

Kildwick and the Brontës – True or False ?

by Graham Taylor

Introduction

It never takes very long. I mention to someone who knows the area that I'm a member of the Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group and sooner or later I'll be told "... of course Kildwick Hall is the real Wuthering Heights" or "... Charlotte Brontë attended Kildwick church"; I've even heard tell that "Charlotte's ghost haunts the White Lion" !

There are so many connections, or supposed connections, between Kildwick and the Brontë family. The aim of this piece is to consider some of these and to discuss to what extent they might be fact or fiction.

True or False ?

1. Charlotte Brontës took her nom-de-plume from the Currer family of Kildwick Hall

Almost certainly true.

The Brontë sisters used nom-de-plumes to disguise their identities as women. They took the surname Bell and chose gender-neutral forenames which meant that, in the culture of the times, it would naturally be assumed that they were men.

They selected forenames that retained the initial letters of their own: Acton (Anne), Ellis (Emily) and Currer (Charlotte), but how these names came to be chosen is not known for certain. In the case of Acton/Anne it has been suggested that the nom-de-plume refers to Eliza Acton, the poet¹.

It is generally agreed that Charlotte's "Currer" was derived from the family who owned Kildwick Hall. However, it's not clear which member of the family inspired the choice. There are two possible candidates:

- Haworth Currer (1690 - 1744)

This member of the family was suggested by J. J. Brigg in his ["Kildwick Hall Historical Sketch"](#) (1921). Brigg describes the monument to Haworth Currer in Kildwick Church and then adds:

*"The writer has often wondered whether Charlotte Brontë, who once lived as a governess at Stone Gappe, may not have been struck by the name **Haworth** Currer and adopted thence her nom-de-plume of "Currer Bell".*

This is unlikely, as the memorial is high on the north wall of the main aisle, just below the altar, and is not easily read from ground-level.

Later in this piece we will consider whether Charlotte Brontë ever actually attended Kildwick Church. There will also be more to say about Haworth Currer.

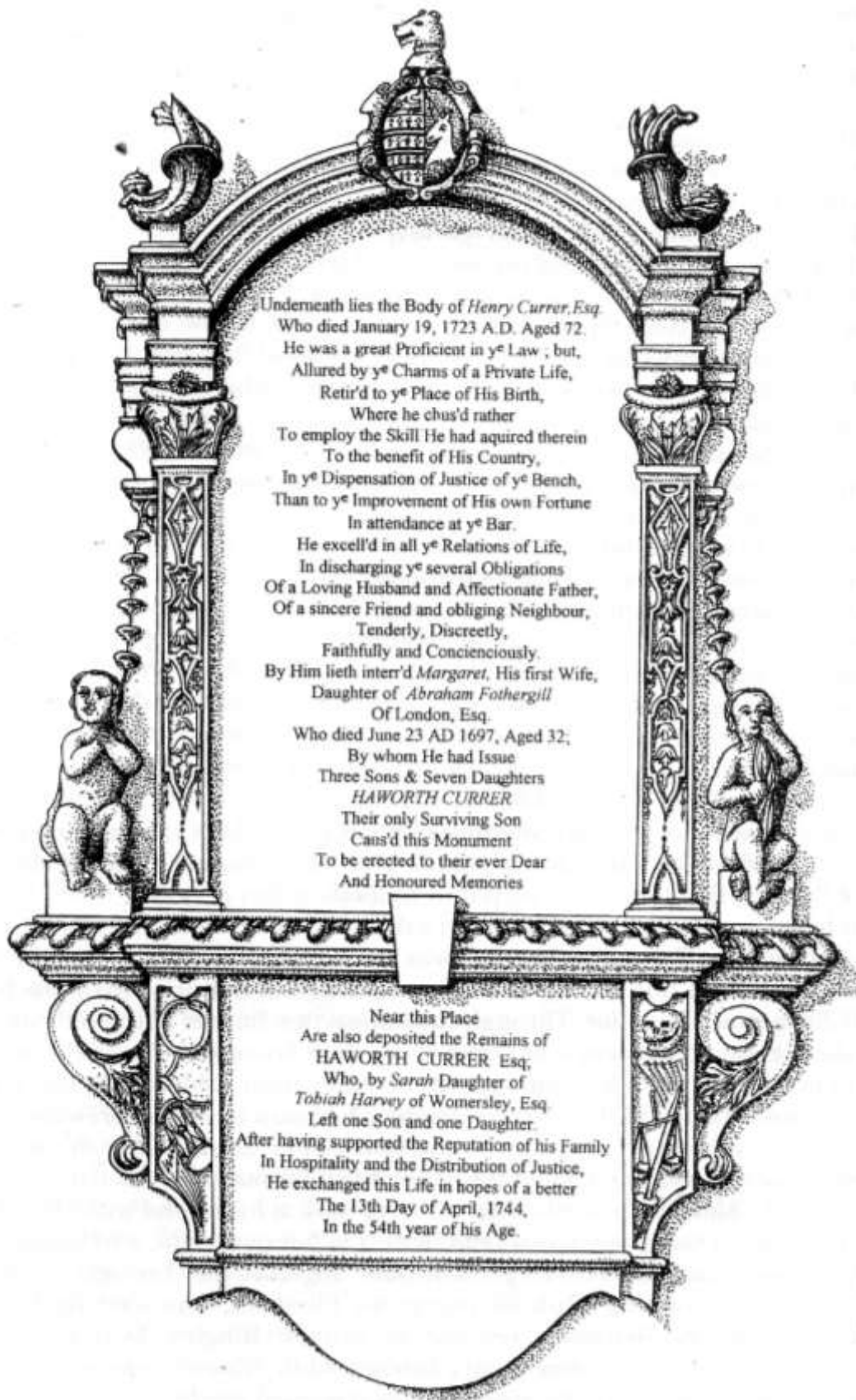


Figure 1: A representation of the Currer Memorial in St. Andrew's,
 with the name Haworth Currer prominent

