

JAMES ECCLESTON
(Headmaster of Bishop Vesey's
Grammar School 1843-1849)
by
Keith Jordan

Following the tragic death of the incumbent Headmaster, Charles Barker, towards the end of 1842, Richard Sadler, the Treasurer to the Trustees, arranged for an advertisement for the vacant post to be taken out in no fewer than nine separate newspapers, at a cost of £3. 1s. 3d. These appeared at the beginning of 1843, during the months of January and February.

The advertisement read, as follows:-

“Sutton Coldfield Grammar School, Warwickshire. A Master for this school is Wanted. He must be of the established Church of England and a Lay Graduate of one of the Universities. Candidates are requested to forward their Testimonials, under seal, on or before the 25th day of March, addressed ‘Mr Richard Sadler, Secretary to the Trustees of the Grammar School, Sutton Coldfield’, on application to whom any further information may be had.”

The response to the advertisement was overwhelming, with a total of 66 applicants. Unfortunately, however, the advertisement was couched in a rather vague manner to say the least. It failed to provide even basic information, such as the amount of salary, the number of pupils being taught at the school, what accommodation was on offer and the type of degree considered appropriate. It even neglected to mention that the post was actually for the headmastership!

Richard Sadler was therefore inundated with enquires requesting the answers to these questions and many more besides.

Owing to other weighty matters appertaining to the school, necessitating several trips down to London during the summer period, Sadler was not able to give his full attention to the vacant post until the early part of August. By that time, many of the applicants were getting extremely anxious, due to the fact that they had heard nothing from the school and several were requesting the return of their Testimonials.

Sadler finally convened a meeting of the Trustees to elect someone to the post on the 8th August. At this juncture, none of the candidates had been interviewed and it was therefore decided to appoint one of the applicants on the strength of their Testimonial alone.

Adding to the overall disarray was the fact that only five of the Trustees were in a position to actually attend the meeting. However, a decision was subsequently reached and James Eccleston who, at the time, was residing at 46, Belgrave Place, London, was offered the position.

It will be shown that the unsatisfactory way in which the whole matter was handled, resulted in a decision everyone later came to regret.

Sadler was instructed by the Trustees to ask James Eccleston to commence his duties on the 2nd October 1843. The Trustees also considered a letter from George Meaby, the master of the Corporation Upper School and an unsuccessful candidate for the headmastership, applying for the post of undermaster. This was supported by testimonials from the Rector and other local dignities, but they deferred a decision at the time.

The new headmaster was born in Carrickfergus, County Antrim in 1816, where his parents had settled from Lancashire. Carrickfergus is one of Northern Ireland's oldest towns and is situated on the shore of Belfast Lough, some eleven miles from Belfast itself.

He was educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution.

In 1834, he was a resident master at Belmont School, near Dublin and from there he moved to Trinity College, Dublin. He graduated with a B.A. degree in 1837, with the highest classical honour in the university and obtained the Divinity Professor's Premium in 1838 and the Elvington Theological Prize the following year.

He subsequently taught for a year at King's College School in the Strand, which formed part of the University of London.

On the 18th June 1835, when he was just 19 years of age, James Eccleston married Lucinda M Walker in Ireland.

In 1841, he took up a post with the African Civilization Society, whose chairman was the celebrated philanthropist and brother-in-law of Elizabeth Fry, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton. During Eccleston's two years with the Society, its principal exploit was an expedition, consisting of three steamers of the British Navy, under the leadership of Captain H D Trotter, up the river Niger in Africa. Unfortunately, the expedition did not prove to be a success, as it was forced to return, due to several of its members succumbing to fatal illnesses.

Later, Sir Thomas Buxton recommended that James Eccleston was *"Fit for any office connected with the Abolition of the Slave Trade"*, which would have looked extremely bizarre on the curriculum vitae of a schoolmaster!

It would appear that the new headmaster visited Sutton shortly after his appointment was confirmed because a black-edged note from Mr Barker's widow, dated the 14th August 1843, read:-

"Mrs Barker will be glad to see Mr Eccleston and Mr Sadler at either 12.00 or 2.00 o'clock, if equally convenient to them, as she is intending to take an early dinner at one."

One immediate problem which Eccleston faced was the question of the fixtures and fittings at the School House. In June 1843, Mrs Barker wrote to Richard Sadler to say that her late husband had paid £81 17s 5d (the equivalent to approximately £5,000 today) for the fixtures and that the greater part of them remained as they were.

One of Barker's executors, George Whateley, a Birmingham solicitor, had a list of the items drawn up and proposed that Eccleston should buy them at a price fixed by an independent valuer. Whateley's attitude was somewhat aggressive, which led Sadler to consider a claim against Barker's estate for dilapidations.

Eccleston subsequently wrote a letter to Richard Sadler on the 19th August 1843, in which he stated:-

"I quite agree with you as to Mr Whateley's remarks, nor indeed do I think that the whole thing has been managed quite as I should like on their part and the result is that I am already of the opinion that we should claim for dilapidations."

Eccleston's letter also contained a request and this gave an insight of things to come in the future. He said:-

"In the hurry and excitement of leaving Sutton, I neglected to say anything more about the money you were good enough to say you would lend me on the security of rents. Perhaps you could let me have £100 for the present and send me any form which you think necessary to be signed, at whatever rate of interest may be fair and proper."

Eccleston did in fact receive the £100 he asked for and this became the first of many loans which Richard Sadler personally made to him. At this point in time Eccleston also wrote to George Whateley agreeing to take the fixtures and fittings, which included items such as curtain rods, roller blinds, umbrella stands, hat pegs and bell pulls. Upon receiving this letter, Whateley immediately wrote to Richard Sadler asking Eccleston to purchase certain other fixtures at the School House or he would include them in a proposed sale by auction of the furniture at the School House. The other fixtures included, amongst other items, chimney pieces, water closets, fire grates, locks and keys etc. Sadler disputed Whateley's right to sell the items, on the grounds that they belonged to the Trustees. This was only right and proper as, based on today's view of the situation, these would be regarded as part of the structure and would have caused damage to the fabric of the building if an attempt were made to remove them.

Richard Sadler, at this juncture, proposed to James Eccleston that he should take up residence in Sutton prior to Mrs Barker's sale and that, until Mrs Barker had vacated

the School House, he and his family should lodge with him at his residence in the High Street. At the time of his appointment Eccleston was married with two young children and so it was an extremely generous offer on Richards' behalf, especially so as he himself was a bachelor and lived with his unmarried sister, Marian.

