

A Mother's Anguish

A letter recently came to light which had been written in February 1834, by Ann Carter, a distraught mother from Quorn. She was writing to Gideon Lee, the Mayor of New York City, about the fate of her beloved son, Benjamin. The letter has survived over 180 years and has recently travelled the 3,500 miles across the Atlantic back to Quorn.

Ann Carter (nee Gilbert) and her husband Richard were servants to Rev Benjamin Clarke Raworth of Quorn Place. This property is now the Quorndon Fox on High Street, but in the early 1800s it was a private house. The Carters had six children, all born in Quorn, and their eldest child was Benjamin, the subject of the letter.

In July 1833, when he was 23 years old, Benjamin, a chemist, decided to seek his fortune in the 'New World', and emigrated to America. However all did not go well, and according to his mother, Benjamin fell foul of an unscrupulous employer and was imprisoned on a charge of fraud. Ann wrote to the mayor of New York, pleading for him to help in any way he could.



Quorn Place in early 1900s

In transcribing the letter some punctuation has been added, simply to make it more readable. Unfortunately there were a few words that were too difficult to interpret, and these are represented by dashes.

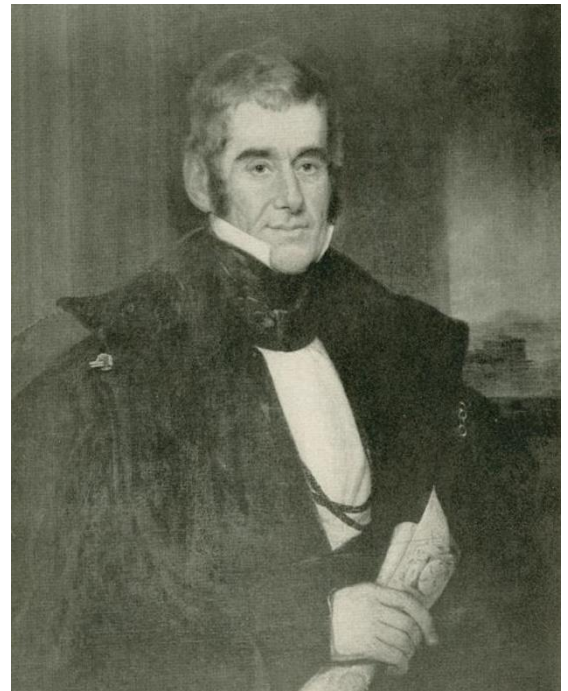


It is interesting to note that at this time, which was in the reign of William IVth, that although the General Post Office existed, there were no stamps or envelopes. The letter was folded into a 3 inch by 5 inch rectangle (5cm by 13cm), and postage would have been paid according to the distance of its destination. The charge seems to have been 2/6d, ie 2 shillings and 6 pence, which is 12.5 pence today – a large outlay in 1834. The letter was sealed with red sealing wax.

My Dear Sir

Though a stranger to you and in a far Country I presume to take the liberty of freely addressing you. I hope and pray that you will not be offended. I am a stranger to writing to any in your office, but any ignorance will please for in your kindness to overlook my error in not knowing how to address you.

I am a Mother of six children my oldest my dear Benjamin is the subject of my prayers to you, and oh may that God that gives you and me the breath we draw, incline your heart to take pity on my darling son. Pardon a broken hearted Mother may you never feel what I do, on account of my oldest my son Benjamin Carter is a prisoner in your state's prison. I had a letter from America on the 16 of October wrote on the 15 September, below, but the contents distressed me. My son left England on the 4 of July in the Greate Brittain bound for New York, to spend with you his days and in hopes of their spring to have his other brother with him. He is by trade a Chemist and Druggist, dark complexion, 23 years of age, tall and stout. Oh that I could see him. He says in his letter he had agreed with someone going to open a store at Philadelphia, as an assistant. He was up and down your city on business for his new employer, collecting goods, and he gave him an order to some place for some things that he had purchased. My son as his servant was bound to obey him, took the order to a Mr Phelps. Who he is or what business I do not know, but he told him he must go to the police with him. It was forged amazing my child could not be guilty of forgery - - - -.



