

Detailed School History

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 26 March 2013 11:17 - Last Updated Friday, 29 March 2013 15:48

This detailed history of People's College was researched and written by Ken Brand a local historian and Vice President of the Nottingham Civic Society. It covers the Further Education College which is part of the history of People's College as envisaged by the founder George Gill. It is a fascinating story of the social reformers and their determination to improve society for the general good not just for the benefit of the well off. Many thanks to Ken Brand for allowing us to put it on the website.

People's College and Higher and Technical Education.

Preamble: George Gill was born on 9th January 1779 at Wilford, where his father was curate. In 1793 he was apprenticed to a hosier, later he started his own business and continued in the hosiery trade for about twenty years. Thereafter he became a commission agent and cotton merchant under his own name, as Gill & Son, and in his advanced years as Gill & Wright. Politically he identified with the Radical party and was active locally, in 1815 he served the office of Chamberlain and in the following year he became one of the town's two Sheriffs. Although most likely a Unitarian in opinions, he worshipped at the Friends' Meeting-house. He was a powerful public speaker. Although never a really wealthy man he was generous in his private benevolence and philanthropy. Much of his munificence was of choice unrecorded but three of his "valuable Institutions" survive; the People's College, the People's Hall, and the Working Man's Retreat. Gill died on 30th November 1855. An appreciation published in the radical

Nottingham Review

7 December 1855 aptly assessed

the man:

"Socially, morally, and politically GEORGE GILL was truly the friend of the people. The elevation of the toiling millions, without distinction of party or creed was the great aim of his life."

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People's College Nottingham was founded by the local radical philanthropist, George Gill in 1846 but his vision to provide an establishment where the children of the working classes could obtain an education as good as any provided in a reputable writing school or private Academy must have been with him well before this time. When the Derby Road Lammas Fields Inclosure Act received the Royal assent on 1st. July 1839 he had the chance to turn his dream into reality. Nottingham had become overcrowded and unhealthy. Surrounded by a tight ring of commonable land, on which building was prohibited, any expansion of the town was impossible. A population of 50,220 (1831) was endeavouring to live on the same area, 876 acres, enjoyed by around 10,300 in 1739. The 1839 Inclosure Act was the first successful attempt to break the stranglehold imposed by these common lands.

Gill must have closely followed the deliberations of the Commissioners appointed to bring about the inclosure of this area, the triangle formed by Park Row, Derby Road and the Ropewalk. They divided up almost 18 acres into 49 allotments.

Lorenzo

Christie, Lace Manufacturer acting for Gill, purchased part of allotment no. 24, lots 5 and 6 on the day, at auction on 16th July 1844 at the George Hotel.

He agreed to pay

£263:8:4d., through a deposit of £26 and the balance to be paid by 11th October 1844.

Gill subsequently acquired the two adjoining lots to the east, no. 7 from a Mr. Sneath and no. 8 by private contract, thus completing the purchase of the whole of allotment no. 24, 2411 square yards in all, a good size plot for a college at this time.

For other purposes Gill later purchased allotment no. 25 from Samuel Parsons the Elder. Both plots stretched from the newly set out West Circus Street, later College Street, down to the existing Ropewalk Street and were to the immediate rear of the new Catholic Church, the later cathedral of St. Barnabas. With all buildings to be erected on the inclosure legislated to be of a minimum value of £500, £800 if fronting into or upon the Ropewalk, Gill was in a position to create his college in a spacious

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setting surrounded by buildings of some quality.

Gill's commitment was some £3,000, given in stages, and being well respected in the town he was an ideal leader for a highly successful public appeal to raise further money. A local architect Isaac Charles Gilbert was appointed to design the new college. In March 1846 the *Nottingham Review*

carried an advertisement requesting "The Friends and Subscribers of this projected Institution " to "attend a meeting at Gill & Wright's Counting House on Monday Evening, the 6th of April, at Half-past Six o'clock, to choose Sixteen Directors for the present year"

In a later issue the

Review

briefly reported the meeting and listed the 15 Directors elected among whom were George Gill, William Gill M.D., and Lorenzo Christie.

