

WILLIAM FELTON SENIOR AND WILLIAM FELTON JUNIOR, SCHOOLMASTERS OF 19TH CENTURY SUTTON COLDFIELD

By Janet Jordan

We are all well acquainted with the names of many of Sutton Coldfield's Landed Gentry families. Not so familiar are those belonging to the working class whose skills contributed to the growth of the town. So, you may not be aware of the two William Feltons, who were involved in the education of the local children in the 19th century, but they deserve to be remembered.

Many Feltons are recorded as living in the area in the late 1700s but the particular branch we are concerned with begins with William (b.1768) and his wife Sarah (b. 1772). Their only child, who was to become William Felton Senior, was christened at Holy Trinity Parish Church on 20th January 1788⁽¹⁾.

WILLIAM FELTON SENIOR (1788-1879)

It is not known where William received his education. As a young lad in the 1790s, having been taught to read, he would thus have been eligible to join the Free Grammar School around the age of 7. Here he would have been taught Classics and Reading of English, free of charge, because his parents were resident in the parish of Sutton Coldfield. Later on, writing instruction was given free for the first twelve months and then a charge of sixpence a week was paid to the under-master (which included spelling, reading, writing and arithmetic). This charge was only applicable on the days a boy actually attended the school. For two months of the year, there were fixed holidays, i.e. Christmas and Midsummer.⁽²⁾



The Free Grammar School prior to 1861

How William spent his twenties is also unknown. We do know that later on he was a schoolmaster, so did he commence his career as a private tutor? We also know from Sarah Holbeche's diary that at some stage he sustained a serious injury to his leg! Did this happen in battle? Had he gone to fight for his country? In spite of this disability, by his mid thirties he was running a thriving school in the High Street. This is how Sarah remembers him:-⁽³⁾

"In the bay window room to the right, Felton began his school in 1823. Having lost his leg; he began to teach, and so successfully that he soon had more boys than the room would hold. He had to leave (Whitehouse's, as it then was) and was allowed the use of the Town Hall. He then went to Birmingham to learn Dr Bell's plan, returned in six weeks and was elected first Master of the New Corporation School Jan 1826. Left the School house Xmas 1859, having done his duty - and receiving a grateful acknowledgment from old pupils."



2. *High Street in the 1860s. (William Felton Senior's schoolroom far right window.)*

The 'acknowledgment' she refers to appears to have been the presentation to him of a chair.⁽³⁾

Dr Andrew Bell's 'plan' was a new method of education which originated in Madras, India, in 1789, and was eventually adopted in England.⁽⁴⁾ Effectively, the children taught each other. Previously, the master had 'heard' all the lessons; when one child was 'saying' his lessons, the rest sat idly by awaiting their turn.

Under the plan the children were arranged in divisions and one of them taught. When one read the others listened, and the next boy in the group corrected any errors. The lessons were



3. *A sketch of the memorial plaque to Dr Andrew Bell in Westminster Abbey, 1839*

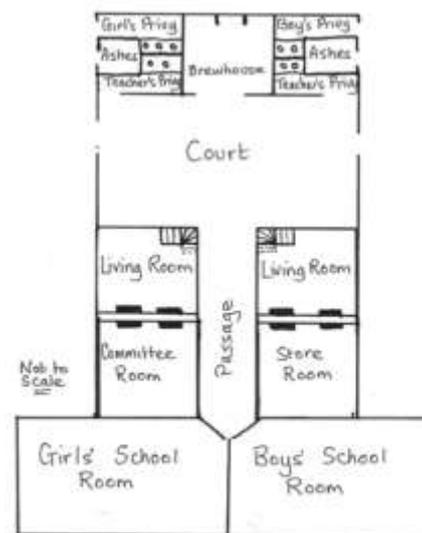
always very short; and each child prepared his work without a single mistake. The aim was for the children to 'get everything perfect'. Records were kept of the work covered and the pupil's progress was written in a monthly report called a 'paidometer'. There was also a register of misdemeanours, called the 'black book', although there was no corporal punishment.

