**How the HLSI lectures began**

The lecture programme has always been one of the cornerstones of the HLSI.  It was started within a few weeks of its foundation in January 1839.  At first the lectures took place in the Gate House pub, because the Institution had no premises of its own and had to make do with two rented rooms in Southwood Lane, but in 1840 it moved to South Grove, into the coach house and stables belonging to neighbouring Church House, our home ever since.

The coach house at the front was turned into a library (now the members’ room) and the stables at the back were converted into a lecture theatre (today the library).  The Victoria Hall was then an open stable yard with a well and pump.   The new lecture theatre was filled with steeply rising tiers of benches with no backs – only the Institution’s Vice-Presidents had chairs with backs!  A staircase led up to a gallery, and in one wall there were niches with busts of famous people. Very soon there were complaints about draughts, poor ventilation and the uncomfortable seating, but the room was not refurbished until 1851 when the seats were made more comfortable.  Lord Shaftesbury, politician and philanthropist, was the guest of honour at the opening ceremony and gave a talk on Ragged Schools.  Another thirty years passed before there was enough money to build a proper hall.  After vigorous fund raising, the Victoria Hall was created by roofing in the yard and was formally opened by Baroness Burdett-Coutts.

The first lectures in 1839 dealt with the atmosphere, water, heat, light and electricity.  They were ‘intended to excite an interest in Nature, animate and inanimate; and to display throughout the whole the power, wisdom and goodness of the great lawgiver’.  For a while science subjects predominated, often reflecting the discoveries and inventions of the age.  But, as time passed, the choice of topics widened to include the History of Geography (1839), the Ancient Sports and Pastimes of the People of England (1842), Photography (1854), Remarkable Military Mutinies (1857), Healthy Homes and How to Live in Them (1878), and the Science of Recreation (1885). There were lectures too on Coleridge and Dante.  Edmund Gosse marked the Institution’s Golden Jubilee with a talk on Victorian poetry.

Our aims today are very similar, if a little less missionary!  We offer a wide range of topics: lectures on literature and science, as well as on history, social and political issues, the natural world, education, music and the fine arts.  Some 180 years on, the lectures still attract a large and lively audience.