Later there were to be 24 directors or managers as they were often termed, 16 being elected by subscribers and eight by the parents of pupils.

On 28th August 1846 under the heading "Town Improvements" the *Review* noted when referring to the development taking place in the former Lammas Fields:

"Houses in the Tudor and other styles of architecture are springing up there, having a much more palatial character than anything the town has formerly seen; and the People's College, which has reached a considerable height above the ground, is already a pleasing feature in that vicinage".

Nottingham's radical newspaper, the *Nottingham Review*, carried a very powerful, yet somewhat naive, editorial in support of the aims of the college, and education for the working classes generally, under the heading "THE PEOPLE'S COLLEGE" in its issue of 13th November 1846. It is difficult in an age when education for all is often taken all too casually to appreciate the impact of statements such as:

"There is not an edifice in Nottingham more truly sacred, or more calculated to aid the elevation and progression of the multitude than that graceful structure which each week approaches nearer to its completion..."

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And

“The Nottingham People’s College is a watch-tower, from whence the thoughtful student may behold the dawning of a brighter day - a shrine in which the true spirit of the age will find a dwelling place...”

Eventually, as if exhausted by the eloquence of its own verbosity, the editorial ended with: *“But, enough:- we will but add from our heart of hearts, success, great and enduring, attend the Nottingham People’s College !”*

The *Review* of November 27th. used a letter from a worried reader, “Ten-Bob a Week”, to correct a common misconception. The correspondent who, confusing the annual subscription paid by supporters of the College with the admission charge for instruction, felt the institution “...ought to be styled “The Monied People’s College.”” In reply the editor of the paper took great pains to point out the annual subscription of ten shillings per annum could be considered “...as so much assistance afforded by a friend to education, towards rendering the scheme successful.” He added that in any case the scale of charges to pupils or students had not yet been fixed and concluded:

“For our own parts, we have no fear that every facility will be afforded even to the poorest, and that the democratic element in the government of the institution will be sufficiently influential to render it in every sense A PEOPLE’S COLLEGE.”

A fortnight later the *Review* for 11th.December carried two pieces on People’s College. There was a long encouraging address from the People’s College of Sheffield congratulating the Nottingham College on its successful fund raising Tucked into the article was a note of caution:

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“Let the managers look well to the election of their principal. He is the soul who is to tone the whole and keep it sweetly agoing. A mere mechanic at maps, and books, and lectures will soon grind all the beauty out of the machinery. Enthusiast in education he must be to succeed.”

Of Gill himself the Sheffield writer considered him to be Nottingham's William of Wykeham and he had laid the foundations of a great institution.

The second item reported the first occasion at which the directors of People's College met the donors and subscribers to the institution. The gathering at the warehouse of Messrs. Gill & Wrig ht was held on 7th December 1846. The supporters were told that the contract for the building after the plan of Mr. Gilbert was taken by Messrs. Burton and Sons and that the college is now nearly completed. A financial statement indicated donations and subscriptions paid into the bank up to that time amounted to £1703 10s 6d and from this sum £1200 had been paid to the contractors with more soon due. A calculation had been made of the likely expenses to be incurred in providing furniture and equipment for the college, building a boundary wall, and other liabilities. The result was a deficiency in the funds of about £1000. The directors hoped the friends of education generally and especially the working classes for whose benefit People's College has been erected, will afford them such aid as may enable them to carry fully out the objects contemplated in the foundation deed. A pamphlet had been printed and circulated to raise public awareness of the college and elicit support from the inhabitants of Nottingham and the neighbourhood. Finally the meeting was reassured that the college should open the following Midsummer and it would

“..afford to the working population of this town and neighbour, the opportunity of obtaining for their children, at the lowest possible charge, a useful and superior education.”
A list of the directors for the ensuing years was given.