A register was kept by monitors and 'Teachers', and even by the boys themselves. Thus the whole school was constantly active. They would have been taught reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, morality, and religion. The effect of all this meant that any school, however large, could be conducted by a single master without difficulty. But, one wonders for how long this new system lasted in Sutton Coldfield? Nationally, it declined after Bell's death in 1832, although a memorial plaque in Westminster Abbey stands to record its great impact in the early 1800s.⁽⁵⁾

The New Corporation School was designed by T & J Bateman, Architects of Birmingham, and one of William's 'perks' was the use of part of the schoolhouse attached to the back of the school building. This appears to have consisted of a living room downstairs and, presumably, sleeping accommodation upstairs. All other facilities seem to have been shared with the school in a building beyond a 'Court' at the rear of the building.⁽⁶⁾



4. Original Town School, on the corner of Mill Street & Trinity Hill



5. Author's sketch of Town School with Schoolmasters' accommodation, c1826

'One-legget Felton', as he was known by some of the boys,⁽⁷⁾ can't have found it easy looking after the schoolchildren with his disability but things must have improved when, on 24th October 1829, he married Ann Parnell from Nuneaton. Both past their forties, they may or may not have been delighted when William, Junior, was born on 22nd July 1830!⁽¹⁾

William Senior's salary was being constantly reviewed by the Corporation although in 1841 it was still deemed to be too low. They agreed that he should have an increase of £10 per year. This brought him up to £50. Seven years later he was on £57 and, at that time, the Corporation also treated him to a new oven grate in the schoolhouse, costing £2.1s.4d!⁽⁸⁾

Part of his job was to order the school requisites, for which he was recompensed on a regular basis, such things as bibles (50 for £6.11.30), hymn books and quill pens.⁽⁸⁾⁺⁽⁹⁾ This went on for years until his retirement in 1859, when he and his wife moved to Walmley, for reasons that will become apparent.

WILLIAM FELTON, JUNIOR, 1830-1879

Young William Junior, following in his father's footsteps, was educated at the Free Grammar School. A remarkable situation occurred in 1840, when he was 10 years old. It appears that he was the only boy at the school! This was because the School Master had no obligation to teach any subjects other than Latin and Greek, subjects which were well suited to William's abilities. The current master, Charles Barker, chose not to extend the curriculum by including English and Maths, which explains why there was little demand for local boys to attend the School. His unenlightened attitude to education was a direct cause of the 1840 Grammar Schools Act, the first piece of legislation which introduced state intervention in private schooling.

When Charles Barker died unexpectedly, it is thought the school closed temporarily. On the new master's appointment, William was readmitted as a foundation scholar, along with eight other boys including the three sons of Dr George Bodington.⁽¹⁰⁾

In 1843, a new scheme was proposed at the school which caused upset all round. The School Governors had decided to make a charge of 10s per quarter for each boy's education. William's father, who obviously had some influence in the school, protested vehemently. He is reported as saying that "*his son had made considerable progress in the Latin and Greek languages and that he wished him to continue his study of the same and that during the time his son was in the school no charge of any kind had been made ... and therefore he prayed to be exempt as, by its enforcement, he would be deprived of a privilege for the benefit of his son which he had fully calculated upon as permanently belonging to every resident in the Parish.*"⁽¹⁰⁾

His plea did him no good and the fee had to be paid. The young scholar continued to make progress. He excelled in the 2nd Annual Examination of 1846, it being said that "*The Greek & Latin scholarship of Felton is in particular deserving commendation. His mode of construing Greek is close and accurate, and in Horace he shewed considerable knowledge of the meaning of his Author, as well as feeling of the peculiar beauties of the style.*" One of the chief examiners even went so far as to say "*Far above all in proficiency I place Felton, whom I examined in Greek, Latin & Hebrew.*"⁽¹⁰⁾

One can see why William achieved a 1st Class BA Degree from Trinity College Dublin.⁽¹¹⁾ By the time he was 20 he was a Classical & Mathematics Tutor, living back in Sutton Coldfield with his parents in Mill Street.⁽¹²⁾ He was on course for a brilliant career. Unfortunately, records of him in the 1850s are almost non-existent, although he seems to have been employed throughout the period.

