



# Celebrating the bicentennial of Birkbeck

A member of the University of London  
for over 100 years



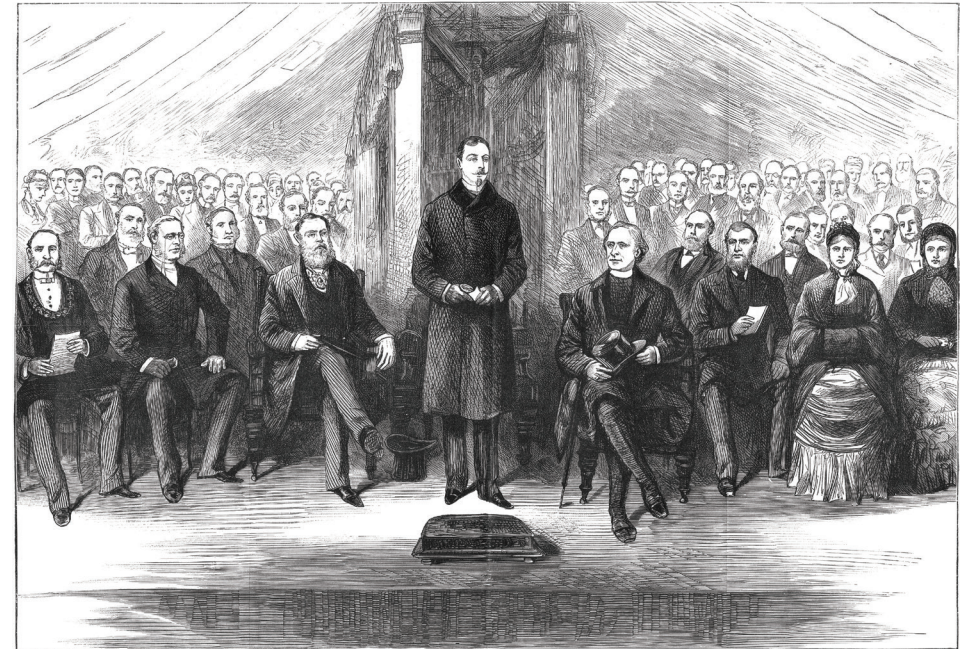
UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON



Birkbeck  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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## ❖The Pictorial World❖



Pictorial World, May 5, 1883

The Duke of Albany laying the foundation-stone of the new building of the Birkbeck Institute, in Bream's Buildings, Chancery Lane, on Monday the 23rd.

The Duke acknowledging the vote of thanks.

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This booklet was presented to Birkbeck, University of London, on its 200th year anniversary by Professor Wendy Thomson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London.