- Frances Mary Richardson Currer (1785 - 1861)

If Charlotte followed her sister Anne and also used the surname of a woman with literary interests, then Frances Mary Richardson Currer, who was well known as a collector of books, would seem to be a good candidate for the origin of the Currer name². However, there is no documentary evidence that puts the matter beyond doubt.

2. The Brontës knew Frances Mary Richardson Currer – the owner of Kildwick Hall

This is probably true, although it might be more accurate to say that they “knew of” her.

In her biography of the Brontë family³, Juliet Barker describes two occasions when the family may have become aware of FMRC:

- FMRC was a well-known as the benefactor of many local institutions, including the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge which Charlotte attended (and which is likely to have been the inspiration for Lowood School in Jane Eyre); and Keighley Mechanics’ Institute, of which Patrick was a member.
- In 1821, when the cost of care during his wife’s final illness left Patrick Brontë in debt, his friends in Bradford held a subscription on his behalf. Patrick subsequently wrote to his friend John Buckworth “I got a letter containing a bank post bill to the value of £50.00 –this was sent to me by a benevolent individual , a wealthy lady in the West Riding”. Although the name of this donor was not revealed, Juliet Barker suggests that the lady in question was FMRC.

3. Charlotte visited FMRC at Kildwick Hall

Almost certainly false.

For a period of three months between May and July 1839, Charlotte was employed as governess to the children of Mr. John Sidgwick, a Skipton wool manufacturer, who lived at Stone Gappe in Lothersdale. In her book on Emily Brontë⁴, Winifred Gérin suggests that this will have brought her into close proximity with FMRC:

While a governess at the Sidgwicks, Charlotte had certainly heard much of their neighbour, Miss Frances Mary Richardson Currer, of Eshton Hall, Skipton, whose property touched Stonegappe, and whose library was famous throughout the north.

However, the use of the word “neighbour” here is problematical. Certainly Kildwick is fairly close to Lothersdale, but does that mean that the Sidgwicks and FMRC were “neighbours” ? In fact, although FMRC certainly owned Kildwick Hall, did she ever live there ? There is a body of evidence that suggests not.

FMRC was born on March 3rd 1785 at Eshton Hall, near Gargrave, the family home of her mother, Margaret Clive Wilson. She was the posthumous daughter of Rev. Henry Richardson who had adopted the surname Currer on succeeding to the estates of Sarah Currer, which included Kildwick Hall, shortly before his death¹⁶.

FMRC's mother was remarried to her cousin, Matthew Wilson, in 1800, and certainly from that date (although perhaps even earlier) FMRC lived at Eshton Hall. It was at Eshton Hall that she established her library; it was there that she was living when Charlotte Brontë was at Stone Gappe; and it was there that she died in 1861.

In his "[Kildwick Hall Historical Sketch](#)", John Jeremy Brigg, who lived at the Hall in the 20th century, lists the 19th century occupants:

John Richardson, who took the name of Currer, and died in 1784 seems to have been the last of the name to live at the Hall. For some years it was occupied by tenants, of whom one, a Mr. Cockshott, is remembered by name. In his time many parts of the premises were occupied by hand wool-combers. About 1825, Mr. Mathew Wilson brought here his first wife, and made extensive improvements ... After a 20 years' tenancy by Mr. Wilson, the Hall was occupied by Mr. John Tennant, his cousin, remembered by many old inhabitants for his kindly eccentric ways ... Mr. Tennant was succeeded in 1882 by Sir John Brigg M.P. who died in 1911.

In the same month as Charlotte took up her post at Stone Gappe, FMRC's half sister (bizarrely also called Frances Mary) married her cousin John Robert Tennant¹⁷. In contradiction to what J.J. Brigg says, the 1841 census shows them living at Kildwick Hall, and it is clear from Tennant's diaries that they lived there until at least 1873²⁴. If they had moved in immediately after their wedding, it would have been the Tennants who were living at Kildwick Hall when Charlotte was at Stone Gappe.

So we can say that from 1800 at the very latest, FMRC did not live at Kildwick Hall – and she was never a neighbour of the Sidgwicks. Thus, even if the social conventions of the day could possibly have been cast aside and Charlotte, an unknown servant, ever did meet FMRC, the rich land-owning spinster, that meeting would not have taken place at Kildwick Hall.

Note: Local people may also have noticed a second problem in the extract from Gérin's book. FMRC's property, the Kildwick estate, cannot be said to have "touched" Stone Gappe. It is possible that Gérin has confused the ecclesiastical parish of Kildwick, which bordered Lothersdale, with the Kildwick estate which had the river Aire as its boundary.

