

JOHN BRADLEY (1787-1844) KEIGHLEY'S CULTURAL CHAMPION

John Bradley is described in Baines's trade directory of 1823 as a, "House and Sign" painter in Wellington Street, Keighley. However, he was also a working man who actively cultivated wider interests and held an increasingly popular belief in the power of continual self-improvement through education. His home town of Keighley was to greatly benefit from this enlightened way of thinking during his lifetime.

KEIGHLEY MECHANICS' INSTITUTE

The world's first Mechanics' Institute was established in Edinburgh in 1821, which included the provision of technical education for working people. In 1823, *The Mechanics' Magazine* described the establishment and progress of another society formed for mutual instruction by Operatives of the Gas Company in Glasgow. They created their own Institute in 1823. Both institutions were to encourage greater access to books and learning for the small tradesmen and ordinary workers. John Bradley is said to have been inspired by this and, together with three other working men: John Farish, reed maker, William Dixon, tailor, and John Haigh, joiner, he founded the first Mechanics' Institute in Keighley. It was one of the first in the North of England to provide such innovative and socially progressive means of adult education and later was a source of inspiration for Andrew Carnegie and the building of Keighley Public Library. John Bradley became Keighley Institute's first secretary and was elected to vice President in 1831.



This copy of a lithograph portrait, archived at Keighley Library, was done by John Bradley and was extracted from Jonas Bottomley's scrapbook by Gordon Bottomley, his great-grandson, in 1894.

JOHN BRADLEY, LOCAL ARTIST

John Bradley also had aspirations to become a professional painter, however, and possessed some talent. He exhibited in the 1820s in local exhibitions, as noted in *The Art of the Brontës* by Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars (CUP, 1995) p33. For example, catalogues for *The Works of British Artists, In the Gallery of The Royal Northern Society, for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts* show that in 1823, he exhibited: 'North East View of Bolton Abbey, Evening' and 'View of Kirby Malham Dale', and sold both for 3 guineas each. Other work included the sketch of the famous *Airedale Heifer* of East Riddlesden Hall from which an engraving was made, a picture later to be found in many Yorkshire homes. He also did many landscapes of Keighley itself in pencil and grey wash and in oils. His panoramic view of Keighley, painted in oils in 1839, hangs in Keighley's Cliffe Castle, as does his self-portrait, which once hung in Keighley Library.

ART TUTOR TO THE BRONTËS

His own connection with the Brontë family is unclear but it was probably through Patrick Brontë's association with Keighley's Mechanics' Institute. For a short while (between 1829 and 1830), John Bradley became the art tutor to not only Charlotte and Branwell but also Emily. An authenticated memo compiled in 1894 records them visiting him in New Bridge Street, Keighley, for lessons,

according to the *Art of the Brontës*, p. 23. This book also cites the inscriptions made on the back of some of Charlotte's sketches and describes the lessons as of their time, with the use of a drawing manual, flower painting from nature and the use of such books as Bewick's line engravings for outline exercises, p. 22. It is speculated, that he may have been a source of inspiration for Branwell's early enthusiasm for architecture, though the inspiration for Branwell's choice of career as portrait painter, it is claimed, is more likely to have come from another tutor, William Robinson, a former student of the Royal Academy and a successful local portrait painter in Leeds. Nevertheless, Patrick Brontë himself sat for his portrait by John Bradley, one of the few that survive of him.

JOHN BRADLEY IN AMERICA

In 1831, John Bradley and his family emigrated to the United States.

The exact reasons for this are not known but it is generally thought that he was possessed of a growing desire for the much talked of 'liberty' in that country. Maybe he also felt that once there, he would find more opportunities with fewer professional and class restrictions for his artistic ambitions. He may also have been influenced by his Swedenborg religion, practiced at Keighley's New Church in King Street, where he became President in 1820. Apparently, Jonathan Wright a member of the prominent and founding New Church family, had fled to America after his political protests in Keighley during the time of the Peterloo massacre. There he also took up the cause of slavery and successfully championed it, becoming something of a local legend, see *Keighley New Church: The First 200 Years* M.V. Bottomley (1989). Nevertheless, John Bradley's wish to make a living as a portrait painter foundered in America. The family rented a property in Philadelphia but found life there difficult and the winter of 1831-1832 was particularly harsh. Ian Dewhirst MBE recounts some of the hardships they faced as well as some of the more pithy observations made by John Bradley of the place and people in his correspondence with friends back in Keighley ('Drawing Master to the Brontës', by Ian Dewhirst in *Yorkshire Ridings Magazine*, June 1968, pp26-27). John Bradley and his family returned to Keighley in 1833.



RETURN TO KEIGHLEY

On his return, Bradley re-joined the Mechanics' Institute, retaining his original founder membership number 3, and apparently he also influenced the architecture of the new building that the Institute was to occupy in 1834.

The new building eventually became the Yorkshire Bank standing next to the current Lloyds Bank, though it was later demolished. John Bradley is once again listed in the local trade directory as 'painter' (*White's Directory*, 1837) and several Mechanics' Institute accounts include his bills, "for painting outside". He was also commissioned to paint three Biblical panels for the rostrum of the Oddfellows' Friendly Society at their Loyal Eboracum Lodge. Bradley and his family also re-joined the New Church, where he was re-appointed to the Committee. He became Chairman in 1838.



John Bradley died in 1844 and, though he did not fulfil his artistic ambitions, his cultural legacy to the town and its inhabitants greatly benefited future generations of artists and scholars.