No doubt further fund raising was carried out during the first half of 1847. Information about courses available at the college, with details of subjects and levels, was contained in a printed

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document distributed around the town. On 9th July the

Review

noted that Mr. Hugo Reid had been appointed principal of People's College and informed its readers that the college would open

*"about the usual time after the
midsummer vacation."*

The newspaper hoped

"that both the middle and working

*classes will rally round this noble establishment, and held (sic) to carry out the just
and philanthropic views of its founders. Such an education, and on such terms, is we believe
nowhere else to be obtained..."*

Two weeks later on 23rd July the Review carried a front page advertisement for the Commercial School of People's College opening on 2nd August. The school was designed for youths under fourteen years of age who could read and write. Instruction would be given in the usual subjects of elementary education:- English Grammar, Spelling, General Knowledge, Writing, Arithmetic, Book-Keeping, and Geography with additionally Physiology, the rudiments of Physical Science, History and Biography, Drawing, Music, and Singing. Further, extra courses, were available for advanced pupils. A quarterly Report on conduct and progress of each pupil would be sent to his parent or guardian. The Charge for this School was set at ten shillings per quarter, or one shilling a week, paid in advance. Enrollment was possible at the College or at Messrs. Gill & Wright, Hounds-gate. A footnote to the advertisement indicated two youths were required as apprentices to be employed in the School. It has been noted that unlike many schools of the time, People's College did appear to actually teach all the subjects set out in its prospectus.

Finally the College opened as promised on Monday 2nd. August 1847. As expected a glowing description of the college, a resume of its philosophy, together with a woodcut illustration of the building appeared on the following Friday, 16th

August, in
the

Nottingham Review

. The newspaper's readers were given precise instructions for inspecting the building:

*"A very capital view of the front of the college may be
obtained a little above Chapel-bar, against the Hospitals recently re-erected; the*

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College being seen to great advantage through a space between the west end of St. Barnabas's Church, and the east gable-end of a house forming one of a row erected on the south side of Derby-road, a few years ago."

Attention was drawn to the inscription
on a stone slab fixed over the porch:-

THE PEOPLE'S COLLEGE,
ERECTED BY VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS: AND
VESTED IN THE HANDS OF TEN TRUSTEES,
FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE WORKING CLASSES
OF NOTTINGHAM AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
FOR EVER

A.D. MDCCCXLVI.

The original commemorative stone slab survives as it was incorporated into the new facade when the College was rebuilt, either in 1881 or later in the 1890s.

The account in the *Review* continued, giving details of the building. There were seven rooms, four on the ground floor and three above. The largest of the ground floor rooms, 50feet by 30feet, was the Hall. It was to be used as a lecture and music room for the present,

"and, by and by, when the funds of the institution shall admit of it, a large cheap class will receive tuition therein. Of the three remaining ground floor rooms, one was for "the English lesson department", one for Geography, History, and Mathematics, and the other would be used as a class-room for junior pupils. The three upper rooms would be occupied as class-rooms for Drawing, Writing etc."

Some details of the managing and administration of the College followed, from which came the information that only the first department, the Commercial School, had opened on 2nd. August, with 60 scholars, and with two assistants, two apprentices and the Principal, Mr. Reid, to conduct the school. The Principal would deliver a weekly lecture upon science, "and the pupils will, after each lecture, be examined as to the amount of information retained by each." Later in the report came the very welcome news that:

"To open the advantages of the school to those of the working classes

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whose means are limited, the directors WILL GIVE ADMISSION, WITHOUT CHARGE, to a certain number of deserving boys, according to a separate fund subscribed for that purpose; not less than twenty will be admitted during the year 1848"

. The provision of an Upper School within the College was another firm commitment.

Finally, came the reassurance that as soon as funds permitted Evening and Female Schools together with a library and a reading room, all very important parts of the plan of the People's College, would be established. Inevitably came the plea from the directors that they would

"...be encouraged to carry speedily into effect, objects calculated to be so serviceable to the youth of both sexes among the industrious orders" if they received "...the aid they expect from all classes of the inhabitants, and particularly from those of the working classes who are in more favourable circumstances." □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□

Rather astutely in

the same issue the editor of the
Review

printed a letter from "A Working Man" concerned that the published terms for pupils of the College would be
a shilling a week

.
The correspondent felt as a father of six children, four of them boys, that
threepence or

.
fourpence per week

would be a reasonable charge for a poor child. He concluded by referring back to the earlier letter denouncing a Monied People's College. The editor in commenting on the letter pointed out that People's College was not created for

"...the furnishing of tuition of an inferior kind for a nominal sum; but the providing of a thorough commercial education to the children of the working classes who can avail themselves of it; - an education which will cost them for one year, what at any other establishment would be charged for one quarter."