4. Charlotte worshipped at St. Andrew's Church, Kildwick

Almost certainly false.

The argument goes that while Charlotte was a governess at Stone Gappe, she would have attended church with the Sidgwicks. The Sidgwick family held a debentured pew in St. Andrew's Church. Therefore Charlotte Brontë must have attended St. Andrew's.

In this instance, the facts are correct but the conclusion is still probably wrong.

In 1824 a faculty was obtained by St Andrew's for the erection of a gallery across the west end of the nave. The pews were apportioned to several purchasers at stated prices: number three was for £21 and was purchased by William Sidgwick of Stone Gappe, the father of John Sidgwick⁵.

However, in 1824 Lothersdale did not have its own church; indeed the parish of Lothersdale was not formed until 1838, when it was carved out from land previously parts of the Carleton and Kildwick parishes, and Christ Church was consecrated⁶.

John Sidgwick was a significant early supporter of the new church and hosted an elegant meal on the occasion of its consecration in November 1838. In fact he has been described "The key protagonist in creating the Parish of Lothersdale from Carleton and Kildwick".

So, let's ask ourselves the most simple of questions: if, in November 1838, you are involved in the consecration of a new church and the creation of a new parish, where are you going to worship in 1839 – in the old church, miles away, or the new one that you have just seen being built on your own doorstep ?

We should also take into account the words of Arthur Christopher Benson, the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward White Benson, who was related to John Sidgwick. He writes²⁰:

Charlotte Bronte acted as governess to my cousins at Stonegappe for a few months in 1839... She was, according to her own account, very unkindly treated, but it is clear that she had no gifts for the management of children... all that another cousin can recollect of her is that if she was invited to walk to Church with them she thought she was being ordered about like a slave; if she was not invited, she imagined she was excluded from the family circle.

So the Sidgwick family were **walking** to church in 1839. Surely that must mean that they were attending the church in Lothersdale, rather than doing the 10-mile round-trip to Kildwick ?

Once again there is no documentary evidence either way, but the weight of circumstantial evidence must suggest that the Sidgwick family attended Christ Church Lothersdale in 1839, not St. Andrew's in Kildwick.

Note: If we accept that Charlotte Brontë did not attend St Andrew's Church, Kildwick, during her time at Stone Gappe this renders moot J. J. Brigg's musings about her seeing Haworth Currer's memorial and adopting his name as a non de plume.

5. St. Andrew's Church Kildwick owns an altar cloth produced by the Sidgwick children during Charlotte's time at Stone Gappe

Almost certainly true.

In a short booklet on the history of St. Andrew's, produced in 1915 to raise money to pay for the repairs done to the church bells, there is the following comment about Charlotte:

... the red frontal used for the high altar was worked by her youngest pupil while she was at Stone Gappe, who is still living in Skipton.

The lady in question was probably Matilda, the younger of the Sidgwick daughters, who was born in 1833 and who would have been about six when Charlotte was at Stone Gappe.

Now childhood memories are notoriously unreliable but, that said, there is no evidence against the suggestion that an altar cloth was produced in the Sidgwick household at that time; and perhaps young Matilda, under the watchful eye of her governess, did make a small contribution ?

The church certainly has a very fine red altar frontal, which is used on Saints' days.



Figure 2: The St. Andrew's red altar cloth – produced under Charlotte Brontë's tutelage ?

6. A character called Haworth Currer appears in one of the Brontë's books

True, but not in a book by any of the women of the family; he appears in a short work by Branwell.

In their youth, all four of the Brontë children wrote plays and stories based on games they played with Branwell's toy soldiers. These gradually coalesced into the Glass Town and Angria Saga – a set of short works written by Charlotte and Branwell. (None of the Glass Town / Angria works written by Emily or Anne survive and they eventually ceased working with Charlotte and Branwell and created their own fictional realm of Gondal.)¹⁸

One of later Angrian works, written by Branwell in February 1838, is a biography of Warner Howard Warner; the prime-minister of Angria. It includes a brief description of the origins of the Warner family¹⁹:

*Long ago the Warner family resided among the Lancashire Hills in England ... **Haworth Currer** Warner Esqr. of Walton Hall in 1683 died aged 35 leaving his large property to his son Markham who spent what he could of it and deceased in 1697...*

Now this biography of "Haworth Currer Warner" bears no similarity to that of the deceased resident of Kildwick, but the use of the name is striking and we must assume that the name originated in Kildwick; it is too much of a coincidence for it to be otherwise.

Significantly, the date of composition of this piece is more than a year before Charlotte worked at Stone Gappe – so if Charlotte derived her nom-de-plume from Haworth Currer she might have got it from Branwell's Warner biography, but it couldn't have been the other way round. That means we need not imagine Charlotte, sat in Kildwick Church listening to one of Rev. Pering's sermons, idly looking around at the memorials; and then, on seeing the one bearing the name Haworth Currer (Figure 1), thinking "That's a good name for an ancestor of Warner Howard Warner; I must tell Branwell – and I might use Currer for myself".

7. The Brigg family, who lived at Kildwick Hall, were founder members of the Brontë Society

True – both John Brigg MP and his son, John Jeremy, were founder members. In fact, John Brigg played a major role in the formation of the Society.