The Ecclestons took up residence in Sutton on the 8th September and stayed with Richard Sadler and his sister pending Mrs Barker holding her sale. After the sale was completed Mrs Barker moved in with Mrs Webb at 'The Rookery' in Lichfield Road.



Fig. 1 Richard Sadler's House at No. 36 High Street, from a watercolour by A E Everitt, circa 1850.

Richard Sadler's fine house was built in red brick, in Flemish Bond. The detail of the original portions was in a red sandstone, sourced locally. The door casing was also in sandstone and the building was flanked by two Doric pilasters, with simple mouldings at the base and capital. The property had a plain metal railing around the front, dividing it off from the pavement.



Fig. 2 Front elevation of 36 High Street, following a later survey of the property in 1977.

On the 11th September Mrs Barker sent a message, together with a key to the School House, to James Eccleston at the High Street. Only one key was supplied and Eccleston had to buy the other at the sale!

Eccleston was obliged to spend a considerable sum at the sale, more than he could afford and Sadler had to loan him £97. 4s. 9d towards the total cost. On Sadler's advice, he did not bid for the permanent fixtures, in the hope that Whateley would not consider it worth his while to remove them. Whateley, however, threatened to do so and, on the 18th September Richard Sadler sent off a request to Messrs Austen and Hobson in London for Counsel's opinion on the ownership of the fixtures and on the question of dilapidations.

Thomas J Platt Q.C. advised that Barker's executors were entitled to items such as grates and bells as 'tenants fixtures', but not the chimney pieces, locks and bolts which 'constituted portions of the inhabited building', and for the wrongful removal of which the trustees could "Recover compensation in damages for the injury resulting from that Waste to the Reversion." Counsel also advised that Barker was bound to keep the School House in tenantable repair and that his executors were liable to the Trustees for any breach of that obligation. Barker, however, was under no obligation in respect of repairs to the other properties on the school estate.

On the day that James Eccleston took possession of the School House two advertisements appeared in Aris's Birmingham Gazette, as follows:-

"Persons desirous of placing boys in a Grammar School to apply to the Headmaster and that the Headmaster intends to take a limited number of pupils as boarders."

Later in the month similar notices were put in the Midland Counties Herald and Birmingham General Advertiser, together with an advertisement for an assistant master. It appeared therefore that George Meaby, the master at the Corporation Upper School, who was not equal to the position of headmaster, was not accepted as the assistant master either.

On the 25th September the Trustees met at the 'Three Tuns' Hotel and heard that eight boys had been admitted to the school as foundation scholars. The boys concerned were William Felton, George Fowler Bodington, Alfred Bodington, Richard Bodington, Henry Blick, Charles Edward Elkins, Francis Wilmot and Robert Ellis.

William Felton Junior was the son of William Felton Senior, who established his own school in 1823 in the High Street when he was only in his mid-thirties.

Young William showed a great aptitude for learning and later achieved a 1st Class B.A. Degree from Trinity College, Dublin which, by coincidence, was the same university his Headmaster attended earlier.

The three Bodington boys were the sons of Dr. George Bodington, the owner of a Sanitorium in Maney named 'Driffold House'.



Fig. 3 Rear view of 'Driffold House', Maney.

Bodington Memorial Gardens were opened in 1953 as recognition of his pioneering achievements in the treatment of pulmonary consumption.

George Bodington later moved to the 'White House', also in Maney, but this was subsequently demolished in 1935 to make way for the Odeon Cinema on the Birmingham Road.

He was a Sutton magistrate and became Warden of Sutton in both 1852 and 1853. His son, George Fowler Bodington, followed in his father's footsteps and also became a doctor.

For more detailed information on Dr. Bodington, please refer to '*Dr. George Bodington 1799-1882: A Victorian physician ahead of his times.*' In the 'Proceedings' of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, Volume 11, issued Summer 2013.

During the latter part of 1843, James Eccleston received five more loans from Richard Sadler namely:-

- £ 33.3s.9d to pay a bill on the 14th October.
- £ 20.0s.0d cash on the 4th November.
- £ 49.5s.2d to pay a bill on the 6th November.
- £100.0s.0d cash on the 22nd November
- and
- £ 25.1s.2d for insurance on the 21st December.

On the 4th December the school was the subject of an article in Aris's Gazette, which read:-

"This valuable endowment which, from causes not very creditable to those in whom its management was formerly vested, had but very imperfectly fulfilled the object of its beneficent founder, Bishop Vesey is now placed upon a footing from which the inhabitants of Sutton Coldfield expect to enjoy considerable benefits. Its sphere of utility had, indeed, been but little commensurate with its means, but, greatly to the honour of the present Trustees, as well as to their very indefatigable and spirited Treasurer, a thorough investigation has been instituted into the affairs of this dormant seminary, since the decease of the late master Mr Charles Barker and the result has been that, by direction of the Lord Chancellor, a scheme has been drawn up for its future management.

To enable the parishioners to participate in the benefits intended by the reverend founder, the basis of instruction is now enlarged and there is no reason to deny the probability of the Grammar School, under able masters, taking as high a ground as any foundation school in England. Under this scheme of instruction the school has been opened a month and the inhabitants, being alive to the privileges they may enjoy, send their children in increased numbers.

The daily saying the 'De Profundis', it need scarcely be added, is omitted in the Chancellor's Scheme, in as much as it has not been repeated since the Reformation."

A week later, on the 11th December 1843, James Eccleston placed an advertisement in the same paper, which stated:-

"This ancient and valuable Foundation, which will be found to present peculiar advantages (especially to youths from the Colonies) will close on the 23rd instant for the Christmas holidays and recommence on the 22nd January. The house is situated in a very pleasant and healthful position outside the town and close to the manorial park, which is open at all times to the pupils. The town of Sutton lies in the centre of England and within easy drive of the railway terminus at Birmingham, whilst the district around it is exclusively rural in its character.

Terms for Boarders may be learned on application to the Head Master at the School."

To this advertisement was added an editorial note, as follows,

"We are happy to learn that this excellent institution is increasing and likely to increase rapidly and we trust that its talented master will soon be surrounded by a flourishing school."

