

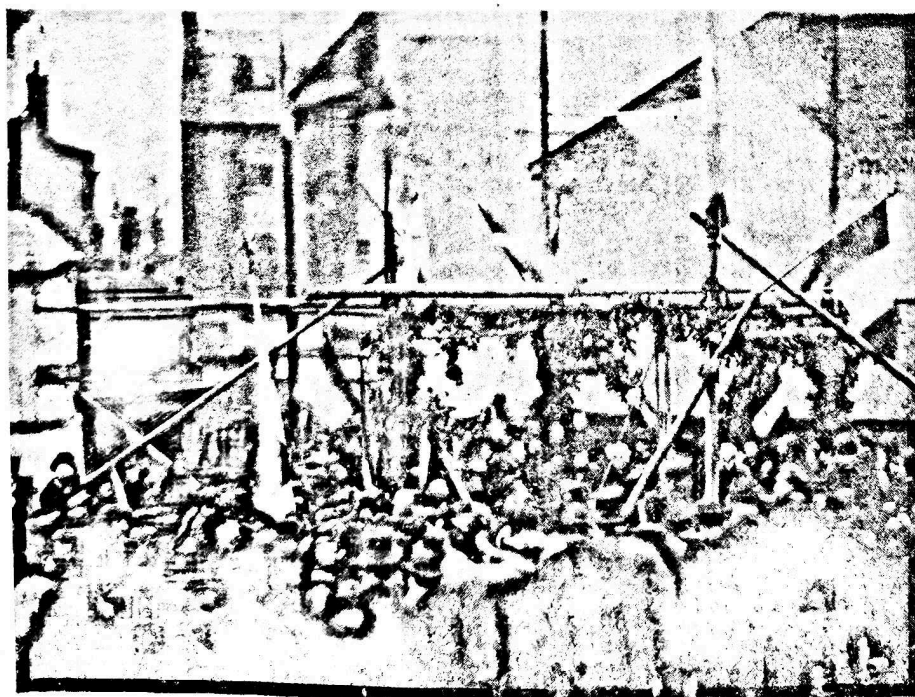
# The Y.M.C.A. in Cambridge

The committee which runs the Y.M.C.A. today has the same sort of worries as George Williams and his twelve young men had in 1844, for the need is as acute now as it was then. Enid Porter, in this interesting article, traces 84 years of Y.M.C.A. history in Cambridge.

By  
**Enid Porter**

The red triangular emblem of the Young Men's Christian Association is now a familiar one in most parts of the world, for the work of the Association has extended far beyond the frontiers of the country in which it had its origin.

Like most great organisations, the Y.M.C.A. began in a small way. On June 6th, 1844, George Williams, later Sir George Williams, a young draper's assistant newly arrived to work in London, formed a group of 12 young men — Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists — who gathered regularly for prayer meetings and Bible study. The group called itself the London Young Men's Christian Association, and before long other groups were established, each of



*The scene at the laying of the foundation stone, February 7th, 1870.*

them autonomous but all with the same motives as the first — the mental and religious improvement of young working men.

From 1851 the movement spread rapidly, for the Great Exhibition held in London in that year served as a medium of publicity, and soon branches of the Association were formed outside Great Britain, and the first International Congress was held in 1855.

In Cambridge, the idea of forming a Christian Association for young men came, in 1851, from the Reverend George Bubier who was minister of the Independent Chapel in Downing Place, a building now used by the University Music School. On January 6th, 1851, he put his plan to the members of his Bible Class, and two weeks later a committee was formed to carry out his suggestions. On February 27th the first meeting was held in Downing Place.

## Need to expand

Mr. Bubier, it would seem, envisaged only a small local society which he wished to be known as the Christian Young Men's Association. His committee, however, soon began to feel that the society should be a far larger one, similar to George William's London Association. They wanted to have, for example, a good reading room in which books, periodicals and newspapers would be provided. Some of the committee members travelled to London, visited the Association's headquarters there and brought back enthusiastic reports. Mr. Bubier was less enthusiastic, but realizing he was out-numbered, apparently retired into the background, allowing the revised scheme to take its course. On July 2nd a new committee met and unanimously agreed that a society be formed on the lines of the London Young Men's Christian Association. So came into being the Cambridge Y.M.C.A. under the leadership of several prominent Cambridge residents.