In 1859, Mary Spettigue from Launceston, Cornwall, came into his life. Little did he know it but his new wife was to bring great tragedy to the family. They married on 27th January and a succession of babies followed, all girls - so, at least, no more Williams to confuse the issue!⁽¹⁾

Ada Letitia was the first to arrive in 1861. Her early years must have been surrounded by noise, in a house full of 10-14 year old boys. This was because William had opened a boys' boarding school at Russell House in Walmley. His mother and father had taken up residence in a small

cottage next door.⁽¹¹⁾ Both buildings actually belonged to the Vicar of Walmley, Rev Gilbert William Robinson,⁽¹³⁾ and stood on the opposite side of the road to the Corporation School and St John's Parish Church. Russell House was no doubt named after the Vicar's wife, Frances Sarah Russell⁽¹⁴⁾ and was one of the largest buildings in Walmley at the time.

Walmley in the early 1860s was a rather quiet little hamlet. Although the parish church, St John's, was built in 1845 to serve a growing population, the demise of Penns' Mill in the 1850s caused many inhabitants to move away. William's boarding school probably brought some welcome life back into the neighbourhood.



6. *Russell House, Walmley Village (the large house behind the gas lamp)*
(Keith Jordan's Collection)

Two of his early pupils and boarders, Robert and Henry Squires, were twins who became very friendly with another boy, Francis James Chavasse, who attended daily. The latter walked to Walmley from his home at Wylde Green House, about a mile away. The exploits of these boys and other pupils are recorded in the young Chavasse's diary.⁽¹⁵⁾ All were to make highly esteemed clergymen in their later years and it is a great shame that William was not to see the fruits of his labour.

An opportunity arose in 1863 for him to further his prospects. The headmaster of the Free Grammar School, Josiah Wright, decided to relinquish his post to set up his own establishment elsewhere. William put his name forward for the job, somewhat tardily due to a misunderstanding of the date by which applications should be made⁽¹⁰⁾ However, one would think, as an old boy of the school, he stood a good chance of securing the position.

Things may have turned out very differently had he got the job. Unfortunately, excellent as his credentials were, in this case it seems they were not enough. In choosing the right candidate, it may be that the Governors took into account a petition put forward by the residents of the town. What they wanted was a more practical and commercial approach to the boys' education. The Classical Education currently offered by the school, they felt, only benefited those who were aiming for the professions when, in fact, most of the boys were destined for a Commercial or Agricultural career.⁽¹⁰⁾

The successful applicant was the Rev Albert Smith, put forward by the Headmaster of King Edwards Grammar school. This man continued the good work done by William in tutoring the aforesaid Frank Chavasse, taking him on at the school as a 17 year old, in preparation for a place at Oxford University.⁽¹⁵⁾ Perhaps this was something William himself might have been proud to do?

Sadly, in 1865, William's mother, Ann, died having known only two of her little granddaughters, Ada and May (Mabel Ann).⁽¹⁾

An advertisement appeared in the *Warwickshire Gazette* in 1866 promoting the boarding school.⁽¹⁶⁾ The terms looked impressive, obviously aimed at the upper classes. "*For Boarders under 15 years - £45, above 15 years - £50. The boys are to bring their own bed linen; towels, fork and spoon (no knives?); a charge of 5s. for a seat in the Church; the Clergyman visits ministerially, the school; education is classical and such as will qualify a youth for the Public Schools or Universities.* The Clergyman was undoubtedly Rev GW Robinson, who, again, was instrumental in the careers of many of the boys.