This was a somewhat sweeping statement, which was soon to be challenged. Two weeks later the paper published a letter from an inhabitant of Sutton Coldfield complaining about the article in question. In the course of his remarks he observed that the Grammar School had, during the last nine months, been the source of great excitement in the parish in consequence of the Trustees, in their new scheme, requiring the parents who sent their sons to the school to pay ten shillings per quarter and not admitting any boy until he could read and write well and understand the first four rules of arithmetic, such payment and qualification being before unknown in the history of the school. The correspondent went on to remark that, as the inhabitants of the town were all but unanimous against these two clauses, the statement seemed like an aggravation of the matter. Furthermore, it was stated that the inhabitants were sending their sons in increased numbers, which was

decidedly wrong, for there had been no increase of scholars since the opening of the school, the number being then and now the same, namely seven boys on the foundation, sons of inhabitants of Sutton Coldfield.

Over the Christmas holiday, the furore appeared to have abated somewhat and James Eccleston made preparations to receive his first boarders. At the same time he wrote to Richard Sadler, as follows:-

“Would it be asking too much to oblige me with £18 to pay for some dormitory furniture from Worcester Street (Birmingham), where they cannot give long credit, as you know. We shall have everything ready for pupils in a few days. Miss Sadler told me that Mr Fowler was disposed to send his sons, but I have not heard from him as yet.”

Sadler duly agreed to allow the loan. A month later he received another letter from the Headmaster.

“I shall feel extremely obliged if you could let me have £20 today, as I have some little accounts to settle in Birmingham tomorrow. Pray excuse this trouble and believe me, ever yours truly.”

Once more Sadler acquiesced, which brought Eccleston's overall debt to £462.19s.10d. The interest payable on this sum, calculated to the 25th March 1844, was a further £9.18s.9d., which represented well over one year's gross income of the whole of the School's Estates. This is roughly equivalent to £61,000 in present day terms.

By the time April arrived, Eccleston had incurred several more debts and he wrote once more to Richard Sadler.

“I should feel extremely obliged if I could have £20 tomorrow to pay the Easter rates and a little account or two in Sutton. If I could manage to give a part of their accounts to the Birmingham people it might satisfy them for the present, as they press a little hard.”

The trades people Eccleston was dealing with regularly were obviously now aware of his propensity to pay his accounts later rather than sooner!

Richard Sadler, however, seemed to have a kinder heart and gave Eccleston £120 from the Lady Day rents, which had fallen due and had been received. He also paid the accrued interest of £9.18s.9d from the rents.

On the 15th April the Governors of the school (previously known as the Trustees) met. During the course of this meeting they were informed that three new boys had been admitted to the school, namely, Frederick Noble Haywood, George Duncombe Perkins and James Martin.

During May, whilst Richard Sadler was away for a few days in London, James Eccleston saw fit to borrow £10 from Miss Sadler. On his return Richard repaid his sister and added the loan to Eccleston's account.

The following month, on the 13th June, Eccleston wrote to Sadler once more.

"I find that I have two notes coming due next week, which together amount to £47. Perhaps, if it were not inconvenient, you could let me have the balance of my loan of £20 on the Rents Account. If you would let me have £27 more, I could pay it when my school payments come in or, if you have no objection, add it to our account, which I shall not however ask for any further increase."

When Sadler failed to respond, Eccleston wrote again:-

"I shall feel much obliged by your letting me have whatever remains on our account and, if at all possible, the remainder of the half year's rents. The income tax might be settled at Michaelmas, if it be finally required."

Sadler still failed to respond, which elicited another letter from Eccleston:-

"I am going into Birmingham tomorrow to pay a Bill and it would oblige me very much if you could let me have this evening £30, which after deducting Rents etc. would be about a £10 fresh loan. This I could repay when Buxton and others settle their accounts at the end of the vacation. I am quite prepared for any arrangement which you may think right to make, at your own leisure."

Sadler, at this point in time, duly paid the £30 and debited the Rent Account, although this made Eccleston overdrawn on this account as well, to the tune of £29.6s.11d. Matters of a financial nature seemed to have settled down after this for a short period, but, on the 3rd November, Eccleston once more wrote to Richard Sadler.

"Will you excuse my sending this note at so late an hour but Mrs E is anxious to get out some things from Birmingham tomorrow and if you could oblige me with £20 tomorrow before 11.00am when the carrier sets off, it would a great convenience to me. Thornelaw has sent me a writ, but I should like to talk of that when I see you. You have not come up to see my Drawing Room yet."

Eccleston received £100 from the Michaelmas rents, which made him £30.11s.10d overdrawn on the Rent Account and Sadler, in addition, loaned him a further £100, presumably to settle Thornelaw's writ. He also paid supplementary bills, including £6.1s.6d for a pig! This brought his personal debt to £581.11s.7d.

Despite these payments, Eccleston wrote again at the beginning of December:-

"I have a small bill to meet on Thursday for which I am not quite provided. Could you let me have the balance of the rents and timber money if I call and I shall consider it a very great favour. It will be a great inconvenience to me if I cannot manage it and, but for this, I would not willingly trouble you. Haywood's bill against me is £7 and I received £15 from you on account of timber."

Whatever Eccleston's failings were when it came to money matters his ability as a teacher did not appear to be in doubt. The annual examination of the school in December 1844, conducted by J C Higgins B.A. of Oxford and Dr. Richard Williamson D.D., the Headmaster of Westminster School, were quite congratulatory.

Williamson, reporting on the first and second classes stated:-

“I found their penmanship very good and their maps singularly well drawn. In Greek and Latin I had great reason to be satisfied with the style of scholarship. As to Arithmetic, I only saw their summing books, which were neatly written. In Geometry, I found that several of the upper boys knew a little of the first book of Euclid and that Haywood promises to make an intelligent mathematician. In Theology, I had not time to examine them.”

J C Higgins said in his report on the third and fourth classes:-

“In Sacred History and the Catechism of the Church, the boys are conversant and instructed to a far greater extent than could possibly have been expected. In Profane History, both Roman and English, their knowledge is most satisfactory. The rudiments of the Latin language have evidently been a matter of the greatest care with their instructor, as the youngest boys are perfectly acquainted with that language, as far as their education has at present proceeded. In Grammar and Bible Knowledge, I think Robinson and Eccleston are both deserving of especial mention. With regard to the Writing, Account Books and Drawing, the most constant attention is evident in the admirable productions of the boys.”

The Governors held their meeting on the 27th December and heard that five more boys had been admitted to the school namely, Robert Wilkins, Joseph Hughes, Edmund Wilmot, Charles Bodington and William Smith.

Mrs Eccleston gave birth to son, James Lester, at the end of 1844 and the baptism took place on the 2nd January 1845, at Holy Trinity Parish Church.

