

Frances Mary Richardson Currer – a remarkable bibliophile

Frances Mary Richardson Currer (born in 1785) was the posthumous daughter of Rev. Henry Richardson Currer and his wife Margaret Clive Wilson, the only surviving child of Mathew Wilson of Eshton Hall.

Frances was born at Eshton Hall and, as far as it is possible to determine, she lived there all of her life. There is no evidence that she lived at Kildwick Hall.

She was a very rich woman, inheriting from both her father and mother; and is known to have been a generous philanthropist. Amongst other causes, she is known to have supported:

- Bradford Infirmary
- The Benevolent or Strangers' Friend Society
- The Bradford School of Industry for Girls
- Mechanics' Institute Library in Keighley, from where the Bronte children are believed to have borrowed books.

She is also thought to have been the anonymous benefactor of Patrick Bronte, sending him £50 when the cost of his wife's final illness left him in debt.



Frances Mary Richardson Currer
– 1807 portrait by John James Masquerier

The portrait of her painted in 1807 shows a cultured lady with a book in her hand -- and that is appropriate for the renowned owner of a magnificent library, which was kept at Eshton Hall.

In 1815 a family member wrote of her:

She is in possession of both the Richardson and Currer estates, and inherits all the tastes of the former family, having collected a very large and valuable library, and also possessing a fine collection of prints, shells, and fossils, in addition to what were collected by her great-grandfather and great uncle.

A catalogue of the library was printed in 1820 and, in 1825, Eshton Hall was partially rebuilt to accommodate it. A further catalogue, running to almost 500 pages, was printed in 1833.

The catalogue also included some pictures of Eshton Hall.



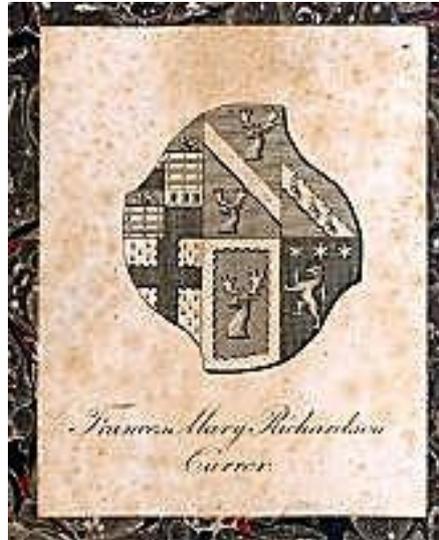
**Frances Mary Richardson Currer in her library at Eshton Hall
– from the 1833 catalogue compiled by C.J. Stewart (1833)**

The bibliophile Thomas Frognall Dibdin thought that her library was one of the best in the country, describing it as:

... consisting of two noble apartments, entirely filled with finely bound books, and extending some eighty feet in length, and twenty-five in width, by sixteen in height – to say nothing of a third library or book boudoir, at the extremity of the second, to the right ... I may honestly say that with the exception of Althorpe, Chatsworth and Stowe, I know of NO such collection of books, situated in the country that can pretend to break a lance with it.

Another book collector, Richard Heber, was said to have been so keen to acquire some of the books in the Currer library that he proposed marriage. Frances Mary declined, but they remained close friends and she later came to Heber's aid when he was in financial trouble.

In the early 1850s the number of books she had accumulated was estimated at over 20,000.



A book-plate from Mary Richardson Currer's library

Although she never lived at Kildwick Hall, Frances Mary Richardson Currer left her mark there, and elsewhere in the village. Her initials are on a carved stone over the Dining Room window of the Hall.



**An "FMRC signature" stone
– from the dining room at Kildwick Hall**

This is dated 1858 and commemorates restoration work being done at the Hall.

The same “signature” stone is to be found on Kildwick School.



“Signature” stone on the gable end of Kildwick School

The school was a gift to the village “for the purpose of educating persons of and in Kildwick parish, and for the residence of the master or mistress” (from Craven Herald 15/1/1892).

She was also responsible for the building (or rebuilding) of Prospect House, on Grange Road, just beyond Kildwick Hall.



Prospect House with “FMRC signature” and date stone

Note: There is evidence that at least some of the work done at Kildwick which bears Frances Mary Richardson Currer’s name was actually carried out by her half-brother, and subsequent lord of the manor, Sir Mathew Wilson.

Note 2: It’s unlikely that Prospect House was a “new build” in 1854; it was more likely to have been a rebuild of one or more existing properties on the site. In his “History of Kildwick Church”, Rev. E.W. Brereton refers to a Laycock family living at Prospect House in the 1810s. However, the first census return (1841) does not record a Prospect House in Kildwick; there is a Laycock family living at View Street (a single household) that is close to Kildwick Hall. In 1851 the census records two households; one in View Street and one in West View Street. Prospect House does not appear in the census until 1881, by which time View Street has disappeared.

Frances Mary Richardson Currer died at Eshton Hall on 28th April 1861 and was buried beside her mother in St Andrew’s Church, Gargrave. In 1800 her mother had married Matthew Wilson, a cousin; Eshton Hall was inherited by their descendants.

Currer had hoped that her library would remain at Eshton Hall but, just a year after she died, her half-brother sold the major part of the collection at auction, when it raised nearly £6000. A second sale in 1916 raised more than £3700; when the collection of manuscripts were bought by Bradford Public Library, and the Richardson family correspondence was bought and then dispersed.

The remaining books were sold in 1979, and in 1994.

FMRC – a postscript: It is almost certain that Frances Mary Richardson Currer was the source of the name “Currer” Bell taken by Charlotte Brontë as her pseudonym. However there is no evidence – contrary to what some people would like to believe – that the Brontë family knew FMRC and even less that members of the family visited her either at Kildwick or at Eshton Hall.

Sources

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: Currer, Frances Mary Richardson (1785–1861)

[Frances Mary Richardson Currer - Wikipedia](#)

[The Wilsons of Eshton: bricks and books](#)

[A catalogue of the library collected by Miss Richardson Currer at Eshton Hall](#)

[Country Life visit Kildwick Hall \(1911\)](#)

History of the Ancient and Historic Church of S. Andrew, by Rev. E.W. Brereton; publ. 1909