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1. LITERARY DISCOVERIES IN THE BROOKS COLLECTION

An examination of the Society's Brooks Manuscript Collection has revealed the presence of a number of unpublished letters by eminent persons, the significance of which appears hitherto to have remained unrecognised.

During the course of research into the work of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, I noted that an autograph letter by Shelley was listed as being held at Northumberland Record Office as part of the Brooks Collection.¹ Upon obtaining permission to examine this, I found that the document was a double-sided manuscript letter written entirely in Shelley's own hand. Subsequent research showed the letter to be unpublished, and consultation with authorities such as Dr Bruce Barker-Benfield of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, showed it to be genuine. A transcript subsequently appeared, with the Society's permission, in the *Times Literary Supplement* and a full account of the discovery and authentication of the letter is due for publication in the *Review of English Studies*.² Some months later, an account of a group of letters from Lord Byron and his family, which are also in the Collection, was published in the *TLS*.³

Further examination of the Collection revealed dozens of other manuscript letters and notes written by important historical figures from the world of literature, politics, and the sciences. These include an Elizabethan parliamentary warrant signed by Lord Burleigh, a Treasury note from Sir Isaac Newton in his capacity as Master of the Royal Mint, a military order from the Duke of Marlborough, an unpublished poem by Felicia Hemans, and numerous other formal letters, signed official documents, and hastily scribbled notes from

figures as diverse as Charles Dickens, Jenny Lind, and Edward Jenner. Although the contents of the collection has been catalogued to some extent, the significance and historical value of the individual documents (other than their value as autographs) has hitherto remained unrecognised.

The Brooks Collection consists of a dozen large leather-bound albums. The various autograph documents are gummed into the leaves of the volumes, in alphabetical order by the subject's surname, and are often accompanied by pictures, cuttings from newspapers and books, and other ephemera. The handwritten Donations Book held in the Society's library at the Black Gate records that the collection of 'Portraits & Autographs & Letters' was presented to the Society by Mr J. C. Brooks V.P. on 31st January 1894. The gift is also recorded in the minutes of the Society's meeting which took place on that date.⁴ The collection is there described as;

A magnificent and extremely valuable collection of portraits and autograph letters ... including portraits and autographs of our sovereigns from Henry VII to Victoria (except Mary and Edward VI) ... [and] most of the presidents of the United States.⁵

A letter from Mr Brooks was read to the meeting in which he stated the conditions under which the gift was made; the proposer and seconder of a vote of thanks both noted the financial, as well as the historical, value of the gift, which was then estimated at £1500. The donation was subsequently acknowledged in the report for that year, which states: "The council gratefully records its high appreciation of the gift, by Mr J. C. Brooks, one of the vice-presidents, of his large and valuable collection of portraits and autographs."⁶

John Crosse Brooks was born at Chatham in 1812, where his father held a government

appointment in the naval yard.⁷ He was educated at Bowes Hall school in Yorkshire – a rival establishment to the one notoriously portrayed as Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Brooks himself later wrote of his alma mater as being of; "...a noble appearance; but as to its inside comforts, I must remain silent." Indeed, he was removed from the school when, upon his return home one holiday, his back was found to be covered with scars.

In 1830, Brooks came further north to the Tyne to start work as a clerk and draughtsman in the shipyard of William Rea at Walker. As the industry converted from the use of wood to that of iron and steel for shipbuilding, the yard was taken over by a Mr Coutts of Aberdeen. Brooks was by now a book-keeper, and found himself working in the company of Charles Mitchell and William Swan, both of whom were later to achieve some degree of eminence on the Tyneside industrial scene.

Brooks' career prospered, and he became owner and manager of a number of vessels trading from the Tyne to Europe, to which he travelled frequently. From early youth, he had been a keen collector of coins, engravings, and works of art of various kinds. The gift from an uncle of a collection of autographs would seem to have been the basis of the collection he was later to present to the Society. During the course of a long life, Brooks added to this, as is suggested by the presence of what appear to be cuttings from auction sale catalogues alongside many letters in the collection. So far, a search of auction catalogues at the British Library has failed to link any item in the collection to a specific sale.

Having lived for most of his adult life in Wallsend, Brooks retired to a house at 14 Lovaine Place, Newcastle, in 1882. He died at that address, aged 85, on 13th March 1897.

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¹ D. C. Sutton (ed.), *Location Register of English Literary Manuscripts and Letters: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, II (K-Z), London: British Library, 1995, 862.