Gideon Lee
Mayor of New York City (Democratic)
1833 to 1834

Having no friend he was sent to prison there to die I fear. I have wrote two letters to New York, but can have no answer therefore I take this liberty in writing to you. If you will be so kind as to make enquiries at York for my son and if you will do all you can to set him at liberty and let him come home once more to his distressed Mother. If that cannot be, make enquiries concerning him all you can and tell me if I could do anything for him if I was to come. I will make the tryst if cost me my life Sir. I fear you will think me bold and troublesome, but if you will be kind enough to pardon me and condescend to have the goodness to help to liberate my son I shall ever pray for you. Can and will you, at his Mother's earnest request, for my life is bound up in my Benjamin case(?) you pray. Can you in any way solicit a pardon of the Governors of your Country? I know not what to do. I have wrote twice but had no answer. I fear your Government does not allow my son to write to his Mother. If you will be so kind as to see him and tell him that his Mother still lives, though on his account distressed beyond all description, but in all other the same as when he left England. I should if possible thank you on my knees. If you have got children you will pardon me. If you will or can see Benjamin Carter, he will give you all the information you or another can wish, and refer you to many respectable people in England - though in America he is destitute of all - no-one to see him or to care if he dies or lives. If you cannot get him liberty, will you see him and permit him or you, to write to me as soon as you can?

I fear you will not be able read my writing, but if you will have the goodness to see my son, he will read it to you with joy, to see that his mother is still alive. You will not find my child ungrateful or dishonest in word or deed. Only try him in anything you please, or dare I hope he will not deceive you, notwithstanding he is I fear a prisoner. Oh what can I do? Can I do anything? I will wait for your answer if you please Sir, as soon as you can. Do not my Dear Sir let your multitude of business make you forget me, though in a far Country, and my Son that is a prisoner with you. He came to your country with hopes high of seeing and knowing and approving of it in preference our own, not like some who had no home to leave, but he has left a good home and many disconsolate friends, particularly his Mother - but please to see my son and try in my stead you can to get his liberty pardon. Sir my ignorant way of writing I write to you as a friend though I know you not or

you me, but I hope you will not be offended at the liberty I have taken when I tell you I am a Mother, and with trembling hand and aching heart I make this effort.

You will be surprised to know how I knew your name, seeing a New York paper and seeing your name affixed to a circular, I took the liberty in this my great extremity, to address you, praying that the all wise director may of his infinite goodness with your kind efforts grant me petition.

Dear Sir I remain with the greatest anxiety and solitude your very humble and obliged servant.

*Ann Carter
Quorndon
Near Loughborough
Leicestershire*

Even though I wrote to the New York City Archives, sadly it has not been possible to find out what happened to Benjamin, either whether he was released, or what became of him later in his life. He does not appear to have returned to England, so it is probable that his mother never saw him again. Ann Carter died almost seven years to the day after writing her letter. She was aged 50 and was buried in Quorn Parish Churchyard in February 1841.

The 1851 census sheets show us that ten years after Ann's death, fortunes seem to have changed for her widower, Richard. His occupation had risen from lowly 'servant' in 1841, to 'proprietor of land' in 1851, which is extremely unusual. An explanation started to emerge when an advertisement in the Leicester Chronicle on Saturday 21st July 1849, under the title of 'To Be Let', included "...a residence lately occupied by the Rev Benjamin Clarke Raworth..." together with another 43 acres of land. The present 'owner and occupier' was stated as Mr Richard Carter. After examining Benjamin Raworth's will, it became clear that when Rev Raworth died in April 1848, aged 70 years old, he left his property to his loyal servant.



Richard Carter died in January 1854, also aged 70. He was buried with Ann, and their slate gravestone can still be seen in Quorn Churchyard today.

This article was produced by Sue Templeman on behalf of www.quornmuseum.com. Thank you to Christine and Peter Sibcy for the Leicester Chronicle newspaper reference, which was taken from their book 'Quorndon Through The Newspapers 1754 to 1850'.