Warming to his theme the editor closed with:

"The directors wish they had the means of educating every poor child in the town, but their support is limited. As subscriptions enlarge, their usefulness will be extended. Meanwhile, they are filling a place which has hitherto been void in Nottingham, and we must not quarrel with those who do so much, because they can do no more."

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Thus was the People's College established and opened. In "The Strangers' Guide to Nottingham" published in 1848 the College was firmly in place as one of the features of the guide's perambulations around the town. In its description of the College the Library is mentioned, "...in which books of any religious or political description may be introduced if approved of by the Board of Directors." "Lascelles and Hagar's Directory of Nottingham" of the same year related:

"Recently, considerable improvements have been made, much to the benefit of the town ... the People's College, near Derby road, for the instruction of the working classes"

The *Nottingham Review* 5th January 1850 carried an advertisement giving the date and times of the re-opening of the Boys' Day School, the Male Evening School, and the Female Evening School. The opening of the Girls' Day School under the Mistress, Miss Kirkland, was also announced. Respecting the official propriety of the day, the Male Evening School met on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, 7.30pm - 9.30pm at a cost of 6d. per week. The Female Night School met on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 7pm - 9pm at a cost of 4d. per week. The Girls' Day School was designed for girls from seven to fourteen years of age,

"and will be conducted in the upper rooms of the College, quite separately in every respect from the Boys' School."

For this year

there were 170 boys and 75 girls on roll.

Hugo Reid appears to have left the College in 1851-2, perhaps to further his career as a writer, especially on science and scientific education. It is said that he devised some form of early correspondence course in order to give his students continuity of directed study. The directors certainly made a wise choice in selecting Reid for under his guidance the College made an excellent start. T. Buckley Smith succeeded Reid and he stayed for 30 years. Edward Francis was the third Principal, or strictly in the 1880s, Headmaster and he guided the College into the new century.

By the mid 1850s the high reputation of the College was attracting students from the surrounding villages. In 1855 the evening classes for those in full employment, were given official recognition by the payment of a government grant. Before long extra

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subjects were being added, metallurgy, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and machine drawing were among the subjects soon to be enriching the curriculum. The

Nottingham Review

of 5th January 1855 advertised

Additional Evening Classes, in

separate Rooms,

the classes to include French, German, and Singing at two levels,

beginners and advanced. The College would also offer "A

new Evening Class,

for

FRENCH CONVERSATION especially, to be opened January 15th, at 8.15."

On 3rd. October 1856, the day the *Nottingham Review* printed a letter telling of the erection of a memorial tablet to the late George Gill in the vestibule of the People's Hall, the College received an unexpected testimonial through another letter. From "An Earnest Citizen" came the following:

SIR.- I heard a fact from a friend the other day, which I don't think is generally known amongst those whom it most concerns, viz.,- that within the last few weeks, the girls' school at the People's College has been placed under a very superior and experienced instructress, and is thus in the way to supply an important want to the town, which I and others have often remarked that we did not see how to remedy. The children of many of the middle classes, the daughters more particularly, seem to be left out, as it were, in the present advance of education."

The writer continued in the same vein, extolling the way the directors of the College were maintaining the high ideals of its founder and,

"In conclusion, I urge my fellow

-

townsmen to look into these things, and avail themselves of these opportunities of placing their children under accredited and first rate instructors,"

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In 1870 School Boards were set up and by the end of the decade the day school side of the College was transferred to the Nottingham School Board, when it became established as the town's first Higher Grade School. One reason for the smooth change over was the setting up of a University College in the town in 1877, which would take over much of the Further Education work. At the same time the local School Board was considering its approach to post-elementary education spurred on by parents wishing to obtain secondary education provision for their children.

