celebrate the first day of the races. This concert gave Leicester people and visitors to the races the chance to hear a performance by the famous pianist and composer Franz Liszt and other contemporary well known musicians and singers.³⁷ Possibly as a result of the success and popularity of the Leicester and Nottingham Mechanics excursions, the Midland Counties Railway were advertising their own special one-day excursion fares between Leicester and Nottingham on Mondays commencing during August 1840. In September of that year they also advertised excursion trains from Leicester to Doncaster Races with coach travel from the station to the race course.

Although the Mechanics' excursions of July 1840 were a great success in terms of numbers, the exhibitions themselves were less successful in achieving their objective of raising money to provide new institutional buildings. Total receipts for Nottingham are recorded at just over £2,996, but this does not tally with the number of visitors stated by the same source as 224,000 paying 6d. each for admission, which should have raised total receipts of £5,600.³⁸ Net profit is given as £802 11s. 2½d., a considerable sum of money for that date, but not enough to build and furnish premises sufficiently large and imposing to house the Mechanics Institute in the manner they had come to expect. The Nottingham Mechanics did however obtain their building two years later, thanks to the generosity of John Wright, their wealthy banker president, who paid for the building of suitable premises to house the library, lecture rooms and meeting areas. The Leicester Institute was much less fortunate and far from being a source of funds for endowing premises, the exhibition was the cause of an 'unanticipated ... and humiliating result which attended the expenditure of the time and labour employed in preparing and sustaining a means of amusement and

36. *Leicester Journal*, 28 Aug. 1840

37. *Leicester Journal*, as n.36

38. *The Story of Nottingham Mechanics' Institute 1837-1937*, Nottingham: 1937

instruction'. Almost every other provincial exhibition was a great success and even when no profit was made, the losses were

comparatively unimportant, the Leicester Exhibition has not only completely failed in realizing of the results purposed by it but entailed upon those most intimately associated with it a liability exceeding that incurred by the supporters of Exhibitions in towns of the least flourishing resources and most limited population.³⁹

The cash account for the year ending 1841 itemises payments made of £3 8s. 6d. to the Directors of the Midland Counties Railway, 'being expenses of a special train to Nottingham in 1840', an unpaid amount carried forward from 1840 of £26 10s. owed to the New Hall Committee and a payment of £17 10s. to that same committee.⁴⁰ According to their accounts the Leicester Mechanics' began 1841 owing £125 14s. 5d. It would appear from these accounts that the Institute was still paying off debts associated with the exhibition over the next couple of years; they still had not cleared the outstanding sums by the beginning of 1842. The Leicester Institute was forced to move from the premises it occupied in Bishop Street to cheaper rooms in Newarke Street, though a contemporary account claimed the move was because of the need for larger premises. The Institute also found it necessary to temporarily curtail its lecture programme due to lack of support and to make no additions to the library owing to insufficiency of funds. The report to the members at the end of the following year, 1841, still refers to the financial embarrassment caused by the losses sustained by the exhibition and members were asked for contributions to offset the deficit.⁴² The Leicester Institute, however, did obtain larger premises in 1848 when the Literary and Philosophical Society removed its museum from the New Hall, the venue of the 1840 exhibition, thereby vacating the building. The Leicester Mechanics, however, never really gained a firm financial base for its undertakings and ceased to function in 1871 whereas Nottingham's still flourishes today.

The gloom expressed by the Leicester Committee at the financial disaster (no full account was found from the Exhibition Committee according to Lott) should not overshadow the historical and social importance of the event, not just for Leicester which from amongst the exhibits gained the basis of the modern collection housed in New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, but also for the tourism industry. For one of the first times in history, a large number of ordinary people had been able to travel a comparatively long distance, quickly and cheaply. The excursions would have been impossible in the East Midlands region only three months before as the rail link between the towns was not then open. The *Leicester Exhibition Gazette* reporting the visit acknowledged the major contribution of the railway to transportation and its great potential as a liberator of humankind from the barriers caused by distance:

A more signal instance of the triumph of science over matter, and the power of mind to overcome obstacles which oppose its ends, has not been witnessed in our town. This idea is trite enough and a similar one may be found better expressed in almost every newspaper we cast our eyes on, - but it is worthwhile to illustrate statistically the advantages accruing to every department of society by this annihilation of space and

39. Leicester Reference Library, Leicester Mechanics' Institute, *Report of the Committee of Members for the Year 1840*.
40. *Report ... for the Year 1840*, as n.39; Leicester Reference Library, Leicester Mechanics' Institute, *Report of the Committee of Members for the Year 1841*.
41. F. B. Lott, *The Story of the Leicester Mechanics Institute, 1833-1871*. Leicester: Thornley, 1935
42. *Report ... for the Year 1841*, as n.40

economy of time. Had a visit like this been contemplated a year since, how could it have been carried into effect? At the most moderate computation, thirty coaches must have been engaged, two hundred horses employed, six hours consumed in the journey to and fro, far greater fatigue and risk, in the aggregate, incurred, and the time afforded for the objects of the journey shortened by four hours. Almost any one of these obstacles is singly sufficient to have deterred any one from the proposal of such a visit as we have the pleasure to record, while their amount would have rendered the bare contemplation of it preposterous.⁴³

