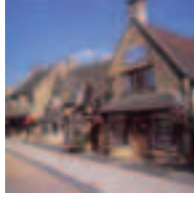


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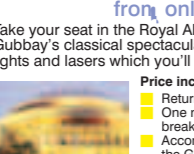


- Price includes:**
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# In the tracks of Polam's progress

This week, Echo Memories follows the footsteps of the Grey Lady to the green grass of Polam, and tracks the changes that led to the creation of South Park

**T**HE river babbles by; a duck paddles past. On the green grass of Polam opposite, the Canada geese squabble as they turn in for the night.

The day is fading; a mist is rising. A lady, all in grey, hurries across the Skerne towards the big houses of Grange Road. Only next day does it strike you as odd. The river is still babbling, the duck is still paddling and the geese on the grass are still squabbling.

But there is no bridge there, no way of crossing from Darlington's showfield in South Park over the Skerne to the playing fields of Polam Hall. No way the lady, all in grey, could have hurried home through the mist.

Once, though, there was a

**ECHO MEMORIES**  
BY CHRIS LLOYD  
A WALK IN THE PARK  
online: www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk

footbridge there. It stood at the end of Lavender Walk - a long-lost footpath that ran off Grange Road, went around Polam Hall and down to the river.

The footbridge is shown on an 1848 map when both parts of the river belonged to the Polam Estate.

A financial calamity of the 1870s caused the break-up of the estate. It was sold off in two

