

John Alston: Helping the Blind to Read*

Carol Parry, Trades House Honorary Librarian

In the Trades House Library there are some fascinating volumes of the New Testament printed in raised capital letters for the blind. The type, known as Alston Type was developed by Glasgow muslin manufacturer John Alston (1778-1846). John Alston was the eldest child of Thomas Alston, a weaver, and his wife Isobel. In 1802 he married Margaret Scott, the eldest daughter of William Scott, Manufacturer in Glasgow. The couple lived at Rosemount, an estate of four acres, on the East side of Garngadhill and had ten children, not all of whom survived to adulthood. Described as a 'little round-about and round-shouldered figure', wearing a 'broad-brimmed beaver', a 'curiously-constructed dress-coat' and a 'wisp of a white tie',¹ John Alston took an active part in the Trades House, being Deacon of the Weavers (1810-11) and Deacon Convener (1829-30). He was also a major figure in the City of Glasgow, serving as a town councillor and was involved in many charitable activities including helping to raise funds for the Asylum for Indigent Old Men erected in Rottenrow. However, it is for his work for the Asylum of the Blind that he is chiefly remembered and to which 'he devoted his principal labour', being Honorary Treasurer for that institution from 1825-1846.²

Funds towards an Asylum had been bequeathed by Mr John Leitch but the sum (£5,000) was insufficient until Mr Ewing of Strathleven and John Alston managed to raise further funds via subscription to purchase a site and erect a building.³ The Asylum which opened in 1828, was in Castle Street, close to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. Children lived in whereas blind adults came in daily, numbers being small initially. In January 1830 there were 15 adults in the 'House of Industry' and 8 boys and 5 girls.⁴ This number gradually increased year on year. The 1834 Report describes Alston as the 'Foster-father of the Asylum' who in the evenings 'is generally to be seen seated at the Asylum in the midst of his blind family, instructing them in habits of industry and virtue, and the principles of our holy religion'.⁵ A school was held for the children where lessons were given in reading, English grammar, arithmetic, music and geography and, when not attending classes, the boys were taught how to make nets for wall-trees and sew sacks and similar types of work, whereas girls were taught to knit silk purses,

¹ A. Aird, *Glimpses of Old Glasgow*, (Glasgow, 1894), 396

² Obituary of John Alston, *Glasgow Herald*, 31 August 1846.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Third Report by the Directors of the Asylum for the Blind, 18 January 1830, (Glasgow, 1830), 4.

⁵ *Seventh Report by the Directors of the Asylum for the Blind*, 22nd January 1834 (Glasgow, 1834), 9, 14.

stockings and caps.⁶ Instruction was also given to the girls in household work and, if they proved suitable, they could be engaged as domestic servants in the Asylum. Admittance to the Asylum was open to any blind person who was fit to work and who lived in Glasgow or its neighbourhood.

An annual examination of the attainments of the pupils was held outside the Asylum in the Trades Hall or the Great Hall of the Andersonian University. The annual examination was a chance to display examples of the work produced in the Asylum and also show the proficiency of the pupils in their school studies. From 1841 the annual examination was held in a new hall in the Asylum which had been made following modifications to the original building. The hall is described as:

tastefully fitted up, being painted oak colour. At the head of the room is the fine organ, on the right of which is suspended the admirable portrait of the Treasurer and father of the Institution, and on the left is placed a tablet inscribed with the name of the founder (the late Mr Leech of Kilmardinny), donations from the corporations, together with a list of legacies.⁷



Portrait of Bailie John Alston of Rosemount (1778-1846) by John Graham-Gilbert (1794-1866). Photo credit: Glasgow Museums, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

⁶ *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind, Glasgow*, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), 28.

⁷ 'Glasgow Asylum for the Blind Annual Examination' in *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind, Glasgow*, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), 55.

Adult males were employed in weaving sacking cloth, basket making, spinning twine, making and repairing mattresses, mat and rug making. They were given a similar rate of pay to other workmen, of around 7s to 8s a week, with a premium added which raised the rate further.⁸ Females were employed in sewing, knitting, netting and winding pirns (bobbins) for weaving. The items were then sold to support the institution.

The children were initially taught letters by means of a string alphabet – knots in the string distinguishing the letters.⁹ However, this method was not very efficient and by the early 1830s there was a considerable amount of interest in producing an effective reading system for the blind; the Society of Arts for Scotland offering a gold medal as a prize for the best. In 1836 the Society sent several different alphabets to the directors of blind institutions for their consideration. It was at this stage that Alston became really interested in the subject, and started experiments of his own using a system devised by Dr Fry of London based on Roman capitals in relief.¹⁰ Dr Fry's characters were felt to be too broad and obtuse and Alston changed them to be thinner and sharper so that the children could read the letters more easily.

Alston recommended Dr Fry's system with changes to the Society of Arts and in May 1837 Fry's system was awarded a gold medal, but the Society pointed out the modifications required in order to make it more practical for the blind.¹¹ Alston felt that a method based on the Roman alphabet would be an advantage for those who were familiar with it before they lost their sight and would also be much easier for those helping the blind to read. He demonstrated his improved version of Fry's system at the annual examination of the blind in the Trades Hall in October 1836. As a consequence of the fundraising efforts of the ladies who attended this meeting, he was able to establish a press for producing the new type at the Asylum. Two different sizes of font were produced, a smaller one for school age pupils and a larger font for older people who did not have the same sense of touch as the young. A special meeting was held in the Asylum in April 1837 to demonstrate the efficacy of the Alston Type to an audience of over one hundred people. The children initially read from the gospels and were then tested on unseen sentences which they read fluently.