Meanwhile, her husband was still suffering from financial difficulties and he wrote to Sadler four months later, at the end of May:-

“I have been looking over the terms of our account. I do not know exactly how it stands with regards to last year’s rents, or whether the £100 which you gave me on November 22nd last, was on that account or no. Should it not be so, I suppose there may be some little balance from last year after expenses etc. You will thus see that there is still about £20 remaining of the £500 which you were good enough to promise to lend me, but I hope that you will not restrict me too closely to that sum. Another £100 (equivalent to approximately £12,500 in present day terms) would serve me very materially and is not I trust too much to ask from your kindness. I know how many calls you have, but as I only require a start and with ordinary success can easily repay, I trust you will not refuse me.”

The true state of affairs was that Eccleston was now just a few pounds short of owing £600 and Richard Sadler drew the line at this figure.

Around this point in time, in the spring of 1845, Richard Sadler himself married at the mature age for those times of 47. He and his wife Sarah celebrated the birth of two sons over the next four years, namely; Richard Hurst and Ralph Stanley Sadler. The following year his sister Marian also got married to Francis Lloyd and they left Sutton altogether to live in Feltham, Middlesex.

On the 1st July 1845 an article appeared in the *Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondence* relating to James Eccleston and his position at Sutton Coldfield Grammar School.

The report stated, in the usual rather flowery prose of the day, as follows:-

SUTTON COLDFIELD GRAMMAR SCHOOL

“We are rejoiced to learn that our gifted fellow countryman Mr James Eccleston, ex-scholar of the Dublin University, is successfully conducting the ancient and most valuable grammar school in Warwickshire, to which he has been appointed, or should we say selected, out of a list of 70 candidates, comprising some of the first men of their years at Oxford and Cambridge. It is quite exhilarating to find an Irishman so highly distinguished to be confided in by the many excellent and exalted Trustees and Governors of the Sutton Coldfield Grammar School.

We sincerely hope that Mr Eccleston may be enabled to realise his fondest expectations and confidently calculate upon his complete success.

The school is most eligibly situated in a healthful and purely agricultural district, although a convenient distance from Birmingham. Besides the ground attached to the establishment, the manorial park of 2,000 acres, which lies before the house, may be considered as a playground for the pupils, being open to them at all times.

The internal accommodations of the school are of a very superior description and the utmost care is taken to surround the inmates with everything suitable of a gentlemanly character.

The name of Mr Eccleston’s former tutor, Doctor Singer, is an ample guarantee for the care which will be bestowed on the pupils, who may be entrusted to his care. We are inclined to think that some of our fellow citizens will be induced to place their children under the skilful eye of Mr Eccleston, whose advertisement will be found elsewhere.”

Whether this was by way of the paper’s own research or via a prompt from Eccleston himself, is not known. It does seem strange, however, that Eccleston had already been an incumbant in his post for over two years!

It would seem that Eccleston’s lack of financial acumen was not widely known in Sutton circles and he must have been held in high esteem for his capabilities as a teacher because, in October 1845, only two years after his arrival, he was elected to the Corporation.

On the 21st November, Richard Sadler wrote to Eccleston:-

“Your brother’s bill, which I hold for £140, has become due. Am I to send it for presentation and, if so, I must pay it into the Bank today”.

Eccleston replied on the **same day**. A fact that is hard to comprehend now, given the state of our own postal service 175 years later, but it must be remembered that it was much superior then. He remarked:-

“I cannot just at this moment pay off the bill which you hold and I should be very unwilling to press my brother for it if I could avoid it. I should be very much obliged therefore if you would consider it as part of the whole sum which I owe you, which I hope shortly to commence paying off. Perhaps you would therefore let it stand over until I am myself in a position to discharge it and you will confer a great favour on yours ever truly.”

The bill was in the nature of a guarantee of part of Eccleston’s debt to Sadler and, as requested, Sadler did not call it in, even though he must by this time have been aware that Eccleston was chronically incapable of managing his finances.

At the end of the year, it was reported to the Governors that seven more boys had been admitted to the school. Their names were, Francis Blick, Richard Farmer Todd, John Ellison, Matthew Wilkins, Walter Wallis, Henry George Appletree and Joseph Harrison.

Unfortunately, however, the boarding school project had not taken off but Eccleston was still hoping, Micawber-like, for something to turn up. To make matters worse, about this time the Master of the Corporation Upper School also began to advertise for boarders.

By November 1846 Eccleston was short of money again. He wrote to Sadler saying:-

“Will you be good enough to let me have £24, the balance of the rents, by Bearer, as I have a Bill of that amount coming due this day. I think the items in my little note are perfectly correct but, should there be any slight mistake, we can settle it again.”

Richard Sadler duly saw to it that Eccleston received his money even though the rent account was overdrawn at the end of the year, as Eccleston had also spent £34.9s.3d on making a playground for the boys at the school and for repairs to the School House. He had, however, paid Sadler the 5% interest on his personal loan, but nothing towards the repayment of capital.

On a more positive note, the school inspection for 1846 went well, with nothing but praise received for the boys' progress.

More good news followed in 1847, with Eccleston publishing a book entitled '*An Introduction to English Antiquities*', which was published by Longman & Co. of London.

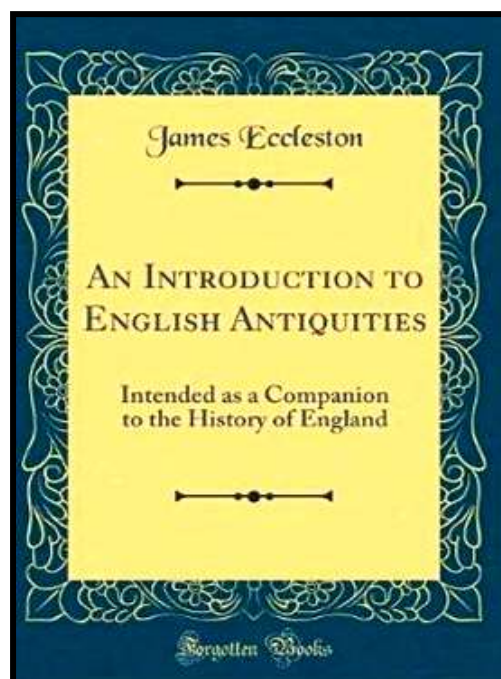


Fig. 4 '*An Introduction to English Antiquities*' by James Eccleston, 1847.

This was followed in December with his wife giving birth to a third son, John Charles William, who was baptised at Holy Trinity Church in March 1848.