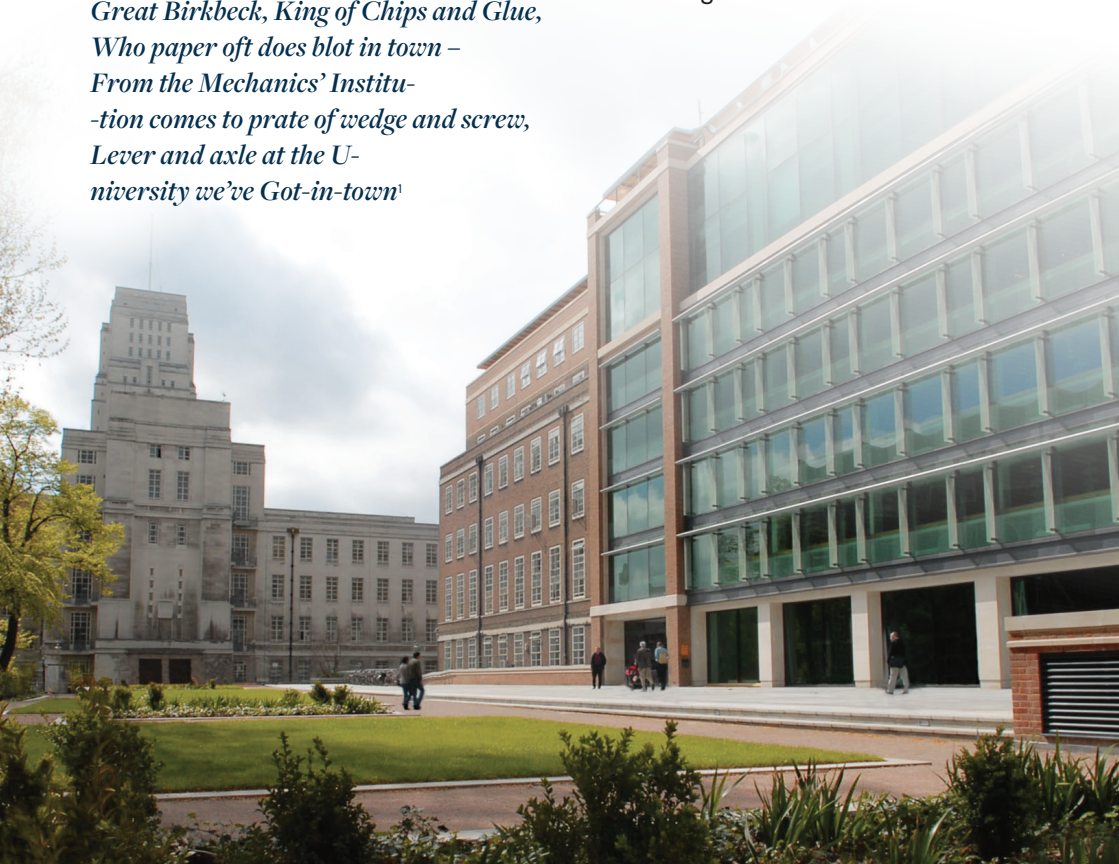
## Early days

The University of London has always been associated with Birkbeck.

In 1830, the highly conservative publication *John Bull* printed a poem satirising the new London University; George Birkbeck and his London Mechanics' Institution formed the subject of one of the verses:

*Great Birkbeck, King of Chips and Glue,  
Who paper oft does blot in town –  
From the Mechanics' Institu-  
-tion comes to prate of wedge and screw,  
Lever and axle at the U-  
niversity we've Got-in-town'*

Despite the scepticism of *John Bull*, both the University of London and Birkbeck College proved their worth. And from 1858 teachers were preparing Birkbeck students to take University of London degree examinations.



## Joining the 'new' University of London

At the beginning of the twentieth century the University of London's new charter paved the way for higher education institutions in and around London to become incorporated as colleges of the University.

To many, Birkbeck seemed already to be part of the University 'in everything but name', as the college employed University-recognised teachers and an increasing number of the students were taking the University of London degree.<sup>2</sup>

The Royal Commission of 1908–1912, set up to consider higher education in London, recommended Birkbeck's admission to the University of London, based largely on the evidence of the college's principal George Armitage-Smith. Armitage-Smith had already reported to the University that the movement among Birkbeck's students and teachers to become incorporated was having a 'good influence' on the college.<sup>3</sup>

He told the Commission that admitting Birkbeck would help transform the University of London into a 'People's University ... easily accessible to all classes', as opposed to an exclusive establishment

where entrance was determined by the ability to pay fees.<sup>4</sup>

Although World War I delayed Birkbeck's admission, this description of the University of London as a 'People's University' was one that characterised the University's development over the next century. At a dinner celebrating the new University of London site in Bloomsbury in 1933, the Chancellor Lord Athlone spoke of the common object of all members of the University as 'the interchange ... of ideas – between ourselves and any others ... who have at heart the cause of learning and research'.<sup>5</sup>

University memos from Birkbeck's probationary period as a member of the University of London recognise the college's 'great progress' and achievements, which in 1925 justified Birkbeck continuing as a school of the University without time limit.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Stinkomalee Triumphans', *John Bull*, 1830 (University of London Archives, ULC/PC4/3).

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 129–30.

<sup>3</sup> UoL/CF1/4/348.

<sup>4</sup> Bourke, pp. 129–30.

<sup>5</sup> Lord Athlone, quoted in 'Foundation Dinner', *The Times*, 26 June 1933, p. 16. (University of London Archives, ULC/PC4/17).

<sup>6</sup> Senate minutes 1919–20, UoL/ST2/3/36; UoL/CF1/25/348.





HRH The Queen Mother, Chancellor of the University of London formally opening Birkbeck's new Malet Street building. *The Chronicle*, 1953 (UoL/SV5/34).