In June 2012, the Australian Brontë Society Newsletter² published a transcript of a documentary describing the creation of the Brontë Society:

Mr W W Yates, a Dewsbury journalist who had long taken an eager interest in the Brontës and their books, made the first proposal to form a Brontë Society. He put his idea before the late Sir John Brigg, who invited him to meet a few friends at the Liberal Club in Bank Street, Bradford, to discuss his plans.

This led to a public meeting called by the Mayor of Bradford, in the Council Chamber of Bradford Town Hall, on December 16th, 1893. And so the Brontë Society was born...

John Brigg became the first president of the Society and there were 103 founder members⁸. When his son, John Jeremy, died in 1945 at the age of 82, he was the last of the founder members⁹.

8. Kildwick Hall matches the descriptions given of Wuthering Heights

No, really, it doesn't. At least, the similarities are no more than coincidental.

The book opens with Mr. Lockwood, the new tenant of Thrushcross Grange, paying his first visit to Wuthering Heights. The first chapter contains several descriptive passages about the house which we can compare with the Kildwick Hall.

Text: *... even the gate against which he leant ...
When he saw my horse's breast fairly pushing the barrier ...*

Match with **No.**

Kildwick Hall: The gateway at Kildwick Hall is not the sort of 5-bar farm gate that someone might lean against or a horse might attempt to push open.

Later, in Chapter 2, Mr. Lockwood actually vaults this gate when he cannot open it. Best of luck to anyone who tries that at Kildwick Hall – watch out for the lions !



Figure 3: The gates of Kildwick Hall – not something you could easily jump over

Text: *... preceded me up the causeway*

Match with **No.**

Kildwick Hall: In this period, the driveway to Kildwick Hall (now known as Hall Gardens) had not been created; the only entrance to the Hall was via the main gate – there was no causeway.

Text: *... the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones*

Match with **No.**

Kildwick Hall: Kildwick Hall is built in an elegant Jacobean style, with large windows and well-squared corners.

Text: *I paused to admire a quantity of grotesque carvings lavished over the front ... a wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys.*

Match with **Slightly.**

Kildwick Hall: Kildwick Hall famously has the pair of lions above the gate, but nothing above the entrance to the house itself.

Text: *One step brought us into the family sitting room, without any lobby or passage.*

Match with **No.**

Kildwick Hall: The modern floor-plan of Kildwick Hall shows a small lobby; and its location, tucked into the bay of a window, would suggest that this is not a modern addition. In any case, the layout as described is not unusual. Harewood House, for example, has a large room directly beyond the threshold.

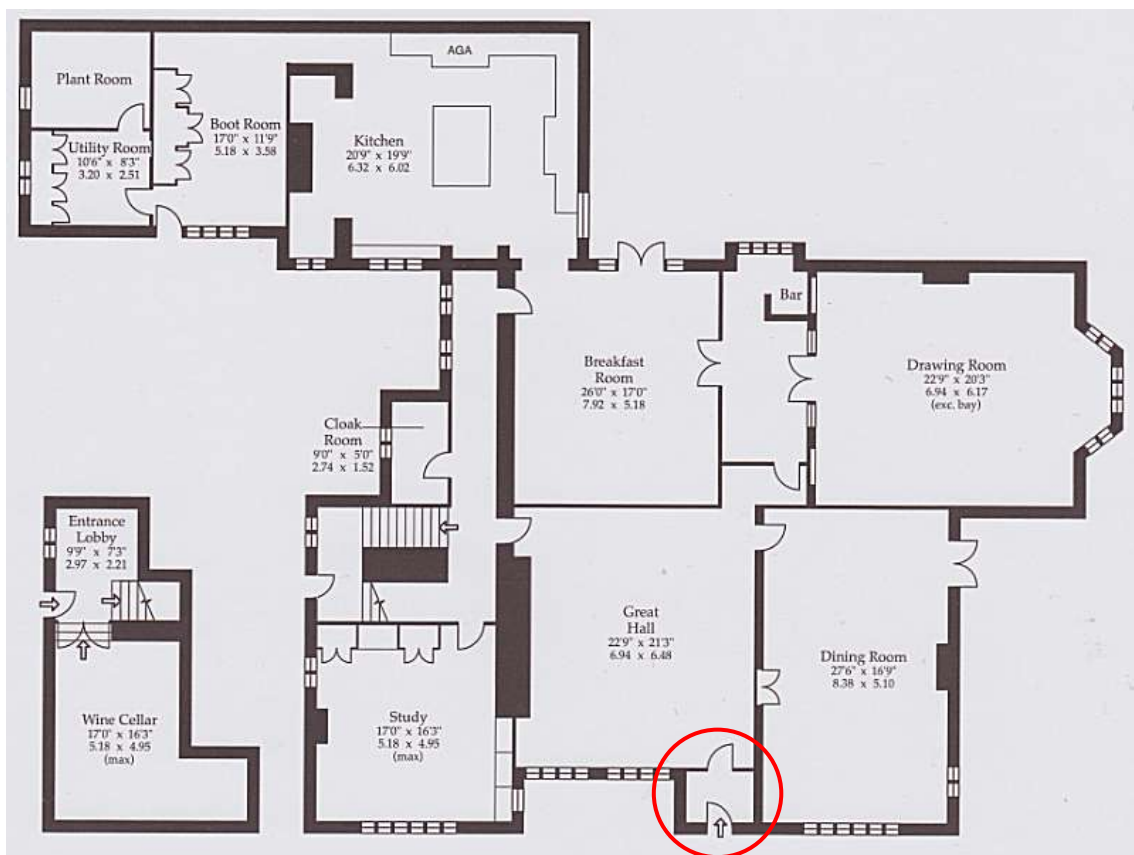


Figure 4: Floor-plan of the ground floor of Kildwick Hall, showing the lobby leading on to the Great Hall.