At the December 1847 meeting of the Governors, there was only a bare quorum of three; Sir Edmund Hartopp, C B Adderley and John Floyer. Sir John Eardley Wilmot had died during the year and the opportunity to appoint John Shawe Manley of Manley Hall, Weeford in his place, was taken. *(Additional information on John Shawe Manley can be obtained elsewhere on the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group website www.sclhrq.org under 'Manley Hall and the Manley Family').*

The Governors were informed that presently there were 35 boys at the school, 25 being from Sutton. More crucially, however, from the financial point of view, was the fact that there were only 5 boarders.

The annual inspection of the school, conducted by the Reverend Gilbert Robinson M.A. of St. Peter's College, Cambridge and the Reverend Robert Riland Mendham M.A. of Wadham College, Oxford once more went well. The examiner's report was, as follows:-

"We were satisfied with the general condition of the school and the evident progress of the scholars. We were pleased with the results of the examination in all the branches of education pursued in the Institution. In mapping especially several of the specimens exhibited were of pleasing correctness and design and many drawings also were creditable.

In Classics, the first class were examined in Homer and Horace, Virgil and Xenophon and answered decidedly well. The first boy in the 1st Division was Alfred Bodington and in second place was George Moore. In the 2nd Division R H Merry was unquestionably superior. In the 2nd Class Thomas Brentnall and Ashley Merry and in the 3rd Class Robert Wilmot and William Brentnall were considered the best scholars.

These boys were examined in Latin and English Grammar, Latin Delectus, History and Geography. A number of the boys were also examined in French."

Twelve months later, at the Corporation's Meeting in November 1848, James Eccleston star rose still further when he was unanimously elected as Warden for the ensuing year. He was therefore, at the young age of 32, the Chairman of the Council and the senior Justice of the Peace.

This, however, was to be the zenith of his achievements as, by late 1848, James Eccleston's debts were mounting and he had been unable to pay off any part of his large loan from Richard Sadler. The 1623 Limitation Act set a time limit of six years for commencing court proceedings to recover an unsecured loan and matters were bound to come to a head sooner or later.

There had been only a handful of boarders and the handsome profits hoped for from this side of the business had proved to be illusory. By early 1849 local tradesmen were beginning to refuse further credit and matters quickly got out of hand.

In hindsight, Richard Sadler should probably have called a halt to Eccleston's borrowing much earlier, instead of constantly giving in to his repeated requests for more money. In this, he had done James Eccleston no favours at all.

In January, Sadler arranged for an inventory of Eccleston's goods and fixtures at the School House to be drawn up by John Fallows of 14 Temple Row, Birmingham, who was the Auctioneer and Appraiser instructed by the Sheriff of Warwickshire, presumably with the view to taking them as security for his debt.

As if his growing money problems were not enough for James Eccleston to bear he was struck with an even crueller blow in early March when two of his young children took sick and died. Lucinda and James were only aged nine and four respectively at the time and it is hard to imagine the effect these events had on James and his poor wife.

A brief description of the sad deaths was given in an obituary issued in the *Birmingham Journal* on Saturday 17th March.

March 6th, after a short illness, in his 4th year, James Lester, second son; and on the 8th March, in her 9th year, Lucinda Maria Anna, second daughter of J. Eccleston Esq., of Sutton Coldfield.

Unfortunately, the death of children was a common occurrence in Victorian houses, when they were at risk of dying from many diseases which have now been either eradicated or become treatable with the use of antibiotics. Diseases such as smallpox, measles, whooping cough, diphtheria and typhoid were prevalent.

The cause of Lucinda's death on the 8th March was described on the Death Certificate as scarlatina and congestion of the brain.

Scarlet fever, or scarlatina as it was also called in the mid-nineteenth century, was another disease where treatment at the time was rarely successful and in 1840 alone it killed 20,000 people.

Even if the fever was not initially fatal it weakened the child, who often died months or even years later from the complications it caused. It could spread to other people for up to 2-3 weeks before its symptoms became apparent. I am fairly certain therefore that poor James Lester was also struck down by the same terrible disease as his sister when he died a mere two days earlier.

A joint funeral was held at Holy Trinity Parish Church on the 13th March 1849. Doctor's fees and the costs of mourning placed yet more strain on James Eccleston's finances.

The following month Richard Sadler wrote to Charles Adderley and suggested a meeting of the Governors to discuss the matter. However, the Governors decided that they did not wish to involve themselves in a case of this nature and matters took their course.

James Eccleston carried on for a time as if nothing was amiss but, by the end of May, he realised that his position was untenable and unlikely to improve. On the 28th May he tendered his resignation, which read:-

“I James Eccleston of Trinity College, Dublin B.A., the Head and presently only master of the Sutton Coldfield Grammar School in the County of Warwick do for certain good reason causes me specially moving and of my own free will absolutely resign and give up my situation as Master of the said school as aforesaid with all my right title and possession of in or to the same or in anywise relating thereto.”

The same month, two more creditors made themselves known to Richard Sadler. They were J Mayland of St. Mary’s College, Oscott, who was owed £7.7s.0d for French and German instruction, which had been due since midsummer 1848 and J W Ensor of Washwood , who was owed £48.2s.11d.

The seriousness of his predicament finally dawned upon poor James Eccleston and, on the 4th June, he panicked and absconded or, to put it in more basic terms, he tried to make a run for it! At 9.00 a.m. in the morning he caught the horse-drawn omnibus to Birmingham, which passed through Sutton from Tamworth. However, one of his creditors must have been advised of the situation and, when he finally reached Birmingham, he was arrested. It was not clear where he intended to go upon reaching Birmingham, but it may possibly have been London where he had had earlier connections.

He was sent to Warwick for trial and was committed to the Debtors Prison there.



Fig. 5 Warwick Debtor’s Prison and County Hall.

Warwick Gaol, also known as the County Gaol, was located to the north of Warwick town centre. The gaol was surrounded by a strong wall, 23 feet high, enclosing a

space of approximately one acre. The stone frontage on Northgate Street had Doric pillars and a set of steps leading into the self-contained public offices of the Clerk of the Peace and other officials.

Next to the gaol stood County Hall, an imposing building that was completed in 1776. It contained a large lofty room with galleries and two Courts of Justice, including the Warwick County Assizes

The entrance to the actual prison itself was situated around the corner on Bridewell Lane, later Barrack Street, and consisted of four main divisions, namely:-

1. Misdemeanors.
2. Debtors.
3. Women's Prison.
4. Male Felon's Prison.

Debtor's Prisons were not pleasant places to be interred and, in addition to the most basic of accommodation, they were rife with rats, lice and fleas.