² C. Goulding, "Shelley from Pisa", *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 July 1999.

³ C. Goulding, "From Byron to Babbage", *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 October, 1999.

⁴ *PSAN*², 6 (1893–1894), 130.

⁵ Current members of the Society have advised that most of the autographs of US Presidents went missing in the 1970s – apparently stolen by an American student.

⁶ Report for the year 1894 in *AA*², 17 (1895), xi.

⁷ The following details are extracted from Brooks' autobiography in *AA*², 19, 143–6, where there is also a portrait photograph.

2. PUBLIC HIRE CHAIRS IN NEWCASTLE

It appears probable that Newcastle was served by public hire chairs ('sedans') for at least a century (fig. 1). For part of that time they may have been the main, if not the only, form of public transport. Sydney Middlebrook implies so in his history: 'In Pilgrim Street, just below Anderson Place, stood a row of sedan chairs waiting for hire.'¹ As late as 1838 there were few hackney coaches and no cabs in the town. 'Consequently the sedan chairs which Hodgson said had been much in use in Newcastle at the beginning of the [nineteenth] century were a long time in disappearing from the streets.'²

The 'Hodgson' referred to was the Reverend J. Hodgson and the authority his *Picture of Newcastle* which first appeared in 1807.³ By the time the second edition was published in 1812 Newcastle's population, according to the census of the previous year, was 27,587, making it one of the 15 English provincial cities and towns with more than 25,000 people.⁴ In size and population however it still remained far smaller than London. The capital's relentless growth, to 864,845 inhabitants in 1801, had for some time been outstripping the range of its sedan chairs no matter how stalwart their bearers. In April 1791 Horace Walpole had written to Mary Berry: 'Indeed the town is so extended, that the breed of [sedan] chairs is almost lost; for Hercules and Atlas could not carry anybody from one end of this enormous

capital to the other.⁵ All the same, hire chairs lasted in London for another 30 years before succumbing at last to their long-established rivals, the hackney coaches and to upstart ones like the cabriolets. The last stand for them was in St. James's where six or seven chairs could still be had up to 1821.

In a number of provincial cities, not least in Bath, and Edinburgh, where topography and social considerations specially favoured the continuance of chair transport, they lasted until the 1850s, and Aberdeen and Peterborough certainly had one public chair until about 1862.⁶ Even where public chairs were no more, or had never plied, examples of the more elegantly finished private variety could still be seen in the 1860s and later, bearing genteel ladies like those of 'Cranford' (otherwise Knutsford) where a chair that once belonged to Lady Stanley – but was graciously lent on occasion to respectable persons of her acquaintance – is borne in procession every May Day.

Public hire chairs first appeared in London as early as 1636, inspired by those of Naples, and by 1726 the number authorised to ply in London and Westminster was 400. Bath and Edinburgh began to be served by hire chairs in the 1670s. Elsewhere their introduction came later, sometimes well into the next century. Unfortunately we have no firm evidence for their arrival in Newcastle but an Act of 1763 for 'lighting the streets and other places and maintaining a regular and nightly watch within the town and county of Newcastle upon Tyne' included detailed provisions for regulating hackney coachmen and chairmen, cartmen, porters and Tyne watermen.⁷ Clearly Newcastle already had a service of unregulated hire coaches and chairs by then. On and from 24 June 1763 the mayor and aldermen of Newcastle, or any 'three or more of them', were authorised to license 'all or any persons who shall keep any glass chair [another name for a sedan because of its windows] to be let out for hire within the town or its liberties or precincts.' Each chairman was to pay not more than one shilling, and not fewer than ten chairs were to be licensed. Each licence was to last a year.