Text: *... the kitchen is forced to retreat altogether into another quarter*

Match with **Yes.**

Kildwick Hall: However, whereas Lockwood is surprised to find that there were "no signs of roasting, boiling, or baking, about the huge fireplace", the kitchen at Kildwick Hall was always separate from the main hall, at the rear of the building and linked to it by a passageway.

Text: ... the huge fireplace

Match with **Yes.**

Kildwick Hall: Like many substantial houses, the main hall at Kildwick has a large stone fireplace.

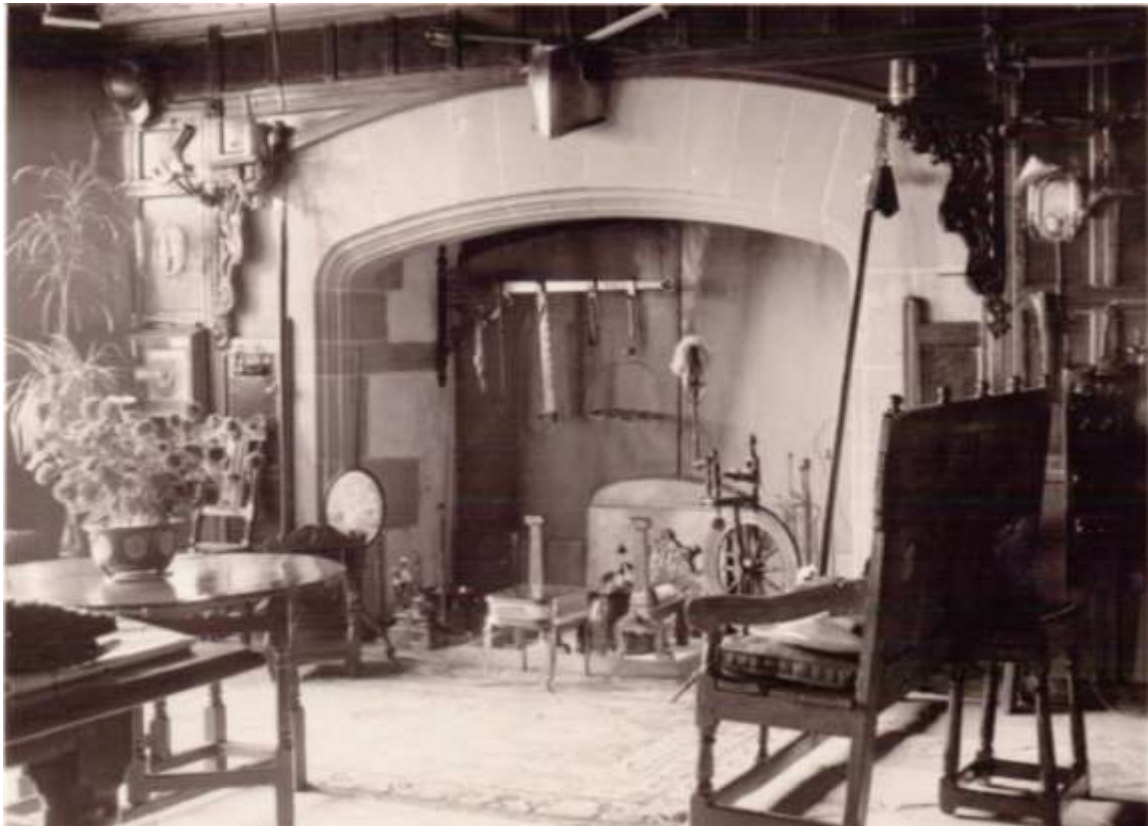


Figure 5: The fireplace in the main hall at Kildwick

Text: ... the roof [of the main room] ... had never been underdrawn: its entire anatomy lay bare to the inquiring eye

Match with **No.**

Kildwick Hall: This implies that this part of the building is a single-storey, which is not the case at Kildwick Hall where the main hall supports two upper two-storeys.

Text: [Lockwood is sat in the main hall] ... Joseph mumbled indistinctly in the depths of the cellar: so his master dived down to him ... Mr. Heathcliff and his man climbed the cellar steps ...

Match with **No.**

Kildwick Hall: The Kildwick Hall cellar is not directly accessible from the main hall, which seems to be the layout suggested here.

There is no evidence that any of the Brontë family ever visited Kildwick Hall. Emily in particular rarely left Haworth – except for her brief sojourn at Law Hill, near Halifax, and her stay with Charlotte when she was at a school in Brussels.

Almost certainly Emily took inspiration for Wuthering Heights from more than one building she knew. The farmhouse “Top Withens”, on the moors above the Parsonage, probably supplied the location – close to the rocky outcrop Ponden Kirk (which becomes Penistone Crag in the book).

