

“The Bellford Gazette”, Darlington, 1826

IN 1826 Jacob Bell (1810–1859),¹ son of John and Elizabeth Bell of Westminster, and Robert Lawson Ford (1809–1878) son of John and Mary (Lawson) Ford of Lancaster, were, together with some other Friends’ sons, at Henry Frederick Smith’s school at Darlington.² The school seems to have had a good literary tradition, and the diary of schoolboy Thomas Whitwell (for extracts see *Jnl. F.H.S.* 24 (1927), 21–27) mentions “The Phoenix”, which appeared 3 xii 1827 “a magazine to which every member of the Debating Society is expected to send an original piece; it comes out once a month, and the members take it in turn to write it”. Amy Wallis of Darlington reports having seen other similar manuscripts.

Jacob Bell and Robert Lawson Ford edited and wrote a school newspaper called *The Bellford Gazette* which appeared every Tuesday in September 1826, making four weekly issues, each of four pages of manuscript (251 × 203 mm; double columns). The newspaper includes school news, local (and particularly local Friends’) news, the weather, poetry, and an editorial. It is most professionally produced. The writing is good, and not so minuscule as the hands in the Brontë children’s productions with which this might be compared. One may perhaps guess that the drawings are the work of Jacob Bell, who had no little artistic interest, although one cannot rule out the possibility of them being done by Robert Lawson Ford, in whose family similar talent is displayed.

The name of the paper is an allusion to its “printers”—Ford & Bell, Darlington. The punning device of a bell with

¹ *Dictionary of National Biography*; *Jnl. F.H.S.*, 22 (1925), 87–88.

² Henry Frederick Smith (d. 1862) kept school in Darlington 1817–1827. See *Jnl. F.H.S.*, 19 (1922) 105–107, 20 (1923) 25, 22 (1925) 87, 24 (1927) 27–30, 26 (1929) 29–31, and references. The school, described as a “collegiate school” providing a good education “without the exposure of university life”, is said to have been carried on by H. F. Smith’s wife Selfe (Pease) Smith from 1827 until 1831, when the availability of the York schools led to its discontinuance. Further information on the career of H. F. Smith is still to seek.

the inscription "FORD" makes up the centrepiece of the (imitation) newspaper stamp for Four Pence which appears on each of the four issues. The final issue has a coloured bell about to be lowered over a fashionable figure with cocked hat, spectacles and closed umbrella, while the motto beneath reads "Extinctus amabitur idem". Each issue has the banner headline: "Whilst the press is free England shall be so too".

Notwithstanding the short life of the *Gazette*, the first number opened bravely enough, albeit with a sidelong glance at a short-lived predecessor:

To the Public. The editors of this publication take this early opportunity of craving the indulgence & patronage of the public on behalf of the arduous undertaking which they have now taken in hand. Indeed from the favourable manner in which a former work of this kind was received they have no reason to expect anything less than the most generous treatment. They have only to hope that the present work will not meet with so speedy a termination as the last,—that instead of sinking into oblivion in the course of a few weeks & thus blasting the hopes & expectations of those under whose patronage it was carried on—the present publication may (through the indefatigable exertions of its proprietors & the generosity of the public) still remain to enlighten the minds of the illiterate, convey useful information to those among whom it will be circulated & that it may increase in merit & reputation as it gains experience.

(No. 1, pp. 1-2)

This preliminary announcement continues for some paragraphs, and is finally signed:

by the devoted servants of the public—Ford & Bell. P.S. Scandal, profanity & libels are considered beneath the dignity of this paper.

(No. 1, p. 2)

One item of news in the first issue concerned the Darlington Debating Society, which resumed its sittings on August 26 "after its long adjournment", covering the summer holiday. Indeed, reports of the weekly Saturday meetings of the Debating Society form one of the major items in the *Gazette*. No. 2 reports the debate on September 9 on the subject "Is a man who comes into a foreign land & unconsciously offends its laws amenable to those laws?" "The Reverent [spelling was not impeccable with Bell or Ford] James

Cumming & Owen Flintoff¹ Esqr.” were orator and respondent respectively.

Orator W. Bainbridge and respondent N. Lloyd led the next debate on a motion that “the condition of a condemned criminal is more pitiable than that of the shipwrecked mariner”, which is reported in No. 3. In the final issue of the *Gazette* W. Nevins² and Mr. Hornor argued whether “the life of a soldier is happier than that of a sailor”. The result is not recorded, “The want of room makes us conclude our report here”; but the report had found space to give some of William Nevins’s description of the perils which attended the life of a sailor in his own words:

“Sometimes *Sir*” said he, “the boats are so overloaded *Sir* as to sink by the way, or the crew are so distressed *Sir* for want of provisions as to be obliged to eat one another. In consequence of these hardships *Sir* diseases break out among them, & carry off numbers *Sir* leaving the remainder in a deplorably emaciated condition.”