The most notorious of the prisons was the Marshalsea Gaol (1373-1842), which was situated in Southwark, London. This was mentioned several times by Dickens in his novels, but most particularly in *'Little Dorrit'*.

When James Eccleston eventually appeared before the Judge of the Warwickshire County Court on Friday 29th June 1849 he was in good company as, barely ten years earlier, James Collins had also been tried there.

James Collins (1802-1852) was a leading spokesman for the Birmingham Political Union. He was passionate about the rights of the working class and was one of the main orators for the Chartist movement.

'Chartism', which was most active between 1838 and 1848, was a British working class movement that stood for equal social and political reform.

In the summer of 1839, Collins and fellow Chartist William Lovett, fell afoul of the establishment when they criticised police brutality during a Chartist convention in Birmingham.

Arrested on charges of sedition, the two men were sentenced to 12 months in prison and their mistreatment in the Male Felon's section was the subject of much debate in Parliament and newspapers nationwide.

Fortunately, Eccleston did not suffer the same fate!

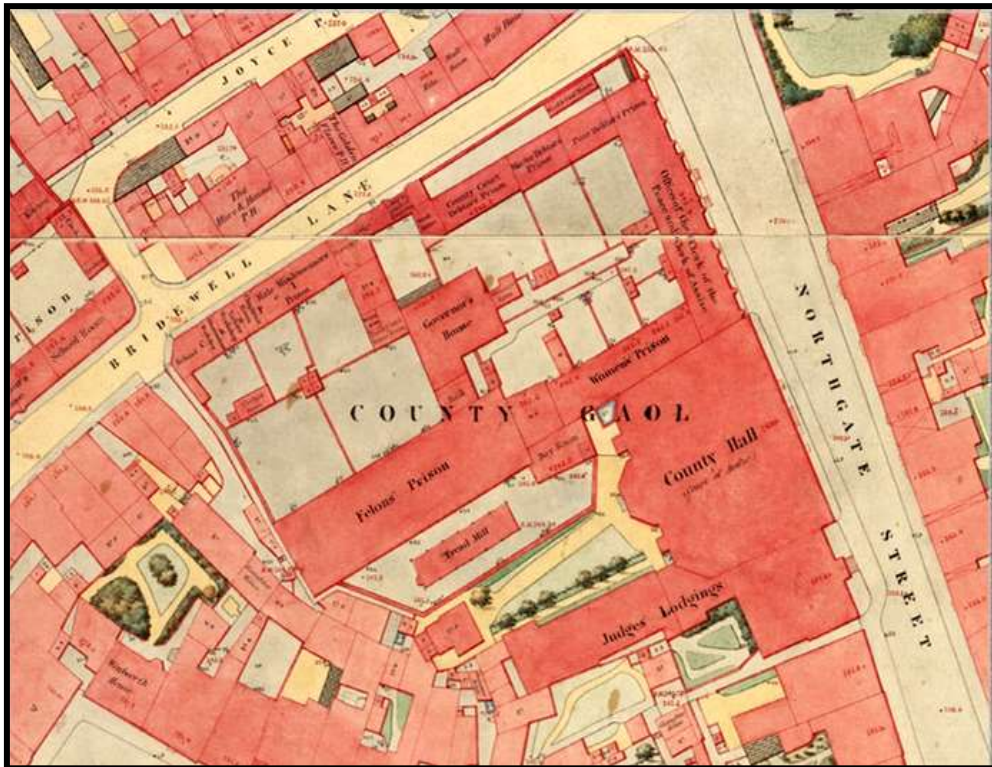


Fig. 6 Plan of the Warwick County Gaol and County Hall.

In the meantime, whilst busy engaging in correspondence with new candidates for the position of Headmaster, Richard Sadler was still involved with the affairs of James Eccleston.

A sale of the furniture at the School House was inevitable and John Fallows, the Sheriff's Agent, was instructed to hold an auction on the premises between the 11th and 13th June.

John Fallows duly placed an advert in the paper which read, as follows:-

'Important unreserved sale at the Grammar School, Sutton, six miles from Birmingham.

Catalogue of all the modern and superior Household Furniture.

Elegant Rosewood Drawing Room Suite, Fine-toned Piano Forte, Mahogany Dining Room Suite, Library, Handsome and Neat Furniture in the 11 Bedrooms, Baths, Kitchen Requisites, Excellent Lead Salting Trough, Complete Set of Capital Brewing Utensils, Eight-Day Clock in Oak Case, Iron Garden Seat, Tools and Numerous Other Effects.

To be sold by auction by John Fallows at the residence above, without the least reserve, on Monday and Wednesday the 11th and 13th days of June 1849. Conditions as usual.'

169 lots were sold on the first day of the auction and another 248 lots on the Wednesday. The sale fetched a total of £381.3s.6d. and, after the deduction of the Auctioneer's commission and expenses, the Sheriff's fees, Queens Taxes and other miscellaneous sundry items, Richard Sadler received a Nett payment of £299.6s.0d.

Unfortunately, this was only about half the sum he was owed.

At the Insolvency Hearing, James Eccleston was attended by Messrs. Powell & Hawkes, Solicitors of Birmingham.

The hearing was covered by the Leamington Spa Courier and an article appeared in their newspaper on Saturday 7th July 1849.

The article went on to state:-

INSOLVENT DEBTORS

Re: James Eccleston. – This insolvent had been served with fifteen notices of opposition. Mr B Allcock of Birmingham appeared for the creditors and Messrs. Powell & Hawkes, Solicitors, also of Birmingham, supported the insolvent, who had formerly been Headmaster of the Grammar School at Sutton Coldfield, as well as Chief Magistrate of the town.

In answer to questions put by Mr Allcock, the insolvent stated that

“Sutton Coldfield School was an endowed, or public school. The appointment of Master is vested in the Trustees, I think fourteen in number, among them are Sir Francis Lawley, the Reverend R Paget, Mr. C B Adderley, Mr. W S Dugdale and the others are gentlemen of that class. I was chosen Master of the School in 1843, I think in August of that year and I presume I was elected on the 7th August. Before my appointment, I resided in London and had no occupation previously. I am not a native of London. I think I came down to Sutton on the 8th of September following. Connected with the appointment there is a house. Until that was furnished, I resided for some time with a friend when I first came down, with Richard Sadler, who is a Solicitor and Secretary or Treasurer to the Trustees. At the time I was arrested on the 4th June, I had an execution at the house, at the suit of Mr Sadler. He is the same individual to whom I went first and who was a stranger to me at the time. I was married when I first went, with three children, a nursemaid and my sister came with me to Mr. Sadler’s, where I resided for five, six or it might have been seven weeks. He lent me at different times £596. 4s. 0d in all (equal today to approximately £77,000). I gave no security for the first sums but afterwards did for £140 for a bill accepted by my brother and a Policy of Assurance, which is now void. My brother has not paid the money and I do not owe him any money. Mr. Sadler sent me £100 before I came down to Sutton and I owe Sadler what I do since 1843 and owed him the whole amount when I was arrested.”