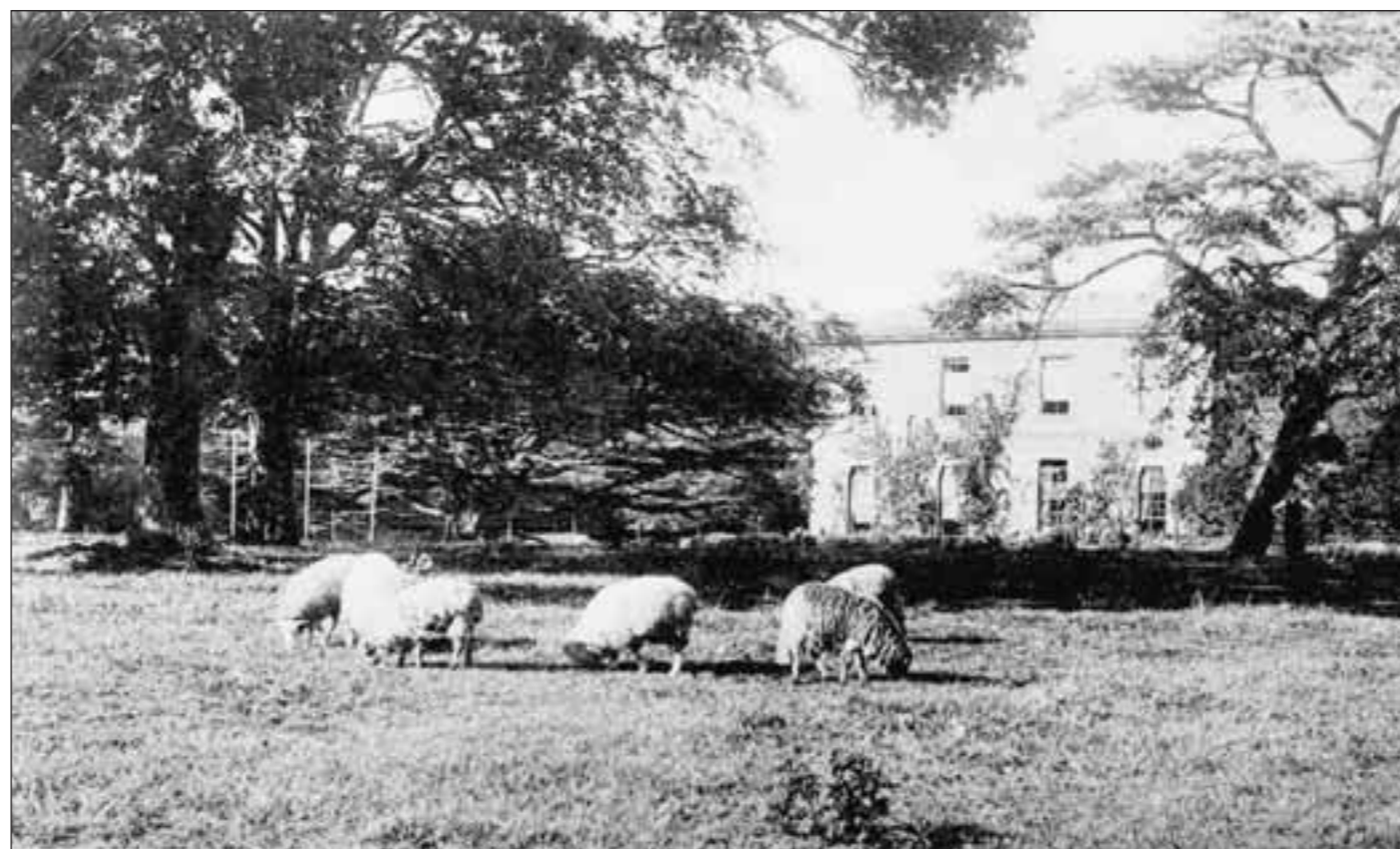


Quaker pupils: A photograph taken in 1857 of the girls studying at Polam Hall School, which was founded three years earlier

## FACES FROM HISTORY



**Historic figures:** Clockwise from top left are William Thompson who, with brother Robert, owned Polam Hall from 1850 until 1872; Jonathan Backhouse Junior (1779-1842), who bought Polam Hall from Harrington Lee in 1825; and sisters Elizabeth and Jane Procter, Jane being the founder of Polam Hall School, a school for Quaker girls created in 1848



Picturesque scene: Polam Hall in the late 19th Century, with sheep grazing on the school fields



Balancing act: Blondin crossing the Niagara Falls. He appeared on a high wire in the grounds of Polam in July 1872

halves and the river in the middle of it was straightened and the old bridge destroyed.

So no one has been able to cross to Lavender Walk for the best part of 150 years. No one except, of course, for the ghostly Grey Lady - although she only appears when the mist is rising in the evening.

**N**O walk in South Park is complete without a look towards Polam Hall.

Polam's open tree-lined bank and grassy field is an integral part of the park's beauty. The two sides of the river are connected in many ways - not just by the crossing of the ghostly Grey Lady.

Polam - or Polinpole, Polum Pool, or Powlam Hall, as history has variously recorded it - is the name by which several of Darlington's ancient leading families knew their farmland in this district.

In 1794, a fellow called Harrington Lee acquired four acres of land at Polam. He was only 27, but still financed the building of the area's first countryside villa.

We can only guess where Harrington's money came from. He was "an eminent mercer" with a draper's shop in the Horse-market (roughly where McGurk's sports shop is today). He was also newly-married to Margaret, a member of the wealthy Hylton family, which had possessions all over the North-East.

Harrington and his six children lived at Polam for more than 25 years before they moved out to Baydale (probably near the Broken Scar pumping station where Coniscliffe Mews has recently been built).

The new owner of Polam Hall was the banker Jonathan Backhouse Jnr (1779-1842). In 1825, it became the last piece in his jigsaw because he had been buying parcels of land around Polam for seven years. He now owned 36 acres and spent three years transforming them into a palatial park.

He turned the house around - quite literally. Harrington's home faced onto Grange Road (you can still see its pedestrian

access through the disused roadside gateway, which has a curious tin hat above it).

Jonathan's new wing and entrance hall looked out over his terrace, down through his gardens to the river with the broad sweep of pasture beyond.

His wife, Hannah Chapman Gurney, whom he married in 1811, was given the suite of rooms which commanded the best views.

"The excavation of a fine fishpond and the plantation of trees and shrubberies over such an area expanded a mere paddock into a widely-spread park," says Kathleen Davies in her 1981 book Polam Hall: Story of a School.

Having spent so much money and so much time, and having four children aged six to 16, one might think Jonathan and Hannah would happily settle in their new home.

Not a bit of it. In July 1830, the pair sailed from Liverpool to America and began travelling, preaching their Quaker faith. After two years, Jonathan returned to Darlington - but Hannah pushed on deep into the slave-owning states of Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio.

She drove her own carriage, crossed a river in a hollowed-out canoe and slept on straw on the floor of a railroad coach.

She came back in 1835, and lived out the rest of her days in Polam, Jonathan dying in 1842 and she in 1850. On her death, her son Edmund sold Polam to the Thompson brothers, William and Robert.

