



Keighley Local Studies Library

Keighley & the Brontë Connection A Guide to Resources

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The Collection

Keighley was visited by the Brontë family because it was the nearest town of consequence to Haworth and also because its Mechanics' Institute was one of the first in the country to provide this innovative and socially progressive adult learning. This leaflet highlights Keighley's connection to the Brontës through its own books and archive records during the period in which they lived in the local township of Haworth, from 1820 to the time of Patrick Brontë's death in 1861. Keighley Library's collection of Brontë books and ephemera and its local history library and archive are resources second only to that of the Brontë Parsonage Library. They fully provide for a thorough study of both 19th century Haworth and Keighley.

Keighley at the time of the Brontës

In White's trade directory*, Keighley is described in 1837 as, "a populous market town, built chiefly of stone and picturesquely seated in the bosom of a deep valley, at the confluence of the Worth and Laycock rivulets", and as participating largely in the worsted manufacture with a portion of the cotton trade. It is described as a place of 'numerous' mills and factories with a great part of the spinning and other machinery also manufactured there. Keighley was a busy, and fast growing industrial town in 1837, the population of about 12,000 had increased to 18,258 by 1851, boosted by migrations from Ireland during the potato famine of the 1840s. This was not without its problems, however, and in *A History of Keighley**, Ian Dewhirst describes some of the industrial issues and unrest in Keighley area's textile trade, regarding the poverty of many workers and the dangers to health for both adults and children. These issues were also national concerns and some eventually appeared in Charlotte's novel, *Shirley*.

Presumably, when Haworth Township could not cater for the family's more specialist needs, a trip to Keighley followed. The book, *A Brontë Encyclopedia* by Robert and Louise Barnard (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), notes that newspapers, books, toys and clothing were amongst items purchased by them and Parsonage records show that art materials were also bought in Keighley. Trade directories in Keighley Library list the businesses, commercial and industrial, during this period. They also list the coach services to Leeds which the Brontës would have used until the extension of the Leeds:Bradford railway line was opened in 1847, with 8 trains running daily between Bradford and Keighley and travel to London taking one, instead of 4 days. The old station roughly stood where Sainsbury's car park is now. The Keighley and Worth Valley Railway Company was not formed until 1862, significantly, however, as a result of the championing of the branch line in part by civil engineer, John McLandsborough, who first visited Haworth because it was the home of the Brontës. He was later appointed acting engineer of the project.

The following books provide excellent accounts of Keighley Township and the immediate locality in terms of politics, religion, trade, transport, housing and social life, customs and beliefs:

- **A History of Keighley* by Ian Dewhirst (Tempus, 1974, revised 2006)
- *Keighley Past and Present* by William Keighley (A. Hey, 1879)
- *A Pennine Community on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution* by Michael Baumber (J.L. Crabtree Ltd, 1977)
- *From Revival to Regency, Vols I and II* by Michael Baumber (, 1977)
- *Textile Manufacture and Other Industries in Keighley* by John Hodgson (A. Hey, 1879)
- *History, Directory & Gazetteer of the County of York, Vol 1* by Edward Baines (Edward Baines, 1823)
- **History, Directory and Gazetteer of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Vol 1* by William White (Robert Leader, 1837)

Keighley Library also holds census returns, rate books, old maps, building and sale plans, tithe and enclosure awards, mill reports, plans and local archives.

Keighley Mechanics' Institute

This was established in 1825 by four working men for mutual instruction. It was one of the first to be established in the North and soon collected many members from the middle and upper classes. There were 2 meetings a week, a growing library, and activities included conversations, essays, periodical readings and lectures. Patrick Brontë joined in 1833 and in 1834 the Institute moved to a new building in North Street (still standing next to Lloyds Bank), the later, larger building was opened in 1870. Keighley Library holds the Institute's archives (**BK2**), including flyers for events, library catalogues and annual reports. The Brontë family certainly borrowed books from the Institute and Patrick Brontë lectured there, however, Juliet Barker in, *The Brontës* , p.172 (Pegasus Books, 2010) puts more emphasis on the influence of Keighley's circulating libraries as a regular source of books, periodicals and reviews for the sisters. Keighley Library inherited the Mechanics' Institute library when it opened in 1904 and still has some books from these early days. For a summary of the history of the Mechanics' Institute, please ask for the history file kept at the Library counter.

Educational classes were also run at the Institute, including drawing, and in Claire Harman's book ***Charlotte Brontë, A Life*** (she writes that the sisters were given drawing lessons by the Institute's founder member, John Bradley, and writes of an evening when all three sisters with Ellen Nussey, attended a lecture given by William Weightman, Patrick's new young curate, in April 1840. The book, ***The art of the Brontës*** by Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars (Cambridge UP, 1995) is also available for reference in the Library. This shows a

self-portrait of John Bradley and details the Brontë's art tuition, some of which took place in New Bridge Street, Keighley. The authors also note that Branwell, and possibly Charlotte too, later had tuition from a portrait painter in Keighley, a Thomas Plummer of Chapel Lane.

Keighley society, the Brontës and the Brontë Society

Any one of the members of the Keighley Mechanics' Institute could have associated with the Brontës at social gatherings, lectures and meetings. There was probably some association with the Rev. Theodore Dury who was also rector of Keighley's substantial Parish Church of St Andrew. However, his second wife was also Anne Greenwood, sister of Charlotte's employer Sarah Hannah Sidgwick of Stonegappe, whom Charlotte had worked for as governess with some difficulty and much unhappiness. William Dearden was a schoolmaster friend of both Patrick and Branwell and there was Abraham Sunderland, their music teacher, who sometimes conducted the Keighley orchestra and choirs, as for example, at the 1834 Keighley music festival. Special concerts were also held at the new Keighley Mechanics' Institute. Unfortunately, there is little information to suggest how, if at all, the Brontës might have mixed in Keighley society and though in early adult life, they were classed as governesses, later their increasing literary reputations would have excited local attention. However, even after publication, no Brontë expresses any particular affection for the town or its social gatherings. Charlotte also wrote, after publication of her work, that she did not like small town gossip and so did not visit Keighley. Perhaps, as literary, published females, the sisters were always destined to be regarded with more curiosity than they could comfortably bear in local society.

Nevertheless, many of the members of the proceeding Brontë Society were from the educated and prominent families of Keighley, such as the Brigg family (*Briggs* is the name of a solicitor in *Jane Eyre*). Alderman John Brigg, J.P. was very active in local political and cultural affairs in Keighley and was the first president of the Brontë Society when it was established in 1893. Some early correspondence, regarding the first museum, can be found in Keighley Library's Brigg family archive collections (BK134).

First hand accounts of the Society's meetings and the opening of both museums can be found in the *Brontë Society Transactions* which are stored on open access in Keighley Library and also in the local newspapers, the *Keighley News* and *Keighley Herald*, held on microfilm.

Opening Hours

Monday 9am to 7pm
Tuesday 9am to 7pm
Wednesday 9am to 7pm

Thursday 9am to 7pm
Friday 9am to 7pm
Saturday 9am to 5pm

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