It is interesting to note that both groups selected Monday for the day to make their excursions, the Midland Counties Railway also chose to advertise cheap excursion fares from Leicester to Nottingham running on Mondays only. It is important to remember that at this time there was no week-end as we know it, Saturday was a normal working day for most people and Sunday would have been regarded by many as the Sabbath, a day of rest and worship. Amongst many workers, especially those tradesmen who had some independence, Monday was an unofficial holiday. Many extended their rest day into Monday, or Saint Monday as it was sometimes referred to. This form of absenteeism was quite common during the period and so probably explains the choice of Monday for the excursions. It is also likely that some employers would have given permission to their employees to take time off to make the trip as production in Leicester tended to be based around small workshops in which the skilled tradesman could organise the work pattern to suit himself.⁴⁴

The Mechanics Institutes of Leicester and Nottingham were the first groups to exploit the circumstances which prevailed in Leicester and Nottingham in July 1840: namely the existence of public entertainment in the form of the two exhibitions, a means of fast, safe and affordable transport between the home and destination towns and a large number of people wishing to make the visit due to its having been advertised beforehand in a local newspaper. The Mechanics' excursions involved the selling of tickets in advance with the Midland Counties Railway providing the appropriate carriage accommodation. As the trains were chartered on behalf of a group rather than an individual, there was, therefore, little personal risk involved for any of the party organisers. This contrasts with Thomas Cook's famous Leicester to Loughborough excursion in the following year. Cook, anticipating a large number of supporters wishing to travel to a Temperance Society rally in Loughborough, chartered a train partially at his own expense and then sold the tickets afterwards. Cook, therefore, took more of a personal risk than did the Mechanics Institutes, though he was assisted by the resident secretary of the Midland Counties Railway, John Fox Bell, who gave Cook a contribution towards the preliminary expenses of arranging the trip.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Cook was also acting under the approval of the Chairman and membership of the local Temperance Society who had been consulted before the arrangements were made. He did, however, have some form of commitment from potential travellers and backing for his organisation. Whether this extended to any financial commitment by the society is not known.

From the available evidence, therefore, it is apparent that it was the Mechanics' Institutes who were the pioneers and developers of the rail excursion. In this case excursion is taken as meaning a trip by locomotive-powered train at fares considerably

43. *Leicester Exhibition Gazette*, as n.25

44. D. A. Reid, 'The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766-1876', *Past and Present*, 171, (1976), pp.76-101

45. Pudney, *Thomas Cook*, as n.4

reduced from the normal rate, for the exclusive use of passengers attending a particular attraction. Thomas Cook is often cited as the founder of the excursion trade with his 1841 trip, but this is an erroneous view and indeed an accolade he never personally claimed. In 1841, Cook was acting in an unpaid voluntary capacity on behalf of the Temperance Society of which he was a member. In this capacity he was no different from the organisers of the Mechanics' trips who he acknowledged in his memoirs as being his inspiration. It was not until 1845 that Cook arranged his first commercial pleasure trip thereby founding the business of Thomas Cook and Son. It is also interesting to note how the Mechanics' excursions were almost prototypes for the rail excursions to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London's Crystal Palace, which Cook provided over a decade later, and which established him as a popular commercial tour operator. It is for his achievement as the first commercial tour operator that Cook should be remembered, not for his excursion to Loughborough from Leicester in support of a local temperance rally. In this he was merely following the example already set by a few Mechanics' Institutes in the north of England and in his own locality. The honour of being the pioneers of excursion travel undoubtedly belongs to the Mechanics' Institutes who had already run a number of successful trips before Cook's more celebrated journey was even conceived.

Personal details

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APPENDIX:

Verse written to commemorate the visit of the Nottingham Mechanics' Institute to Leicester Mechanics' Exhibition, July 1840

From trent's fair margin and castled height
 His kingly seat, which once the mercian made,
 The growth of science, lowly reared, to aid,
 And greet of kindred art the dawning light,
 Where reedy soar in 'summer wreaths is drest,'
 Bathing with listless flood the crumbling hold,
 Which fenced the princely lancaster of old,
 Throgs many a fair and many a stately guest-
 This to commemorate, with willing praise
 Hail we the kindly fellowship begun;
 And lasting wish, through unrecorded days,
 Preserved in added strength from sire to son,
 This bond, which, forged in amity, displays
 Our homes distinct - our hearts and spirit.

From the Nottingham Institute to their Leicester visitors

FRIENDS, we receive you with a brother's hand
And bid you welcome to our good old town;
Right glad, with interchange of feelings bland,
The feast of art and intellect, to crown.

Bright omen, sure is seen, of nobler days,
Of Virtue's reign, and Reason's wise control,
When man, the blending laws of both, obeys,
Nor vice maintains a schism in the soul.

Thus onward, ever, be the march of mind,
Sunlighted, by the hearts benignant beam;
The moral with the mental intertwined,
Nor of their mad divorce, e'en folly, dream.

So Britain, happy, glorious, shall remain;
Her sons a princely brotherhood of man! -
Achievement high, in art and science gain,
And live, a nation on her Maker's plan!

Then welcome Friends! - along our fragrant meads
Glancing with streamy plumes, a brilliant show! -
Thus, from Old England's heart, the pulse proceeds,
'Till felt at far extremes, the kindly glow!