

The History of the University Extension Movement and Southport University Extension Society (SUES)

The idea that universities should reach out to the wider community can be traced back to the 19th century. Many leading social thinkers, such as John Ruskin, sought to end material and cultural poverty across areas of society, including education.

Two particular sections of the community, both seeking greater access to university standard learning, were middle-class women and working men. With women, it was due to strict gender stereotypes and ideals, even held by prominent reformers, like Ruskin.

Men and women operated into separate spheres. For middle-class women, their place was in the home – ‘the Angel in the house,’ the perfect wife and mother. Their husband’s role was outside in the world of work, such as businessmen or industrialists.

The most notable reaction to such widespread inequalities was the emergence of the women's rights movement. Traditionally seen as seeking entitlement to vote, this action group also campaigned vigorously for the same access to education as men enjoyed.

At the time, Southport was growing rapidly, with middle-class families moving to this ‘new town’ from the manufacturing areas of Liverpool and Manchester. This created somewhat socially exclusive residential areas within the town, with Birkdale becoming one of the North of England's chief centres for boarding schools for elementary education, 60% of whom were girls.

Nationally, two women in particular, were responsible for bringing about change. Josephine Butler and Anne Jemima Clough, the latter born in Liverpool, worked together in the North of England Council for Promoting the Higher Education of Women to raise the status of governesses and female teachers to that of a profession.

Both were instrumental in pushing the University of Cambridge authorities to open its teaching to women. Their Council invited James Stuart, a fellow of Trinity College and, later, the first Professor of Engineering at Cambridge, to give a course of university standard lectures in Leeds, Sheffield and Liverpool, which were oversubscribed and well received.

A strong supporter of women suffrage, Stuart was also an advocate of education for women and the working-classes. His enthusiasm and support eventually resulted in his pioneering system of extra-mural lectures across the country. This resulted in the development of the global University Extension Movement, with many referring to him as its “Father.” The first lecture took place in Derby in 1873.

Soon other major universities, such as London, Oxford and Durham followed suit in establishing Extension Movements. By 1891, there were over 140 centres, in what was called an 'extra-mural empire,' extending from the South Coast to the Scottish border

Southport was an early adopter and, in 1874, held its first Lecture for Ladies, now formally associated with the Extension Movement. The first two decades were only partially successful. It wasn't until 1896 when the next major step forward took place in establishing the Southport and Birkdale University Extension Society.

In addition to the far-sighted, liberal-minded individuals at universities, many local dignitaries were also supportive. In Southport, this included the mayor and the Right Hon. G N Curzon who later became Viceroy of India. Compared with industrial towns such as Derby and Crewe, Southport, a largely dormitory town, was far more successful in establishing a flourishing Extension Movement centre.

In order that they were of university standard, the courses offered were strictly controlled. They had to be the same as taught at Cambridge, delivered by their lecturers, with written work, examinations and certificates awarded for those who passed the examination.

By the early 20th century, with National and Local government playing a greater part in adult education, the Extension Movement encountered new competition, still solely dependent on fees from its local Societies' members. Some fell by the wayside, whilst others were absorbed into the increasing number of new universities being established across the country, which established Extra-Mural Departments focusing on adult education.

Between the two World Wars, Extension Societies had to adapt to the changing conditions. Nevertheless, the availability of alternative forms of adult education led to a decrease in their importance.

Economics finally brought an end to the extensive Extension empire, when the costs of supplying lecturers to remote centres could no longer be justified. Inevitably, this also led to Southport's long, close association with Cambridge coming to an end, in 1961. However, at this point, Liverpool University assumed responsibility for Extension activities in Southport, within their Department of Extra-Mural Studies. That year, a decision was also taken to drop Birkdale from the Society's name.

Other challenges were to follow with the advent of alternative education providers, such as the Open University, where students are able to study at home, at a time suitable for them, and obtain an accredited degree over several years. Despite this, it also gave Societies the opportunity to focus on the increasing importance of later-life learning. So, in changing its emphasis, the Society was able to maintain its identity. However, this was not replicated across the country. Eventually, all remaining Extension Societies closed. By 1974, Southport was the sole survivor.

Its fortunes have fluctuated since then but, just before the turn of the century, great efforts were made to ensure its continuation. This has been maintained over the last decade. The Society can now offer a programme containing seven individual lectures plus five 4-9 weekly courses. Together with its own website and monthly magazine, *Forum*, the Society is flourishing once again.

Today, SUES provides opportunities to learn about fascinating subjects from knowledgeable and interesting speakers. The shared side of learning is equally important, enjoying conversations and discussions with others over a cup of tea in a relaxed environment, while delivering the benefits of later-life learning, such as cognitive, psychological, social and physical.

SUES is in good shape to face the future, as it continues to provide a programme of activities that clearly meets the needs of the local community.