Mr Allcock submitted, before he proceeded further, that the insolvent’s case should be adjointed for the amendment of his schedule, which failed to account for £600, which had been advanced by Mr. Sadler to the insolvent.

Mr Hawkes objected to this and stated the aggregate amount of debts now owing by the insolvent to be £1084, which included the supposed debt of £600. It would have been practising deception on the Court if the schedule had not been made out as it had been. It would be impossible to amend it, as it had been framed in strict accordance with the rules of the Court.

Mr Allcock still maintained that the £600 was unaccounted for.

Mr Powell said that they had given the total amount of debts owing by the insolvent at the time of his arrest and Mr Hawkes stated that the balance sheet would explain in reference to the £600.

Mr Allcock objected to look on the other side until the sum was accounted in the schedule. He said he represented creditors to the amount of £700 out of £1,000 and therefore he thought he had a right to make the objection before they went into the balance sheet.

His Honour was in favour of an adjournment but, upon Mr. Powell representing the serious effect this would have upon the prospects of the insolvent, after a great deal of argument pro and con, he overruled the objection and suffered the examination to proceed.

The insolvent's further examination went on to show he had been receiving £400 a year salary and that, in addition to this, there were rents from cottages and the free use of the house, orchard etc. available to him. James Eccleston went on to state:-

"The furniture of the house had cost him £1,200 and it had been seized by Mr. Sadler and sold for about half that sum. He had waited upon him when he received the writ, but did not acquaint his other creditors of his having received it. He had resigned his appointment in Sutton on the 28th May, in order to take up a new one. He couldn't say he was appointed to it, it depended upon his means of reaching Australia in time. Much to his surprise, Mr. Sadler put an execution on his house the Wednesday after his resignation. After deducting the set-offs, there is about £72 due to me, to be divided among my creditors. I gave George Wilkins, a butcher, an order on the Trustees for £65 on the 4th June. I kept no cash book and am sorry to say I was very ignorant of business. I have no detailed account of the furniture or of the salaries paid to masters, or of the servants' wages, although I have guessed the amounts fairly."

Mr Hawkes made an eloquent address to the Court in favour of the insolvent.

After Mr Allcock, in strong terms, had moved for an adjournment of the case, his Honour acquitting the insolvent of any fraudulent intention and not wishing to injure his future prospects, permitted his immediate discharge. This was not before, however, he had emphatically addressed Mr Eccleston upon the recklessness of his conduct and the latter promised to be less reckless in the future.

In fact, Eccleston benefited from a recent Act of Parliament where relief from imprisonment could be obtained upon surrender of all his property, although this did not discharge the person from his debts and any property acquired by him afterwards was still liable to be seized.

The real losers in this whole affair were the poor trades' people who were left with approximately sixpence in the pound to share amongst themselves. This must have caused great hardship following the outcome of the hearing.

In the meantime, Mrs Eccleston, abandoned by her husband, was still residing at the School House with her children.

On the 7th June she wrote to Richard Sadler, on black edged paper, as follows:-

"Sir,

I trust to your kindness to pardon the liberty I take in thus trespassing on your time.

If it is in your power will you kindly write an order to your man to allow me to take the remains of the eatables I happen to have in the house. I really blush to make such a request but must confess dire necessity compels me, as not understanding in the least the rules and regulations of the law proceedings. I know not the moment I may be compelled to leave the house with my children without a penny in my pocket. I could, if it is correct, take my clothes and the children's and take lodgings somewhere before the sale commences.

Again I pray you pardon the request and consider the necessity."

In retrospect, what a very sad this letter is and one can only feel great sympathy with Mrs Eccleston for the plight which she faced at this stage. Not only had she lost two of her young children little more than three months ago, her husband had lost his privileged position and was in debtors prison. This was coupled with the fact she was about to see all her possessions sold around her at the forthcoming auction leaving her out of house and home.

A day or two later she wrote again to Richard Sadler, in which she stated:-

“My dear Sir,

I regret being obliged to trouble you still further.

I deeply feel in what a handsome manner you advanced to strangers, as we then were, with a sum of money. Would to God our speculation of Boarders had succeeded and how proud and happy we should have felt to repay your kind loan with interest and heartfelt thanks, but it has unfortunately turned out unsuccessful and we not only have we suffered intense anxiety of mind but, when willing to sacrifice all the warmest affections of the heart to seek in another country the means of honestly paying all debts, we are hunted down by lies and false oaths and absolutely deprived of the means of exertion.

Don't think I pray you, that even in feeling I murmur at your just proceeding, you could not act otherwise under the circumstances.

I confess I did feel sorely wounded at the idea of the Pupil, above all others who had been treated with so much kindness and constant consideration for so many years, could be capable of telling you that we were robbing you, in such a mean and despicable manner.

I pray most sincerely the sale will repay you. It shall not be my fault if the things do not go off to the best advantage. I have done my best to make all look well, as the strangers employed can testify.

I do think, if the intricacies of the law would permit of it, that the next Master would find it much to his advantage and I think so would you, if the whole property of fixtures and furniture was taken at a valuation.

The gentleman, who called upon you today, seemed delighted to see the order and repair he found the whole place in and said he thought it would be a great advantage for the next comer to take it all and that he should do so if he happened to be the one selected. Mr Henry Newport is his name and he told me he had called upon you, but I suppose the sale will proceed first, as you think best.

I should feel extremely obliged if you would let me have £20 pounds on account, as I am without a penny and you can easily believe am in great need of it.”

Despite his trials and tribulations, James somehow had managed to gain another appointment, this time as Rector (Headmaster) of the High School in Hobart, Tasmania. (Van Dieman's Land, as it was then called).

He replaced James Anthony Froude, who had recently published a book entitled 'The Nemesis of Faith' which had proved to be somewhat controversial in certain circles.

He may have been indebted to Sir Eardley Wilmot, whose late father had been Governor of Tasmania, for putting his name forward as a candidate for the vacant

post. His earlier association with colleagues in the African Civilisation Society could also have been beneficial in some form or another.