There is little doubt that because of its popularity, its successes, and in its new role the College was now too small. On the 19th and the 31st. December 1880, the Nottingham architects Evans and Jolley submitted plans for "Additions to People's College", in actual fact these proposals and those of 9th October 1891 and 12th. February 1897 amounted to a complete rebuilding of the College. Plans for most of Nottingham's schools appear to have been mislaid or lost. Certainly some of the 1880 work was carried out on enlarging the Ropewalk side of the College. The "new" College Street elevation, whilst it cannot be precisely dated, has in the brickwork of the gables a typical facet of Evans' style which can be seen in other buildings designed by his practice in the town.

In Nottingham the higher grade system expanded rapidly and by 1891 there were four such schools in which, unlike the practice in most other towns, there was a serious attempt to give a balanced curriculum. This soon changed for following further re-organisation in 1892 the higher grade schools were divided into science and commercial departments. People's College boys' was made into a science school, whilst the girls' department became a commercial school. The boys had a wide choice of science and arts subjects but the girls were confined to shorthand and typing, French or German, commercial correspondence and arithmetic.

One unusual and highly successful venture at the College was the provision of training for Pupil Teachers who attended for three nights a week to receive instruction from experienced teachers. This initiative started in October 1882 and continued with many changes until 1903 at least. The centre had some amazing results, particularly in 1899 when the first place in the national examination was achieved by a girl from People's College, some achievement as usually around 9,000 girls sat the annual examination. The ever more popular evening classes continued much as before, until in 1896 this work came under a new banner, the Evening Continuation School. In the first session eighteen different subjects in the commercial and technical fields were

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on offer to the 140 students who enrolled

. Some statistics from this period reveal that the one thousandth student enrolled

by October 1900 and in the following year there

were 94 male and 262 female students over the age of twenty-one.

There were 95

girls in the 14-15 group.

In February 1905 the City Council's Education Committee decided the future of their Higher Elementary Schools. High Pavement and Mundella would be converted into Third Grade Secondary Schools whilst People's College would be utilized as an ordinary Elementary School for the district, in place of St. James' and St. Nicholas' Trust Schools which had been declared unfit for use. After the present pupils had finished their courses, the Ropewalk School, a girls' school in the former girls' department of People's College since August 1904, would become an Infants and Junior Mixed School. The first floor of the existing Higher Elementary School would become a Senior Girls' School and the ground floor would become a Senior Boys' School, with the intention to combine them into a Senior Mixed School as soon as possible. The headmaster of the College, still Edmund Francis, was transferred to the High Pavement School, taking his more advanced pupils with him.

In 1907 People's College was yet again re-named, this time as a special Commercial and Technical Centre, where the courses would be geared to help those students from the former Evening Continuation School to have access to the higher education available at the University College. This must have been a popular route, the City's Prospectus for Evening Institutes for the session 1913-14, for example, has a full page advertisement for the University College. Its main heading is:

ORGANISED COURSES

at University College, following on the completion

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of the Course at People's College.

At a lower level, in the years before the first World War, examinations set by a variety of bodies: the Royal Society of Arts, the Board of Education, the National Union of Teachers, and the East Midlands Educational Union were all taken by the Colleges' students.

After the war the evening College, like most similar institutions in the 1920s, was always struggling to make progress in a long period of financial restraint. For the new term starting in January 1925 Assistant Instructors had their rate of payment cut. The 1930s brought improvement and expansion when the National Certificate Courses in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering were introduced. The College provided the first year tuition for courses which were completed at the University College. The East Midlands Educational Union started to offer grouped courses and these proved to be extremely popular.

In 1925 the College schools were re-organised when part of the senior department was transferred to the Ropewalk and the premises on College Street became a boys' Central School. Another re-organisation took place in 1932, this time senior boys from various schools were accommodated. This arrangement lasted until 1941 when the school closed because of reduced numbers. The Ropewalk School had closed in 1934. In 1942 the College premises became a Junior Technical School for the building and allied trades. As a result of the 1944 Education Act it became a secondary school for the same purposes in 1945 and finally closed as a school in 1965.

