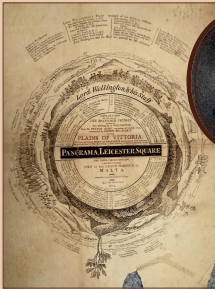


# THE ROYAL POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTION & MULTI-MEDIA VICTORIAN LONDON

The “Polytechnic Institution” (as it then was) was established in 1838, a year after Victoria came to the throne, at a time when British Society was changing rapidly.



London—the “Monster City”—had doubled in size every decade since the turn of the 19th-century, and the middle class was expanding. The West End had become a new centre for their amusement and instruction.



Robert Barker opened the first purpose-built, 90-foot diameter circular “panorama”, to showcase his giant immersive paintings, in Leicester Square in 1793.

Daguerre established his illuminated Diorama near Regent’s Park in 1823, while Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, which opened in 1785, kept inventing new attractions.



Sir David Brewster, who invented the kaleidoscope in 1816, set up the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1831. A year later, he published his *Letters on Natural Magic*, which discussed (among other things visual and “spectral”) optical illusions and the magic lantern. He was at the height of his powers when the Polytechnic opened its doors — moving on, in 1849, to invent a stereoscope for viewing 3-D photographs, which became a Victorian craze.



THE STEREOSCOPE.



Learned institutions and scientific societies had existed since the Royal Society was founded in 1660. Key for the Polytechnic was the Royal Institution, f. 1799 “to introduce new technologies and teach science to the general public”.



The National Repository of Arts and Sciences was established in 1828, to expand that work. It folded quickly, but inspired the National Gallery of Practical Science, known as the “Adelaide Gallery”, which opened in 1832. It was the first public institution to combine amusement and instruction—the model for the Polytechnic.



THE POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTION.



At the same time, transport was improving, to bring tourists and seekers-after-Knowledge to the Polytechnic’s doors. The London to Greenwich railway opened in 1836, followed by London Bridge Station, the first of London’s termini.



The London to Croydon line opened in 1839.



Many of the new omnibuses launched by Mr. Shilbeer in 1829 passed the door of the Royal Polytechnic in Regent Street—as well as those of other attractions.

It became easier for the public to find out what was going on. Guides for Londoners and “Strangers” (i.e. Tourists) began publication. *The Year-book of Facts* appeared in 1839 and *Peter Parley’s Annual* began its long life one year later.

*Punch* was first published in 1841, and the *Illustrated London News* one year later.



*The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 1822-47, featured frequent articles on both new inventions and London’s spectacular public entertainments.



Knowledge was spreading downwards. The reduction of stamp tax made newspapers accessible to “the Millions”, and—thanks to steam presses and wood-pulp paper—they could now be printed more cheaply, too. The first Mechanics’ Institute was established in Edinburgh in 1821, and Glasgow, London, Liverpool and Manchester followed in quick succession.

This was the environment in which the Polytechnic Institution was born, and the public to which it opened its doors in 1838.