The University was also keen that Birkbeck should have accommodation worthy of a University College.

When plans were being drawn up for the University of London's new Bloomsbury site, room was set aside for Birkbeck College. In an article about the new University site in

the *Times*, Principal Edwin Deller described Birkbeck as an institution in which the University was 'deeply interested' and which had 'developed into an institution of full University rank as an evening college, whose students are engaged in other occupations during the daytime'.<sup>7</sup>

## Celebrating Birkbeck

Admiration for Birkbeck's evening students was very much in evidence during the 1924 celebrations of the college's centenary.

The college was eager to engage the University in its celebrations, and a file in the University of London's archives reveals the collaboration between the University and its new member. The resulting centenary booklet described Birkbeck's students as possessing 'a tenacity of purpose beyond praise, [who] seek in their scanty leisure the more abundant life which a liberal education gives'. It also commended the college's work to provide a route to higher education for those otherwise deprived of it, and emphasised its national importance:

*The welfare of the nation depends upon the creation of an instructed community, and Birkbeck College is playing a considerable part in affording a training in the highest duties of citizenship.*<sup>8</sup>

The blossoming relationship between the college and the University was a feature of the centenary celebrations at the Princes Restaurant in Piccadilly,

which was chaired by the University's Vice-Chancellor. With live coverage provided by the BBC, the event was a grand one, featuring a tribute from Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald – himself an old student of Birkbeck. As well as recalling his own happy memories, MacDonald was eloquent about the college's mission:

*To the many who otherwise were like to be walled in by the limits of their own occupations Birkbeck College stands as a gateway through which each day they may adventure into the wide fields of Learning and Opportunity. The horizon opens without barrier of race or nationality, beckoning the student on to wider understandings and wider friendships.*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Deller, 'The University of London: A New Chapter: Bloomsbury as the Centre', *The Times*, 26 June 1933 (University of London Archives, ULC/PC4/17).

<sup>8</sup> UoL/CF1/20/248.

<sup>9</sup> The Court of Electors', *The Lodestone*, 19.3 (1924), pp. 148–151 (p.151). (Birkbeck Archive, GB 1832 BBK/11/3/Lodestone).

# A good relationship

The relationship between a federal body and its constituent members can sometimes be complicated, as the University's Chancellor Lord Athlone admitted in 1933.

As he stressed however, the individuals of the colleges and the University of London are 'tied by a common loyalty and have a common object in constant view'.<sup>10</sup>

In 1923, as Birkbeck was joining, the University of London Union certainly felt that Birkbeck – like the other member colleges – could take a joke. A satirical piece appeared in the annual magazine, demonstrating how 'college attitudes' could be a barrier to university spirit. In this piece, personifications of King's and UCL were depicted at an imagined meeting of the University, snobbishly disparaging other members as they waited for them to arrive. In a not-so-veiled reference to the polytechnic group of colleges Birkbeck had (for pragmatic reasons) been associated, 'UCL' says, 'it's so unwise to encourage these little polytechnics and technical institutes. They get too big for their boots'.<sup>11</sup>

An exchange about the new Bloomsbury site in 1931 between Birkbeck College Secretary G. F. Troup Horne and Harold Claughton, Clerk of the Court at University of London, reveals the good relations between the institutions. Writing to Birkbeck about how the best aerial photograph of the Bloomsbury site held by the University had disappeared, Claughton facetiously blamed London County Council. Troup Horne responded, 'I trust you will find that the College is more honest than the County Council'. A month later, the University provided proof that it did indeed trust Birkbeck, as Claughton sent Troup Horne 'the only copy I could raise'.<sup>12</sup>



Above: Lord Athlone, official University of London Portrait (MS926/2/4/20).

<sup>10</sup> Lord Athlone, quoted in 'Foundation Dinner', *The Times*, 26 June 1933, p. 16 (University of London archives, ULC/PC4/17).

<sup>11</sup> 'University Spirit', *University of London Union Magazine*, June 1923, pp. 18–20, UoL/UN5/4.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence, 1933, UoL/CF1/31/348.