The transportation of criminals from Britain to mainland Australia had come to an end in 1840 but transportation to Tasmania continued until 1853. As a consequence, a large proportion of the population were convicts. This would not have been good news for James Eccleston's wife, but she steadfastly stood by her husband and much to her credit she travelled with him to Tasmania, along with their remaining children.

Eccleston and his family travelled on the '*Success*', which was an Australian prison ship built in 1840 at Natmoo, Burma for Cockerel & Company of Calcutta.

She was a merchant ship of 621 tons and was 117 feet in length. After initially trading around the Indian subcontinent she was eventually sold to London owners and made three voyages taking emigrants to Australia during the 1840's.



Fig. 7 The '*Success*' pictured at Hobart, Tasmania.

The journey to Australia was often long and hazardous and, even in calm conditions, a sailing ship might have taken as long as four months to complete the voyage.

Life at sea was also uncomfortable. Storms were common in the Southern Ocean and hygiene, which was poor at the best of times, was made even worse in bad weather. The majority of the passengers had never been to sea before and many would have suffered from extreme sea sickness.

The well known term 'batten down the hatches' meant the passengers were also confined below decks in bad weather without ventilation or light, in conditions that were ideal for the spread of disease.

The use of candles or oil lanterns was restricted and, at times, forbidden altogether. In the cramped conditions, surrounded by timber, straw mattresses, rope and tar caulking, meant a fire could spread with terrifying speed.

Luckily, it is known that James and his family travelled as cabin passengers, which was somewhat more comfortable than steerage class.



Fig. 8 Typical steerage accommodation on board ship in the mid-1800's.

They arrived safely at Hobart, Tasmania on the 20th November 1849. The '*Success*' subsequently sailed into Sydney the week before Christmas and carried many families escaping from the Irish Potato Famine.

Not long after they arrived in Hobart and began to settle into their new life, yet more tragedy struck. Their young son, John Charles William Eccleston, who was only just past his second birthday, sadly died on the 4th February 1850. Whether this was the result of the long, arduous voyage over to Australia, one does not know.

Scarcely had the school year begun, when James himself suffered a brain fever and died on the 18th March 1850. Brain fever today is called encephalitis or inflammation of the brain caused, in the main, by a viral infection. With all that James had had to contend with over the last twelve months, it could just as likely to have been from a broken heart.

His funeral procession was a grand affair, attended by 47 carriages and he was interred in St. John's churchyard, New Town, Hobart. His wife and two remaining children received a benefit of £1,000, which was subscribed by public donations.



Fig. 9 St. John's Church, New Town, Hobart, Tasmania, circa 1880.

A headstone was erected for James, which read:-

‘ERECTED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE HIGH SCHOOL OF HOBART TOWN TO
THE MEMORY OF JAMES ECCLESTON B.A., RECTOR OF THE HIGH SCHOOL,
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE ON THE 18TH MARCH 1850, AGED 32 YEARS.’

It is interesting to note that the memorial stone stated he was aged 32. However, his headstone in Sutton Coldfield gives his correct age as 34 years.

Sarah Holbeche mentioned the whole situation in her diary. In her usual succinct manner she commented, as follows:-

“Mr Eccleston’s tragedy began; after having buried two children on the same day; Mr R Sadler pressed him for money – Mr Richard Sadler having secured a bill of sale and he was taken to Warwick. He had secured an appointment as Headmaster at Hobart where on his release he went, was installed, well received, made a much admired address – left the building, posted a paper to me, suddenly became insane and the same ship bringing the paper, brought also the intelligence of his death, a sad story from beginning to end; flushed with his appointment as Headmaster here; misguided and misled into folly and extravagance, he was betrayed, one might almost say, by his mistakenly called friends, who encouraged the contraction of debts they knew he could only pay by borrowing and the consequence thereof – paying for that.”

These brief notes leave many questions unanswered. Reading between the lines, it would appear Sarah thought, perhaps, that James Eccleston had let the appointment to such a prestigious school turn his head; after all he was very young at the time and had no previous experience. Later appointments as senior Justice of the Peace and Warden of the Society would have meant him moving into much higher circles than he may have been used to before.

It would be interesting to learn who his, so called, friends were that Sarah referred to and who had led him into debt. Perhaps living beyond his means was the only option left open to him and was a way of 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

Two other worthy citizens of Sutton Coldfield at the time made comments in their writings.

The Reverend W K Riland Bedford in his '*History of Sutton Coldfield*' remarked:-

"In a literary point of view Mr Eccleston, Headmaster of the school, takes rank as an author by his book on English Antiquities published in 1847 and he introduced several inmates in his house of some distinction, one of them being the late Mr Bellew, known as a preacher and elocutionist who, while still resident under his tutor's roof and a student at Oxford, published a drama entitled 'Speke Hall'.

Mr Eccleston, in consequence of some derangement of his private affairs, accepted an appointment in Tasmania and resigned the school in 1849".

Zachariah Twamley in his '*History of Sutton Coldfield*' 1855 stated:-

"On the 2nd day of November 1848 he was elected to the Office of Warden; in which office he was professing to serve faithfully, as in the oath it is plainly expressed; until the 4th June 1849. When he left the Schoolhouse and Sutton altogether, in a very dishonourable way; not paying one single sixpence in the pound on any of his debts of simple contract."

Taking all aspects into account, one can only feel great sorrow for James and his long suffering wife Lucinda.

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Photographs

- Fig. 1** Richard Sadler's house at 36 High Street, from a watercolour by A E Everitt, circa 1850. Keith & Janet Jordan's Photographic Collection-Photo No. 1672.
Fig. 2 Front elevation of 36 High Street, following a later survey of the property in 1977.
Ref No. QSH 58.9 HIG.
Fig. 3 Rear view of 'Driffold House', Maney. Keith & Janet Jordan's Photographic Collection-Photo No. 1883.
Fig. 4 '*An Introduction to English Antiquities*' by James Eccleston, 1847.
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Fig. 5 Warwick Debtor's Prison and County Hall. <https://www.chartistcollins.com/warwick-gaol>.
Fig. 6 Plan of Warwick County Gaol and County Hall. <https://www.chartistcollins.com/warwick-gaol>.
Fig. 7 The 'Success' pictured at Hobart, Tasmania. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Success-\(prison_ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Success-(prison_ship)).
Fig. 8 Typical steerage accommodation on board ship in the mid-1800's.
<https://dawlischronicles.blogspot.com>.
Fig. 9 St. John's Church, New Town, Hobart, Tasmania. <https://tasmanianwarcasualties.com>.