Some of the features of Wuthering Heights appear to have been derived from Ponden Hall, which it is known she visited; and High Sunderland Hall, located high above Halifax, visible from Law Hill where Emily was a teacher for a few months.

Whatever is the case, and whether or not we need to assume that a fictional place has any real-life counterpart, there is no reason to believe that Kildwick Hall, of which Emily Brontë can only ever have had second-hand knowledge, formed any part in her imaginings.

9. The Brigg family promoted the idea that Kildwick Hall may have been the model for Wuthering Heights

Well, yes and no. They may have helped to promote the suggestion but they didn’t really believe it themselves – they actually thought another building may have been the model.

In 1911, [Country Life carried an article](#) about Kildwick Hall in which it tried to draw parallels between the two right from the first sentence:

Kildwick Hall lies in the same moorland district of Yorkshire that the Brontë sisters have made so well known to us ...

We quickly move into a brief description of the hall, with some (sometimes inaccurate) literary comparisons:

That house [Kildwick Hall] – as originally planned, and as it remains with certain additions and modifications – has a close likeness to the general type of the halls of the small moorland squires that the sisters knew and described as Emily Brontë did the one she called “Wuthering Heights”.

And later:

The hall at Kildwick ... preserves its massive rafter ceiling like that which the authoress describes as having “never been underdrawn: its entire anatomy lay bare to the inquiring eye”

Note: As discussed above, the text of the book at this point is actually referring to the interior of the roof – not the ceiling.

Then another quotation from the book is used to establish the kitchen as a match, simply because it has:

“ranks of immense pewter dishes interspersed with jugs and tankards, towering row after row on a vast oak dresser, to the very roof”



Figure 6: The kitchen at Kildwick Hall

The fallacy of similarity was continued in the 1922 book “English Homes Vol III no. 1, Late Tudor” by Henry Avray Tipping in which the author uses the exact same text as used in the Country Life article for his description of Kildwick Hall.

It is reasonable to assume that the Brigg family must have had some input into the 1911 Country Life article and, consequently, the entry in the H. A. Tipping book. Given their associations with the Brontë Society and J.J. Brigg’s comments in his [“Kildwick Hall Historical Sketch”](#), it is quite possible that the Brigg family might have drawn the authors’ attentions to supposed similarities between Kildwick Hall and Wuthering Heights.

However, another section of the Country Life article clearly indicates that the family thought Ponden Hall was a more likely model. This is part of the article's description of the main hall:

... oak furniture placed here by Sir John Brigg. The three-storeyed Court cupboard at the west end of the room is ... remarkable for its great size – it is nearly nine feet across and seven feet high ... It possesses also a sentimental interest, for it came from the house which served as the model for Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights", and may, indeed, be the very piece she describes as the pewter-bearing dresser.