# Neighbours in Bloomsbury

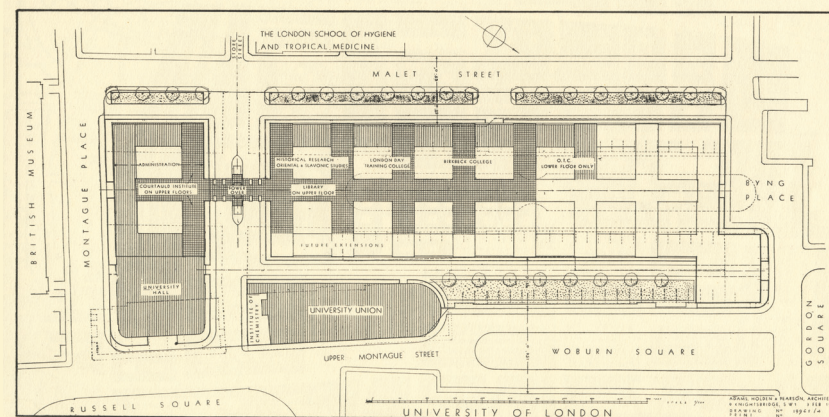
In 1951 Birkbeck finally moved into its present home on the Bloomsbury site. However, the college's troubles with accommodation were far from over.

Correspondence from the 1970s describes the building's defective heating and how its basement – like that of the neighbouring University of London Union building – had a tendency to flood following heavy rain.<sup>13</sup>

Living in such close quarters with the University Union could also cause tension. Birkbeck was forced to complain to the Union when its fire escape was blocked – on one notable occasion by a settee, and on another by a number of kayaks.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1980s Birkbeck's Department of Politics – which had been co-founded by Orwell's biographer Bernard Crick – moved into No. 10 Gower Street. In the summer, the department hosted parties in their walled garden, at which Crick famously enjoyed setting off fireworks – apparently aimed at nearby Senate House. It is reported that Crick hit his target on one occasion only.<sup>15</sup>

Below: Charles Holden's plan of the proposed University of London site, including space for Birkbeck, 1932 (ULC/PC4/1).



Block plan of the site showing the University buildings

<sup>13</sup> Correspondence, December 1971, UoL/UN/3/1/4.

<sup>14</sup> Correspondence, March–April 1971, UoL/UN/3/1/4.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/dec/27/obituary-letter-sir-bernard-crick>.



# A valued member of the University of London

**‘Birkbeck has made many significant contributions to the University’s intellectual and social life.’**

During the first half of the twentieth century the college’s drama society was especially appreciated. In 1925, the University of London Union’s magazine stated: ‘When Birkbeck launches forth, interest is at once aroused, for experience has taught us that their plays are very well done as a rule’.<sup>16</sup> And following Birkbeck’s Centenary production ‘Arden of Feversham’, the Union’s Annual recognised the scholarly contribution represented by Birkbeck’s numerous revivals of Elizabethan plays: ‘Their work offers an ideal introduction to Shakespeare, and is a real service to the study of Elizabethan literature and theatrical art’.<sup>17</sup>

One of Birkbeck’s significant contributions to the University of London was the development of a new university computer. Andrew and Kathleen Booth’s research into computers at Birkbeck coincided with a realisation that the University needed more computing capacity. During the 1950s meetings took place at Senate House to agree the collaboration to build and house the

new computer. The Booths had the technological skills, and the University had the space. Though their resulting computer was – like all computers at that time – a very large piece of machinery, Andrew Booth predicted that, in the future, computers would be small enough that every university would be able to own one.<sup>18</sup>



The University of London also has Birkbeck to thank for one of its most significant Vice-Chancellors.

Dame Lilian Margery Penson

started her career in the history department at the college. She went on to be the first person in the University of London to be awarded a PhD, the first woman to become Professor of History at any British university, and, when she became Vice-Chancellor of the University of London in 1948, she was the first woman in the UK and Commonwealth to hold this role at any university.

<sup>16</sup> *Vincula*, 12 February 1925, p. 2, UoL/UN5/4.

<sup>17</sup> UoL Union Magazine, June 1924, pp. 46–50, UoL/UN5/4.

<sup>18</sup> Bourke, pp. 464–5.

