

The Workers' Institute

The Workers' Institute was opened on 10th June 1912 by the Countess of Dudley. The architect was A.T. Butler who was a local man.

The Workers' Institute only exists because of the courage and determination of the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath, who went on strike for 13 weeks in 1910 to fight for the right to a minimum wage. It was built with the money remaining after the strike ended and extra funding to furnish the Workers' Institute was raised from bazaars held in February 1912.

The women workers were inspired and led by the Glasgow born activist Mary Reid Macarthur who in 1903 became Secretary of the Women's Trade Union League and in 1906 was a founder member of the Anti - Sweating League. In March 1910 the Chain Trade Board agreed a minimum wage of two and a half pence an hour to replace the old piecework system.

Although this was low it meant a 100% rise for most of the women, giving them 10 to 11 shillings for a 55-hour week. Many companies did not keep to this and tricked women (many of whom could not read or write) to consent to a contracting out of this agreement.

A 'lockout' followed, with Mary Macarthur waging a national campaign which brought donations flooding in.

Unusually for those days she used the media to promote their cause, with 79-year-old Patience Round being

interviewed as the oldest woman on strike. Patience was in the newspapers and on Pathe News in the cinemas. She died at the age of 103. It was said that while she was small in stature, she had the 'heart of a lion'.

The dispute ended on 22 October when the last employer signed the 'White List' – those employers who were members of the Chain Manufacturers' Association agreeing to always pay the minimum rates.

The Institute was a very busy building. People could call in for a range of reasons: to pay union dues, to collect union benefits, to get their National Insurance card stamped, to collect sickness, maternity or unemployment benefit, to make an appointment to see a union official, to pay into the 'doctor's club', to book a room for a meeting or a function.

The building was used for 'socials', lectures and also had a billiard hall and cinema and was at the very heart of the community.