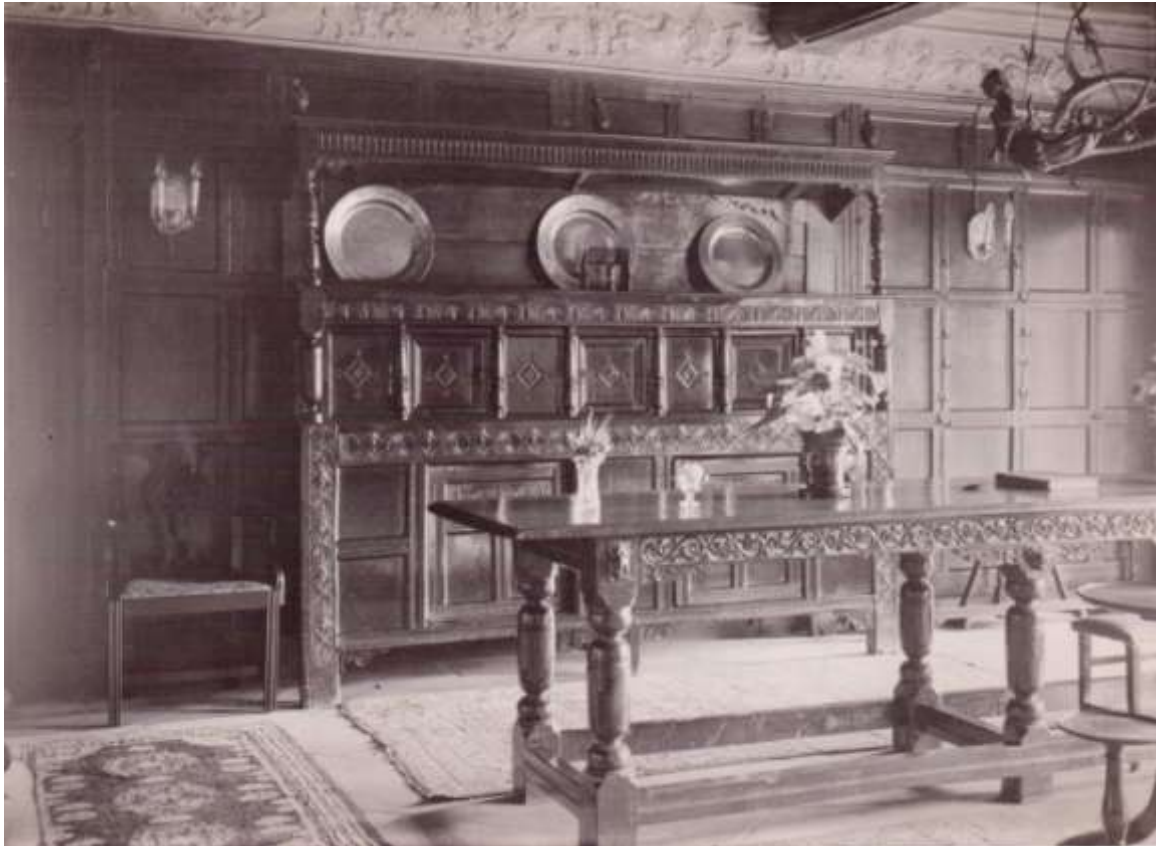


Figure 7: Oak dresser in the main hall at Kildwick

It is known that the oak dresser in question, shown above, came to Kildwick from Ponden Hall: purchased when many of the contents were sold-off at auction in 1899²¹. It is now in East Riddlesden Hall²² – presumably gifted when the Brigg family bought that building and gave it to the National Trust in 1934²³.

10. Kildwick Hall was used as a location for the first ever film of Wuthering Heights

True.

In April and May 1920, the first ever film of Wuthering Heights used various locations around West Yorkshire. The silent, black-and-white, 90-minute film, now lost, starred Milton Rosmer as Heathcliff, and Ann Trevor as Cathy. It was made by Ideal Films of Soho and directed by A.V. Bramble¹⁰.

The completed film, billed as “Emily Brontë’s tremendous Story of Hate”, was first shown at a private viewing on August 5th 1920, at the Kinema Exchange, 22 New Briggate Leeds, and then soon afterwards at Keighley.

In the early years of the millennium, the Brontë Society made a concerted effort to attempt to locate a print of the film, last believed to have been shown in the 1970s. Although they were unsuccessful, they were able to obtain a significant number of documents about the filming.

The film used Haworth Old Hall as Wuthering Heights and Kildwick Hall as Thrushcross Grange.

The Brontë Society also hold A.V. Bramble’s personal album of photographs taken during the shooting. This includes stills from the film as well as pictures of the cast rehearsing and relaxing, some of which show Kildwick Hall gardens.



**Figure 8: Cathy’s death scene from the 1920 film of Wuthering Heights (© The Bronte Society).
Filmed in the oak-panelled bedroom at Kildwick Hall**

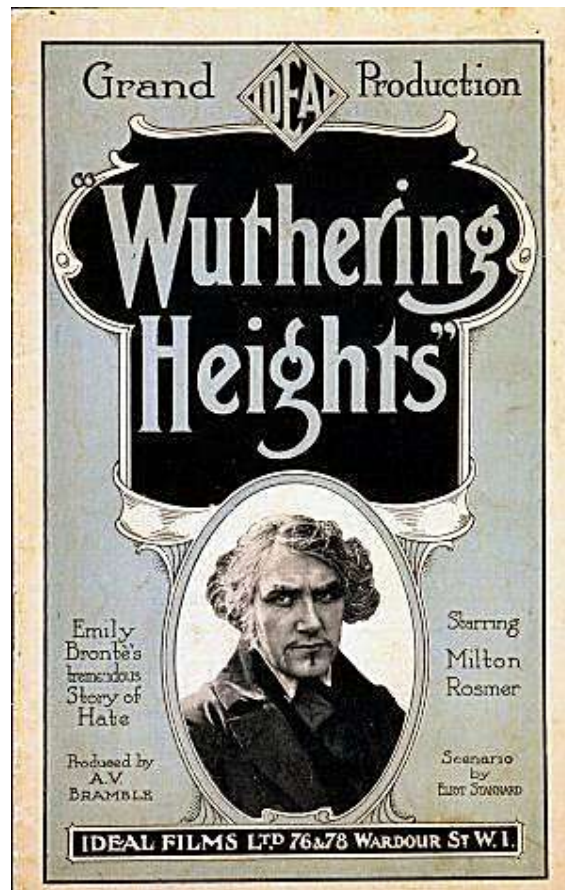
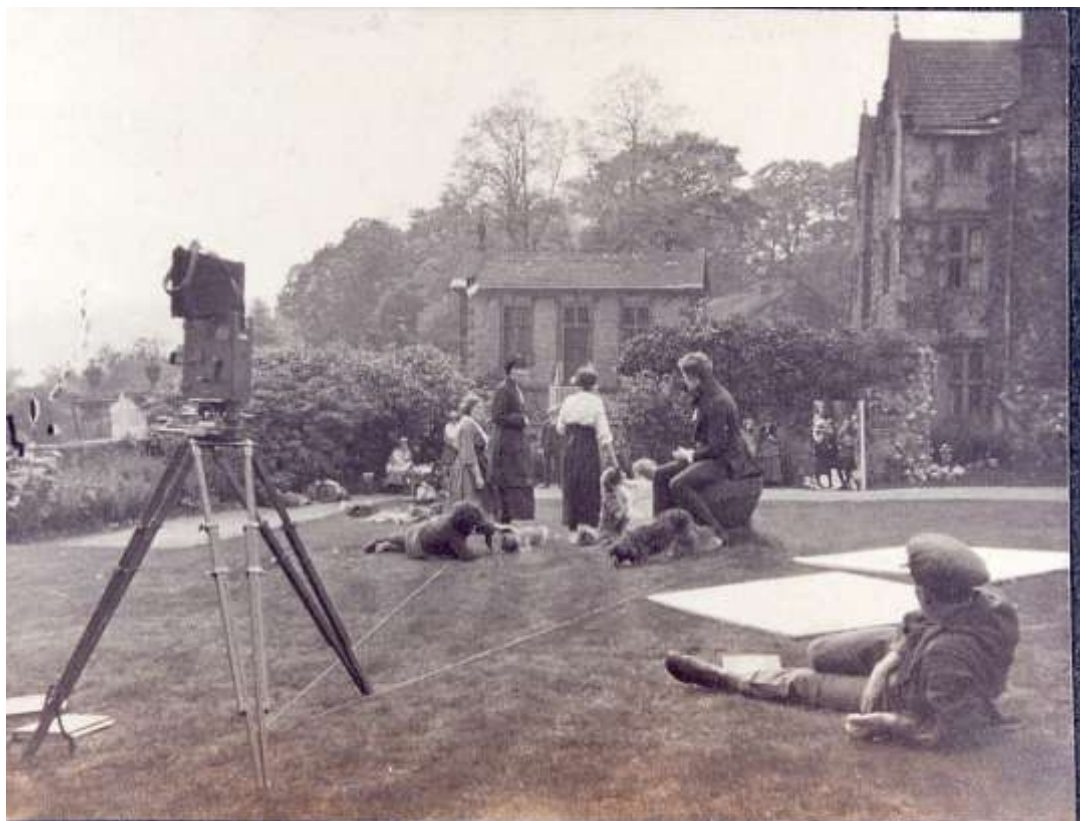