# Notable presidents of Birkbeck, University of London



Lord Denning  
(1952–1983)

One of the most influential judges of the twentieth century, Lord Denning has always promoted Birkbeck’s cause. On a question over funding in 1986 he reminded the House of Lords of Birkbeck’s ‘unique’ character and achievements: ‘It is for students who work by day and study by night, and it has produced in its time some of the best graduates, not only for teaching in our schools but for our industries and sciences’.<sup>19</sup>



Denis Healey  
(1993–1999)

Healey’s favourite part of the role was the graduations. He enjoyed this so much, especially chatting to all the students, that it was virtually impossible to tear him away.<sup>21</sup>



Michael Young  
(1989–1992)

Young took the role so seriously that he enrolled for a Masters in Philosophy – and terrified the staff with the range and depth of his questions. One of his favourite stories about Birkbeck was about a taxi driver who took recording equipment into classes. When the driver was asked about this, he explained that he liked to replay the lectures while driving his cab. The philosophical insights of Birkbeck lecturers were therefore shared with anyone lucky enough to share the journey.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Hansard, 13 June 1986, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1986-06-13/debates/80e8979d-7c9c-440a-a937-128ec1bb0fc4/BirkbeckCollegeFunding>

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Tessa Blackstone, 31/8/23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

## Securing Birkbeck's 'unique mission'

In the 1960s, following the government's Robbins report, there was pressure on Birkbeck to enrol more school-leavers rather than its usual intake of mature students.

When there was internal disagreement over this at Birkbeck, the University acted as a critical friend, suggesting that Birkbeck and the University should jointly invite a cross-university academic advisory committee to make recommendations.

As well as strongly recommending that Birkbeck preserve their mission to provide evening education for mature students, the committee were highly complimentary about the college, noting that 'the College has an abundance of goodwill, high morale and confidence in its future sufficient to overcome its frustrations and difficulties'.

The committee also suggested that Birkbeck was 'uniquely qualified' to contribute to the developing fields of extra-mural studies and distance learning, in which it could become an institution of great national importance. The committee paid tribute to the leaders of Birkbeck from the college's incorporation to the University of London to its present day:

'Birkbeck could not have ... reached its present distinction, without courageous leadership ... George Armitage-Smith, who led the College to university status; George Senter, who presided over the College from 1918-1939; John Maud, who during the war kept the College not only open, but in London...; Gordon Jackson, whose devotion to the College through the war is so well commemorated by the portrait of him in the boardroom; and from 1951 until 1965, John Lockwood, whose foresight and imagination were, until his untimely death, carrying the College into the post-Robbins era. To this list of Masters we would add the name of Eric Warmington, who on more than one occasion has had to take on the leadership of the College under difficult conditions.'<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Report of the Academic Advisory Committee on Birkbeck College, 1966, UoL/ST4/26/2.

## Birkbeck and the University of London in the 21st century

In 2016, colleagues from Birkbeck and across the University of London came together to celebrate the career of Professor Tessa Blackstone (Master of Birkbeck 1987-1997), as she accepted an honorary degree from the University of London in recognition of her contribution to public life and Higher Education.

In his oration, Professor David Latchman (Vice-Chancellor of Birkbeck since 2003) commended her creation and expansion of vocational departments at Birkbeck, noting how her focus on three key principles during her time as Master – improved standards, wider access and better funding – effected change on a national scale when she transferred them to her work in the Labour government of 1997-2010.<sup>23</sup>

In his own tenure as Vice-Chancellor, Professor Latchman also put the Birkbeck mission on the national stage. He has been a consistently powerful advocate for life-long learning, providing expert submissions to select committees and as a member of Labour's Lifelong Learning Commission.

In 2024, the University of London looks forward to welcoming Professor Sally Wheeler, as she

takes the helm at Birkbeck. We look forward to a continued relationship of mutual benefit as the college enters its third century of providing world-class education and lifelong learning to transform lives.



<sup>23</sup> <https://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/former-birkbeck-master-receives-university-of-london-accolade>





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like to be walled in by the limits of  
their own occupations Birkbeck  
College stands as a gateway  
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adventure into the wide fields  
of Learning and Opportunity.  
The horizon opens without  
barrier of race or nationality,  
beckoning the student on to  
wider understandings and wider  
friendships ... Long may Birkbeck  
College flourish and prosperity  
attend her sons and daughters.'*

J. Ramsay MacDonald, 1924  
British Prime Minister and  
Birkbeck Alumnus