The first official records of the Association date from July 13th, 1852, and are the minutes of a meeting held on that day in the vestry of St. Andrew's Street Baptist Chapel of the local Sunday School Teachers' Institute and the members of Mr. Bubier's first Association. At this meeting it was proposed that the Institute and the Association combine

to form one society 'seeking the best interests of its members on the broadest Christian principles'. It was agreed that a reading room and library be established in which classes could be held and lectures delivered. In the following month the rules of the Association were drawn up and approved. Membership subscription was to be 5/- a year and upwards, payable yearly or half-yearly in advance, and women were to be admitted to lectures and, on one evening a week, to the library, on payment of 3/- a year.

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## House - hunting

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The first step, of course, was to find suitable premises. Rooms at No. 20 Sidney Street were first suggested, but these proving unsuitable, it was decided to lease two at No. 14 Rose Crescent for a period of 6 months at £15. On October 11th the reading room was opened. On March 24th, 1853, a move was made to larger premises — four rooms at No. 5 Sidney Street, and here the Association was to stay for the next six years.

Public lectures, debates, prayer meetings, Bible study and classes in French and German all formed part of the early programmes of the Y.M.C.A. Eminent scholars spoke on *Socrates*, *Electricity in Theory and Practice*, *History and How to Study It* and kindred subjects. Debates, extending sometimes over three evenings, were held to discuss such questions as the Execution of Charles I, Alcohol and Honesty in Business.

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## Annual venue.

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An important event in the early years was the annual *Conversazione* in the Guildhall. This was always a lengthy affair, lasting from half past six in the evening to half past ten and consisting of musical items and three or four short addresses with, half-way through the programme, a pause for refreshments.

In September, 1859, the Y.M.C.A. moved from No. 5 Sidney Street, where the rooms were expensive but poorly heated and ventilated, to premises in Hobson's Passage. The new rooms were larger but scarcely more comfortable than the old ones, and before long the landlord spoke of



*The site of the Y.M.C.A. building in 1869, before Alexandra Street was opened. On the right is the Black Ditch, a narrow passage leading to Petty Cury.*

increasing the rent from £30 to £45. The Association, at that time, was not well off, and there was even a suggestion that it might not, after all, be able to continue. In December, 1866, the landlord gave his tenants notice to quit; new rooms were found in St. Edward's Passage and the move to them proved a turning point in the Association's fortunes, for membership began steadily to increase. Indeed, by November, 1868, the bold plan of building completely new premises was being considered. It was finally decided to purchase part of the Red Hart estate which was then being offered for sale. This property lay between Petty Cury and St. Tibbs Row.

Guarantors were found in several leading Cambridge residents — William Eaden Lilley, Robert Sayle, G. E. Foster the banker, James Nutter the Miller, and John Lincoln a prosperous grocer. The site was bought, a building fund was started and Mr. John Waterhouse was selected

as architect. Tenders were invited from builders, that of William Loveday, a Northamptonshire builder then working on the new All Saints Church in Jesus Lane, being accepted.

On February 7th, 1870, seven members of the committee met on the site and laid the first bricks, and on March 30th the foundation stone was laid by Mr. W. Fowler, M.P. for Cambridge. Leading members of the Association, with representatives from the University, marched in procession from St. Edward's Passage to the corner of St. Tibbs Row where scaffolding had been erected from which the ceremony could be watched. After the stone-laying, the singing of a hymn and prayer, the party went to lunch in the Red Lion Hotel in Petty Cury.

Work on the new building proceeded, though delayed, from time to time, by the non-arrival of bricks or the inability of the builder to obtain

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iron stays for the beams. Eventually, however, all was finished, and on January 1st, 1871, the first meeting of the Association was held in Alexandra Street — a devotional meeting attended by 300 members.

The official opening took place on January 11th, and the Association determined to make it a memorable occasion. About 140 people attended a breakfast in the new rooms at 7 o'clock. At one o'clock the committee formally handed over the building to the Trustees, and at 2 o'clock 146 sat down to a lunch which, with the speeches which followed it, lasted until 6 o'clock. Two hours later a public meeting was held.

From its earliest years the Y.M.C.A. had done much for education in Cambridge by arranging classes and by inviting distinguished scholars to deliver public lectures. With its grand new building it was able to do even more. With the help of University dons, additional classes were arranged in such subjects as Political Economy, Geography, Euclid, Short-hand and Music, while the library was added to constantly. It was in charge of two well-known Cambridge book-sellers, Robert Bowes and Alexander Macmillan, and as early as the year 1853 over 2,300 volumes were circulated.