**R**EGULAR readers will remember the Thompsons, self-made accountants and stockbrokers who had a finger in every pie from railways to newspapers to mines in an area stretching from south Durham to Saltburn.

Property was another of their interests - they also owned the large field on the eastern side of the river, a field that was connected to Polam Hall by the footbridge at the end of Lavender Walk.

Another of their properties was in Houndgate. The Procter sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, had



Future mayor: A very early photograph reputed to show Hannah Gurney Backhouse, who died in 1850, with her grandson Jonathan Backhouse Hood, in, who was born in 1843 and who later became the mayor of Darlington

rented it since 1848 and used it as a Quaker school. They taught young Quaker ladies "reading, writing, arithmetic, English Grammar, Composition, Geography, Astronomy, the use of Globes, History, Botany, Needlework, Drawing, the French and German languages" for 50 guineas a year. For a further four guineas, Latin, Greek and Italian were thrown in. This was a high-brow curriculum paid for by sky-high fees (five times more than other Quaker schools). The Procters needed a high-class home for their school and, in 1854, began renting Polam from the Thompsons.

**T**HE school might have been private, but Polam's grounds were remarkably public.

In them were held galas, flower shows, promenade concerts and brass band competitions with the judges floating in a boat on the fishpond.

In winter, that pond was open for public skating. Once, a young man was knocked unconscious in a skating accident and he came round in a Polam room with young girls lining the side of his bed.

A national curling match between Leeds and Newcastle was also held on the frozen pond and, best of all, the world-renowned acrobat Blondin performed in the grounds in July 1872.

Blondin was best-known for balancing on a high wire, but the Thompson brothers were having increasing difficulty balancing their books.

A London bank collapse in 1866 had wiped out much of their fortune and, in 1872, desperate to recoup their losses, they sold Polam Hall on the west of the Skerne to Arthur Pease, of Hummersknott.

The economic depression deepened, and even the sale of their most marketable assets could not save the Thompsons. In 1878, they slipped into liquidation with debts of £1m by today's prices.

Amid the wreckage of their business was another parcel of land - the Little Polam Estate on the east of the Skerne. But so severe was the recession, factory owners were laying off existing workers, not buying land to build terraces for new workers.

So only a municipal body might have wanted Little Polam Estate, and Darlington council got it for a knockdown £3,800 (about £150,000 today).

Using unemployed men as labour, the council landscaped the estate, straightening the Skerne and digging out the ornamental pond.

Little Polam became known as the New Park, as it was beside the Old Park which the council had opened in the early 1850s.

Together the Old and the New became known as South Park, and so the link between the east and the west sides of the rivers was severed - although even if you can't float across it like the ghostly Grey Lady, you can, of course, see across it.

● The full story of the Thompsons' bankruptcy was told in February. It can be found on the Echo Memories' website at, www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/the\_north\_east/history

● A seasonal story from Polam Hall next week. In the meantime, if you have anything to add to today's column, please write to Echo Memories, The Northern Echo, Priestgate, Darlington DL1 1NF, or e-mail chris.lloyd@nne.co.uk or call (01325) 505062.

## The hero of Niagara

**J**EAN-FRANCOIS Gravellet, a Frenchman, became famous in June 1859 under his stage name of Blondin when he crossed the 1,100ft Niagara gorge between the US and Canada on a three-inch thick rope. He wandered across the line 160ft above the water as it rushed towards the falls.

He repeated his feat 17 times, getting his time down to eight minutes and adding a different gimmick each time: he went across blindfold, in a sack, on stilts, pushing a wheelbarrow and

with his manager grimly holding onto his back.

His favourite trick was to sit down midway across and whip out a gas stove so that he could cook himself an omelette. He reprised this trick when his tour stopped at Polam Hall in July 1872. A high wire was erected in the grounds and The Northern Echo enthused about "this world-renowned acrobat, whose marvellous exploits on the tight rope evince a daring and intrepidity almost super-human".

The paper's report said:

"The fine weather on Saturday, and the fame of the performer, drew a very large company, including representatives of most of the influential families of the town and district. The feats which the acrobat performed comprised astounding acts of walking in a sack, cooking an omelette, carrying a man, riding upon a bicycle, all of which were gone through in a manner that fully sustained the reputation of the hero of the Niagara, and gave unbounded satisfaction to the spectators."