Was this advertisement an attempt to bring in more business? Was William struggling to make ends meet?

Two more little girls, Maude and Mary Beatrice, came onto the scene, in 1867 and 1868 respectively.⁽¹⁷⁾ Was this a joy or a worry to their parents? It is not known whether the family's changing situation had any bearing on what was to come next, but a devastating blow was about to descend upon them. On 7th August 1870, at 42 years of age, William's wife, Mary, died of epilepsy. The four children, two of them probably still in nappies, were motherless.⁽¹⁸⁾

On 17th December 1870, four months later, 40 year old William also died of epilepsy or, possibly, a stroke.⁽¹⁹⁾ A mystery surrounds his death. For some reason, he had taken himself off to a boarding house at 25 Madoc Street, Llandudno, and died in the presence of James Albert MacPherson, an Insurance Broker from Erdington.⁽¹⁹⁾ His grave is somewhere in Eglwys Rhos (i.e. Llanrhos, near the Ormes Peninsular), the site of which has yet to be discovered.⁽²⁰⁾ One wonders why he is not buried in St John's Parish Churchyard with his wife.

Yet more questions abound. Why did he go to Llandudno in December, so soon after his wife's death? It has been suggested that he went there for 'the cure', as he was clearly ill at the

RUSSELL HOUSE,

WALMLEY, NEAR SUTTON COLDFIELD.



Mr. W. FRITON, B.A., and 1st Class-man of Trinity College, Dublin, receives a few sons of Gentlemen to educate with the sons of a Clergyman.

TERMS:

For Boarders under 15 years	...	...	...	...	...	...	£45
„ above 15 years	...	...	...	...	...	...	50

The above terms include all things, except personal expenses, books, &c. There is also a charge of 5s. per annum for a seat in the Church.

Each Boy is expected to bring four sheets, two pillow-cases, four towels, fork and spoon.

Instruction in Music, for which a Master is engaged, may be had at £1 10s. per quarter.

The Clergyman of the parish visits ministerially the school.

Whilst the education is classical, and such as will qualify a youth for the Public Schools or Universities, the wishes of Parents will be attended to with a view to the Profession or Employment for which a boy is destined.

French is included in the general course.

The situation of Walmley is exceedingly healthy.

A Quarter's Notice, or payment, is required previously to the removal of a Pupil.

References will be given and required.

7. Advert for William Felton's Boarding School

time. Or did he die as a result of stress or grief? Had the boarding school closed down? One could go on - but no clues have come to light.

Picking up the pieces, Rev GW Robinson took on more than the lion's share. He took out Letters of Administration to enable him to deal with William's Estate (worth approx £1,000).⁽²¹⁾ As far as Russell House was concerned, not only did he have to sell the contents but he also needed a new tenant for his property, so he placed two adverts in the papers.⁽²²⁺²³⁾

SALE 3 BY AUCTION.

WALMLEY, NEAR CHESTER ROAD STATION,
B B D I N G T O N .

SALE OF EXCELLENT
MODERN FURNITURE, PLATE, LINEN, CHINA,
AND VALUABLE LIBRARY.

HENRY EDWARDS and SON have received instructions from the Trustees of the late Mr. W. Felton, B.A., to **BELL** by **AUCTION**, on **FRIDAY NEXT, Feb. 21,** at Ten o'clock—the Contents of five Chambers, Drawing Room and Breakfast Room, China Pantry, Kitchens, and Greenhouse, School-room Fittings, **PIANO-FORTE**, Patent Mangle, Sewing Machine, &c.

The Furniture is chiefly in Rosewood and Mahogany, and comprises an infinity of domestic items. Also at Three o'clock the well-selected **LIBRARY** of 700 **VOLUMES**, principally in Theology, Mathematics, and the Classics, many being best Oxford editions.