The choice of public speakers did

not always please everyone. In 1870, for example, when it became known that Professor Huxley had been asked to lecture, letters of protest appeared in the local press and others were received privately by members of the committee. The writers of all of them expressed their disapproval of a Christian Association inviting a notorious atheist even though, by so doing, it might obtain "popularity and large sums for the Building Fund".

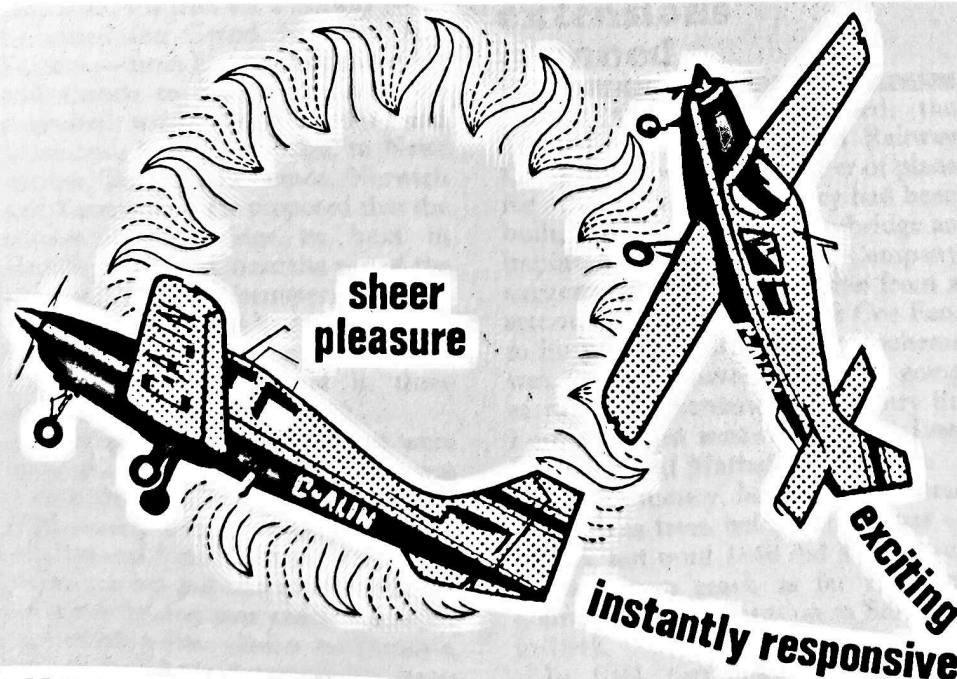
## Widening their activities

Lectures, debates and classes, however, were not the only activities of the Y.M.C.A. In June, 1868, the first of several excursions was arranged jointly with the local Church of England Young Men's Society. Members and their friends travelled in special trains to Matlock and from there to the Duke of Devonshire's estate at Chatsworth. Some people, indeed, made more than a day's outing of it and stayed on until the end of the week, returning by ordinary train for which the railway company charged them only 2/6d. extra.

As early as 1866 a cricket club was formed, followed by a boat club in 1872 and a tennis club in 1878, while instruction was given in swimming,

gymnastics and athletics. In 1909 the first moving pictures in Cambridge were shown in the Y.M.C.A.'s hall — indeed, for some years the Association's rooms provided the first cinema in Cambridge, although the Y.M.C.A. kept a watchful eye on the quality of the pictures shown by those to whom they hired the hall. In times of war the social service provided by the Association to men and women in the Forces is well known.

A hundred years after the Y.M.C.A. moved to its fine building in Alexandra Street a move has again to be faced, for with the proposed alterations to the south side of Petty Cury the premises will be demolished. It is planned to build in Gonville Place much larger ones which will provide the hostel accommodation so much needed in Cambridge, and for which the Y.M.C.A. is now famous. The task that lies ahead will be a gigantic one, and the secretary and his committee will have to meet the same fund-raising problems, the same worries and frustrations inevitably connected with any great new building plan, as their predecessors had to face in 1870. But these will, in due course, be surmounted, and the now somewhat shabby, gloomy-looking building in Alexandra Street will be replaced by fine, modern premises worthy of the Association and its work.

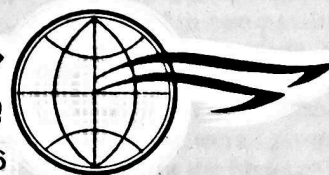


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