During the Second World War the College was almost as busy as in normal conditions; special courses were put on for members of the armed forces. Commercial and technical classes were provided by the College which was designated an Evening Institute. Subsequent to the passing of the 1944 Education Act other matters changed. In 1945 Clarendon College took over the commercial classes. People's College started to provide day release classes for apprentices. First were those for the building trades, later, in 1946-7, similar arrangements were made for apprentices in engineering and for young workers in the cinema industry and in the grocery trade. With a secondary day school occupying the premises the day continuation courses were

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held in 17 different buildings in the ten years to 1958. In 1949-50 the People's College Senior Technical Institute was re-named the People's College of Further Education.

1952 was the year of the introduction of the General Certificate of Education, for which People's had 41 students enrolled on a full time course. Strange subjects were appearing on the night school programme: boiler house practice, fire engineering, horology, and pest control. Although new laboratories and workshop facilities were available in Chesterfield Street in 1953, pressure on available teaching space was an ever present problem. The College was undergoing rapid expansion. At last in 1955 plans were approved for new College premises on land below the Castle, the site being between the established Castle Road and the newly cut Maid Marian Way. To help with accommodation problems all advanced work was moved to the Nottingham and District Technical College, with People's College offering courses up to Ordinary National level. In September 1958 a workshop block was completed on the new site. In the following year the new main block, an assembly hall, and the gymnasium became available. Finally in 1965 all the facilities of the new College on its new city centre site were completed and in use. A considerable increase in student numbers following the introduction of block release courses and the transfer of lower level courses from what was now the Nottingham Regional College of Technology forced physical expansion. In 1966 extra workshops and classrooms were added mainly to accommodate the courses in welding, sheet metal work, mechanical engineering, and a Motor Vehicle Technicians course, all hived off from the Regional College.

Some thirty years on and the People's College was at another stage in its development. In 1994 it almost lost its independence through amalgamation. It is not only a survivor but it is an educational establishment with a long history and a strong tradition of serving its community. The College celebrated in 1997 its one hundred and fiftieth birthday knowing it has more than achieved the ambitions and ideals set out for it by the passion of its founder, George Gill, for the "elevation" of his fellow townsfolk, a man who brought his vision into reality through his generosity.

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A decade later People's lost its identity when on the 1st June 2006 Castle College, Nottingham was formed from the merger of Broxtowe College and People's College, Nottingham.

By this time it had 16 main campuses in and around the city; of particular interest was the joint venture with Toyota, a new automotive and engineering centre on the University of Nottingham's Science Park. The College had become an associate college of De Montfort, Nottingham Trent, Bedfordshire, Northampton and Derby Universities, thus providing opportunities to take Higher Education courses locally.

In 2007 plans were developed and presented by the Hawkins Brown architectural partnership to build a new Castle College higher up from the old People's College site towards Castle Gate. But financial constraints, locally and nationally, forced the abandonment of the project. More recently it has been announced that Central College is seeking a site in the centre of Nottingham on which to build 'a new £60 million state-of-the-art hub' for the majority of its courses.

In 2011 South Notts College predatorily acquired Castle College; subsequently the group was re-named South Nottingham College.

With such a widespread educational presence and after professional advice and public consultation on 24th October 2012 the 'consortium' was re-branded Central College, Nottingham. In time the College will be marketed as 'Central'. In advertising at the moment South Nottingham/Central College claims to be the largest college in the area. This knocks New College Nottingham, who at one point claimed to be the largest F.E. College in Western Europe, from top spot.

(It is fortuitous that the City's railway station is named 'Nottingham Midland'!)

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Footnote: At the latest re-naming ceremony on 24th October 2012 the College principal spoke of the success of South Nottingham College over the last 42 years. Thus ignoring, wiping out, the 160+ years of the People's College serving the educational needs of the town, then the city of Nottingham.

Ken Brand (1996, checked and extended 2013)

Some folk claiming long memories recall People's College wanting to take over South Notts!

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