Full descriptive Catalogues of 316 lots may be had at the place of Sale; or of the Auctioneers, 1, Temple Street, Birmingham.

8. Advertisement disposing of William's possessions

RUSSELL House, Walmley.—To be Let. with immediate possession, a pleasantly situated detached **RESIDENCE**, very suitable for a School, and about 1½ miles from the Chester Road Railway Station. It contains large Dining and Drawing Rooms, Parlour, W.O., five Chambers, commodious Kitchens, Baking Oven, Yard, Greenhouse, Forcing Pit, good Garden, and Paddock. Rent £40.—Apply to **ENEZEKER PIERCY and SON**, House and Estate Agents, 1, Cherry Street.

9. Advertisement disposing of the Feltons' home.

He had no trouble letting the house and before long a family with many children were soon living there.⁽¹⁷⁾ But what happened to William and Mary's daughters? Under the Letters of Administration, Rev Robinson was appointed their legal guardian⁽²¹⁾ and he needed to ensure they were taken care of.

The two eldest, Ada and May, were already at boarding school in Edgbaston, thankfully together. Four year old Maude was sent, presumably as a boarder, to Culls School in Sutton Coldfield. Beatrice, at 2 years, went to live with her Grandad William and his servant.⁽¹⁷⁾ The girls seemed destined to become teachers in some form or another, having been surrounded by the educational establishment in their formative years.

ADA LETITIA FELTON, 1861-1902

In 1871, at 10 years old, she was at a boarding school at 34 Frederick Road Edgbaston, run by Frances C Goode. By 1881, she was a teacher there. On 23 May 1885, she married Walter Frederick Hollis, a schoolmaster. They moved to Nottingham, but by 1902 both had died, leaving a young family of four children.⁽²⁴⁾

MABEL ANN FELTON 1863-1944

Mabel was only 8 years old in 1871, and yet she, too, was at the school at Edgbaston. Ten years later she was still classed as a student. In 1891, by then a School Governess, she was known to be visiting Culls' School in Sutton Coldfield, probably to see Susan A Cull who was at Edgbaston with her and Letitia in 1871. Mabel died in Smiles Home, Woking, Surrey on 25 March 1944 at the ripe old age of 82. Her estate was worth £193.11s.8p. ⁽²⁴⁾

MAUDE FELTON 1867-1911+

Maude remained at Culls School until her education was complete. She, too, became a School Governess and found herself in 1891 in Aldridge, in charge of the Rector's three children. In August of that year, she married Rev H.E. Wilson, Curate of Sutton Coldfield and second master at the Grammar School. By 1911, they had moved firstly to Hamstead, London, and then on to Hornsey, Middlesex. Maud had 5 children. ⁽²⁴⁾

MARY BEATRICE FELTON 1868-1915

Mary followed in her older sisters' footsteps by going to Frances Goode's school in Edgbaston. In 1891, she was a 22 year old governess in Nottingham (perhaps living near her sister Ada), although she moved on to the Meriden area, where she died in 1915, leaving an estate of £240.3s.4d. ⁽²⁴⁾

With the exception of Mabel, all of William and Mary's daughters seem to have inherited their parents' poor health and died in their forties.

Sources (Text)

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- (3) Sarah Holbeche Diary, Sutton Coldfield Library (BCOLQ 942,496081HOL)
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Sources (Illustrations)

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2. Sarah Holbeche Diary, Sutton Coldfield Library (BCOLQ 942,496081HOL)
3. www.british-towns.net
4. Photograph by William Grundy c.1858 from the Norman Evans' Collection, Sutton Coldfield Library
5. Author's sketch of Town School with Schoolmasters' accommodation, c1826 (drawn from map in QSH48.32TOW, Sutton Coldfield Library)
6. Keith Jordan's Collection
7. Morris & Co. Commercial Directory and Gazetteer of Warwickshire with Birmingham, 1866
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