Figure 9: Cover of the programme for the 1920 film of Wuthering Heights (© The Bronte Society)





Figures 10 & 11: Two images of the filming of the 1920 film at Kildwick Hall (© The Brontë Society)
The dog in the foreground is likely to have been one of the Brigg family's spaniels

In August 2014, the Brontë Society announced that they had purchased Bramble's copy of the script and production notes^{[11](#)}.

11. The 1939 film of *Wuthering Heights*, starring Laurence Olivier, was filmed at Kildwick Hall

False – and in this case we know exactly who is responsible for the inaccuracy.

In his published diary, Michael Palin describes his stay at Kildwick Hall while filming the "Golden Gordon" episode of "Ripping Yarns". He writes^{[12](#)}:

*Then to the elegant, tasteful portals of Kildwick Hall, by whose mighty fireplaces Laurence Olivier stood in the film *Wuthering Heights* ...*

Palin may be a national treasure, but in this instance he is completely mistaken. The 1939 film, produced by Sam Goldwyn and starring Laurence Olivier, Merle Oberon, and Flora Robson, was filmed in Hollywood^{[13](#)}.

12. Kildwick Hall was used as a location in a 1967 BBC TV adaption

True.

In 1967, Kildwick Hall once again played the part of Thrushcross Grange in a BBC-TV four-part adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. The cast included Ian McShane and Angela Scoular¹⁴.

Read the [Craven Herald report on the filming](#).

13. The sexton at St. Andrew's Church knew the Brontë family

True.

John Hartley Tillotson was appointed sexton of St. Andrew's Kildwick in 1853 and, later, also became the parish clerk. Prior to coming to Kildwick, he had been apprenticed to John Brown, the monumental mason and sexton of Haworth Church and was in regular contact with the Brontë family. When he set up business as a mason in Kildwick, he came with a recommendation from Rev. Patrick Brontë²⁵.

In later years, John Hartley would note that as there was no railway from Haworth to Keighley he was often entrusted with parcels by Charlotte and Anne Brontë that were going to or coming from London; "Little did I realize at that time the preciousness and value of the proofs and first editions those parcels contained."¹⁵

His wife, Sarah, had been taught in Haworth Sunday School by Charlotte Brontë who she recalled as being a "quaintly dressed, shy, near-sighted lady".

The Tillotsons lived in a house in Church Terrace, Kildwick (now part of Priest Bank Road, backing onto the churchyard) for nearly 50 years, during which time John Hartley officiated in 2488 baptisms, 1241 marriages, and 3625 burials. They had six sons, and eight daughters. One of their grand-daughters was christened Nora Brenda Bronte Tillotson.



Figure 12: Nora Brenda Bronte Tillotson's christening mug
(courtesy of Graham Saunders and Stephen Coates – descendents of John Hartley Tillotson)

Appendix – It could be worse...

From the side of a house near the Kings' Arms, Sutton-in-Craven:



Figure 13: Beware of the dog !

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sarah Laycock, Ann Dinsdale and all the staff of the Brontë Parsonage Museum for allowing me to view their archive material on the 1920 film of *Wuthering Heights*, and for permission to reproduce the images shown in Figures 8 - 11.

Lesley Hudson, churchwarden at St. Andrew's Kildwick, helped with information on the altar cloth and allowed me to take the photographs included as Figure 1.

Isobel Stirk was kind enough to read a draft of this article and her insight and detailed knowledge enabled me to make significant improvements to the text. Among many other helpful comments, it was Isobel who alerted me to the plaque in Sutton and the story of Charlotte's ghost at the White Lion.

Julie and Steve at Ponden Hall were excellent hosts when members of the History Group visited there in 2015 and 2016.

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