(No. 4, p. 4)

The first issue shows that school activities had begun immediately after the end of the summer holiday:

Miscellany: The Darlington Crickett Club has again commenced playing. Last Saturday the members met on their ground, & a short but vigorous game ensued; after which the gentlemen amused themselves in various gymnastic exercises & many displayed their bodily strength & agility to great advantage in wrestling &c.

(No. 1, p. 3)

Physical education was well supported at the school, and there is a diagram of a frame set up for exercises:

Gymnastics: The stupendous machine which is now erected in the court yard has engaged the attention of the neighbourhood for some time. It is upwards of 23 feet high & nearly 20 feet broad. The Gentlemen have experienced great pleasure in climbing

¹ Owen Flintoff, son of John and Ann Flintoff, Hunslet Lane, Leeds; born 13 vii 1811; married Ann Alder of Finchley; M.A. (Trinity College, Cambridge) 1838; barrister-at-law; chief justice, Sierra Leone, 15 x 1840; drowned at the Gambia, 12 iii 1841. S. B. Foster, *Wilson of High Wray*, 1890, p. 177.

² William Nevins, son of John Jowitt and Hannah (Birkbeck) Nevins, of Leeds; born 18 x 1811; married Caroline Anne Willis, dau. of John Willis, 1841; rector of Minningsby, Lincs, 1843–1878. S. B. Foster, *Wilson of High Wray*, 1890, p. 175.

the ropes &c. We have endeavoured to give some idea of it by a plate [illustration 47 × 60 mm].

(No. 4, p. 3)

Leaving aside the facetious reports of local happenings which would require unravelling and probably some intimate local knowledge to sort them out satisfactorily, the first number contains examples of the general and of the local news reported:

On Sunday the 27th August a luminous ball of fire was seen descending with great rapidity towards the earth in a direction from East to West . . . It was at first thought to be a bengal light, but was afterwards found to have been a very beautiful meteor as it was seen at Glasgow & other places at the same time, viz. a little before nine o'clock in the evening.

(No. 1, pp. 3-4)

Deaths: On 14th inst. Nathan Robson¹ of this town after an illness of some months.

(No. 1, p. 4)

The following announcement appears in No. 3:

Spectacles, Spy Glasses, &c.

As it has lately been the fashion to wear these "useful appendages to imperfect vision" we take the liberty of informing the public that such articles may be obtained at Thompson's, High Row, Darlington, where also may be had umbrellas & parasols of various kinds for screening the countenance not only from wind sun & rain, but also from public observation.²

(No. 3, p. 1)

Even during the short life of *The Bellford Gazette* other literary activity was taking place at the school. No. 3 draws attention to a rival weekly paper "The Paul Pry", and also to a proposed monthly:

We also understand that a Monthly Magazine, is likely soon to set afloat among the literate of Darlington Academy. The tendency of this publication will be to promote learning & improvement & we sincerely desire its success & prosperity, & we doubt not that it will be attended with ultimate benefit.

We have since heard that it is to be called the "Portfolio".

(No. 3, p. 1)

¹ See *Jnl. F.H.S.*, 19 (1922), 105-106.

² It would appear that this is the shop of James Thompson, silversmith and clock and watchmaker, and his brother Joseph Thompson "a cunning artizan and a skilfull workman in brass and the frail metals", although both brothers had died a little before this date.

In conclusion, if circumstantial evidence were still needed of the identity of the Darlington Academy where *The Bellford Gazette* was produced, one need look only to the last page of No. 4 (dated 26 September) for the announcement of the birthday of Henry Frederick Smith (27 September):

We are happy to announce that tomorrow will be the birthday of the Governor of the establishment, & the neighbourhood are in anxious expectation of a *fine* day.

(No. 4, p. 4)

The paper is in an admirable state of preservation, having remained in the possession of the Ford family since it was written, just short of 150 years ago. The late Eleanor M. Ford of Leeds presented it to the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, in 1974, and there it is now preserved as Leeds University MS. 357.

It may be permissible to guess that Eleanor Ford's grandfather, Thomas Pease (1816–1884) may have been among the original readers of the paper which was the joint “journalistic” production of her husband Gervase Lawson Ford's grandfather; that is, if the manuscript memoir of Thomas Pease described in *Jnl. F.H.S.* 25 (1928) 84–85 is correct in saying that Thomas Pease first went to the Darlington school in 1822, and not in 1827 (as one might be led to surmise from the entry for 20 ix 1827 in Thomas Whitwell's schoolboy diary, “A boy named T. Pease from Leeds has come” (*Jnl. F.H.S.* 24 (1927) 24).

A medal recently given to the Brotherton Library among other historical relics from the Ford family of Adel has connections with H. F. Smith. On one side there is a man with a book in his hand seated at a table on which is a globe; on the other side—within a border of laurel leaves and the name H F SMITH, there is inscribed ‘1st Prize for Essay on War, 1826’. The most likely suggestion for its origin seems to be that it was a medal presented to Robert Lawson Ford for an essay at the school.

I am grateful for the assistance of Amy E. Wallis of Darlington with references and helping to identify the people mentioned in this paper.

R. S. MORTIMER