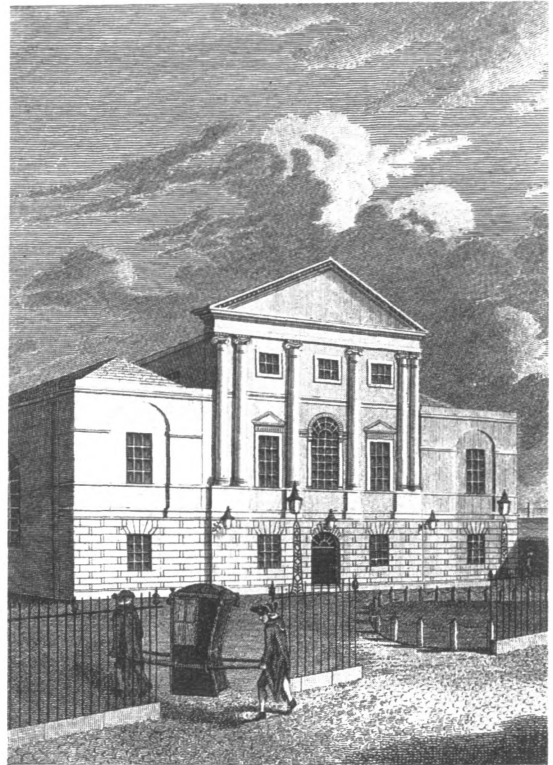


Fig 1. A sedan chair outside the Old Assembly Rooms; detail from an engraving in John Brand's The history . . . of . . . Newcastle upon Tyne (1789) (courtesy of Newcastle City Library)

Anyone letting or carrying a chair without a licence was fined 13s. 4d. for each offence. Chairmen were to have such stands as were directed or pay 10s. for not complying. Offenders who could not pay the fine – 'to be levied by distress and sale of his goods and chattels' – were to be imprisoned.

Passengers were allowed to stop the chair carrying them as often as they needed but not more than for a total of ten minutes in each 6d. fare. Any chairman refusing to carry a fare or demanding more than the Act allowed, or abusing or otherwise insulting a passenger, faced a fine of 10s. Any passenger refusing payment or who 'shall wilfully cut, deface, or break a chair' was to award 'reasonable satisfaction' to the aggrieved party when brought before a Justice.

Otherwise a warrant of distress was levied on his goods and chattels or he was imprisoned for one month 'or until satisfaction be made'.

The Justices assessed and rated chair hire fares at Quarter Sessions from time to time. No public chairman was required to carry a chair beyond the Barras Bridge, Gallowgate Pant, the Infirmary, the Forth House, the Skinner Burn or the Rope Walk and the end of Sandgate. These limits coincided pretty much with those of the built-up area. On the other hand a public chairman could not hinder anybody from employing a chairman or other persons to carry his or her private chair. Registers of licensed chairmen could be consulted in the register office.

A summary list of Newcastle fares, dating to 1790, has been published in this Society's *Proceedings*.⁸ and a bound collection of documents and cuttings in the Newcastle City Library preserves an elaborate chart of fares and distances between public places in the town; this was issued from the Mayor's Chamber on 17 November 1813.⁹ The charges then ranged from 6d., for any distance not exceeding 300 yards, to 2/- for any distance above 1800 yards but not exceeding 2100 yards. For carriage after midnight a double fare was charged whilst children under nine were carried at half fare. The entries are listed – as for a number of other cities and towns – in meticulous detail under three columns, giving distances of streets and places both from each other and from the Mansion House, Theatre and Assembly Rooms. The farthest distance quoted is 2192 yards, from Egypt to the Assembly Rooms; 'Egypt' was approximately on the site of the present Tyne Tees Studios in City Road and a public house nearby, the Egypt Cottage, still preserves the name.

For how long did public chairs ply in Newcastle streets? A correspondent to *Notes & Queries* for 24 October 1885 wrote that a hire chair was said to have been still in use in Newcastle up to eight months previously. If so – and the allegation is unlikely – it must have been the last of the fleet owned by the Elgey family. The *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* recorded the funeral on 31 January 1890 of Mary Elgey

'of Copland Terrace, widow of Michael Elgey, both well-known and highly respected persons in their time.' The paper comments on the former popularity of sedans in Newcastle long after hackney coaches were introduced on 23 January 1824 – 'there are still persons alive who can remember their use'. It adds that Mary Elgey claimed to be the last person in Newcastle to let chairs for hire. (No doubt in all Britain too).

In February 1890 the *Chronicle's* editor provided further information: 'An interesting letter has been sent me from Mr Henry Elgey, of Bell's Court, whose mother, the last of the sedan chair proprietors, died recently. He states that his mother's address was for nearly all her life, in Bell's Court, Pilgrim Street. Her father, Mr Michael Elgey, succeeded his grandfather in the sedan chair business, and he estimates that the family carried on the profession of proprietors of that class of vehicle for upwards of a hundred years. The five sedan chairs which his father kept were most liberally patronised, and he can recollect in his youth as many as forty to fifty orders in for one ball night at the Assembly Rooms in Westgate Road. The chairs were frequently let to Vicar Moody, of the Vicarage, Westgate Road.' The letter continues: 'All the members of the late Richard Grainger's family were, at one time or another, carried to church in them to be christened, and many of the leading families in Newcastle patronised them on baptismal and marriage occasions. When the old Mansion House, in the Close, was in its glory, the sedan chair was in its glory too, and the chair-bearers were so well-known that they were frequently employed as pall-bearers at the funerals of gentlefolk belonging to the district. The men who carried the chairs were generally steady fellows; they wore blue coats with red facing and horn buttons, a tippet or large collar, and a tall hat. From the ends of the poles which ran through the sides of the chair there were generally large horn lanterns suspended, and the whole turnout was about as picturesque as it could well be.'

Michael Elgey, of 21 Bell's Court, and Richard Rollins, of 9 St Andrews Court, were listed

as 'chairmen' in the 1865–66 edition of Ward's *Directory*, which also lists 15 cab and coach proprietors.¹⁰ One of the Elgey chairs, probably the last survivor, had been borne in procession through the streets on 10 June 1881 during the George Stephenson centenary celebrations. Unfortunately no photograph of it on parade seems to have survived. It is, however, described in *The Newcastle Daily Chronicle* for 17 December 1898 as being a black (leather) vehicle, studded with brass nails, with crimson curtains to the windows, and decorated with crimson flags at the four corners and the top – in other words, flags apart, a good solid common-or-garden public hire sedan. It may have been this Elgey chair that passed into the keeping of Atkinson & Philipson, the noted coach builders of Pilgrim Street, Newcastle, whose business just outlasted World War I. Two illustrations of it appear in this Society's *Proceedings*.¹¹ The second picture, clearly a posed 'works' photograph, shows two bowler-hatted men, probably foremen of the firm, holding open the door for a lady in black to emerge.

As late as 1877, two years before the first horse tram ran in Newcastle, the city directory still lists Henry Elgey as 'sedan chairman'.¹² If so, he and his partner must have been the very last in the business. It is, however, more likely that the editor had not brought the entry up to date. Alas for romance, for in the 1879 edition Elgey appears as a 'chimney sweep'.¹³ *Quantum mutatus . . . !*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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¹ S. Middlebrook, *Newcastle upon Tyne: Its Growth and Achievement*, Newcastle (1950), 150.

² *ibid.*, 226.

³ J. Hodgson, *The Picture of Newcastle upon Tyne*, Newcastle (1st ed., 1807); *ibid.*, 2nd ed., (1812), 114.

⁴ Middlebrook, *op. cit.*, 321.

⁵ W. S. Lewis (ed.), *Horace Walpole: Correspondence*, London, 11 (1944), 248–50.

⁶ For discussions see: Bath: T. Fawcett, "Chair transport in Bath", *Bath History* 2 (1988), 113–38. Cheltenham: G. Wilson, "Public hire chairs in Cheltenham", *Cheltenham Local History Journal*, 9 (1992–3), 4–8. Edinburgh: J. Jamieson, "The sedan chair in Edinburgh", *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 9 (1916), 177–234. Exeter: G. Wilson, "Public hire chairs in Exeter", *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 36, pt. 8 (1990), 265–9 and *ibid.*, pt. 9 (1991), 314–21. Taunton: G. Wilson, "Public hire chairs in Taunton", *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, 33, pt. 334 (1991), 84–7. Weymouth: G. Wilson, "Public hire chairs in Weymouth", *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, 33, pt. 339 (1994), 289–94.

⁷ J. Brand, *History and Antiquities of the Town and County of the Town of Newcastle upon Tyne*, Newcastle (1789), I, 20.

⁸ "Fares of the chairmen in Newcastle", *PSAN*³, 1 (1903–4), 162.

⁹ In volume 1 of the Newcastle City Library collection: T. Wilson, *Collections Relating to the History of Newcastle upon Tyne from 1738 to 1851* (12 vols.).

¹⁰ R. Ward, *Ward's Directory Comprehending the Town of Newcastle . . . 1865–6*, Newcastle (1865), 179, 225.

¹¹ –Phillips, "Manners and customs in our grandfathers' days", *PSAN*³, 3 (1907–9), 16–22, fig. facing 18.

¹² R. Ward, *Ward's Directory Comprehending the Town of Newcastle . . . 1877–8*, Newcastle (1877), 396.

¹³ R. Ward, *Ward's Directory Comprehending the Town of Newcastle . . . 1879–80*, Newcastle (1879), 589.