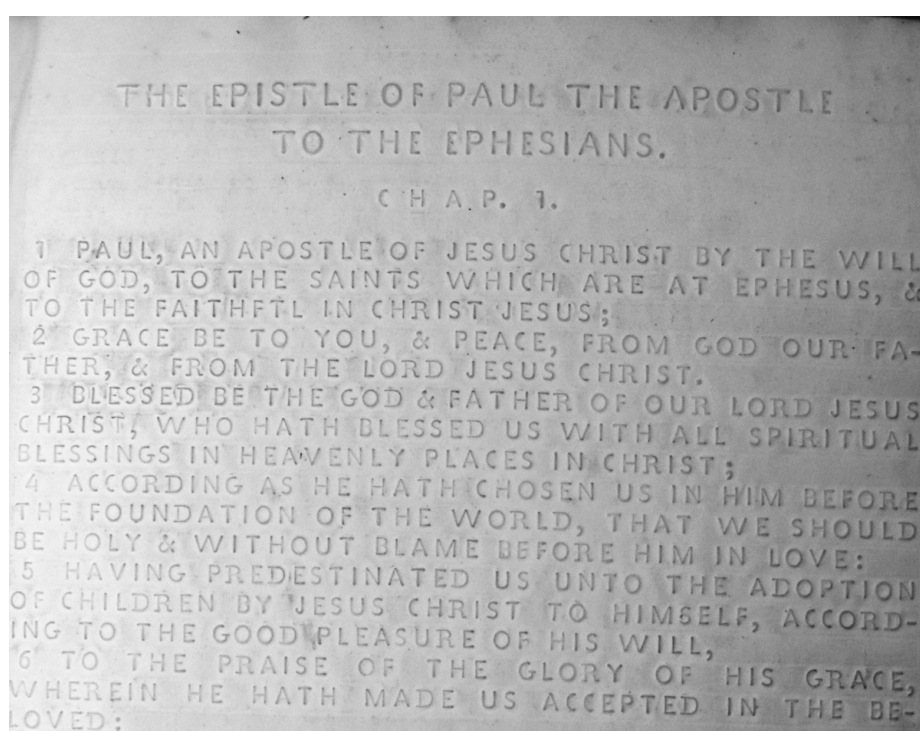
⁸ *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind*, Glasgow, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), 25.

⁹ For a full explanation of this method see: *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind*, Glasgow, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), Plate 1.

¹⁰ J. Alston, 'On Printing for the Blind', *Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow*, 9 April 1844.

¹¹ Statement of the Society of Arts, in *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind*, Glasgow, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), 47.

In July 1837 Alston sent a printed letter with examples of type to the Directors of blind institutions in Great Britain, emphasizing that 'The advantage to the Blind in having books printed for their use, in a distinct and tangible character is incalculable.' He felt that children within the institutions should start learning to read using the typeface at around the age of nine or ten 'before they are put to trades suited to their capacities and strength'.¹² Books printed at the press were offered to Institutions of the Blind at net cost. The Type proved to be very popular and by January 1839 Alston claimed that all the blind institutions in England and Scotland with one exception were teaching their children on this system. In June 1839 he applied for a government grant to help with the production costs to the benefit of all the blind in the country and was awarded £400 from Royal Bounty.¹³



The New Testament in Alston Type, 1838.

The majority of the works produced by the Asylum press were religious in nature but it also produced books on geography, music and natural history. Alston's great aim was that every blind child in the country should have the opportunity of reading the Word of God and he was able to complete the task of printing the whole Bible in December 1840. By 1844 the press had printed more than 14,000 volumes costing between 6d. and 13s. and Alston was able to state at a meeting of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow in April of that year that

¹² John Alston, *Letter to the Directors of the Institutions for the Blind in Great Britain & Ireland*, 4 July 1837, 9-10.

¹³ *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind, Glasgow*, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), 39-41.

there were now 'hundreds reading the books both in schools and in private families, and many are in possession of the whole Bible'.¹⁴

In addition to the press, Alston also introduced a system for the blind to write using an apparatus of wooden types 'with the face of the letter formed of brass points'. The types were arranged:

in a drawer or case, sub-divided into compartments for the respective letters, each compartment being labelled in relief to guide the person using it to the letter he requires. In another drawer ... in the same case, there are a series of grooves or lines exactly fitting the breadth of the types; and in these grooves the words are arranged with suitable spaces. The whole being fixed in a very simple manner, the paper is put upon the types, and pressed down.¹⁵

The great advantage of this way of 'writing' was that the impressions could be read as easily by the sighted as by the blind.

Once children had learned how to read Alston's type it was found that they could then relatively easily learn other raised types and gradually Alston's system was replaced by the one ultimately preferred, that of Louis Braille (1809-1852). Before braille became widespread, however, Alston Type was a key method in helping the blind to read and, as a consequence of Alston's work, reading was now considered essential in the education of blind people.

In appreciation of all the work he had done for the Asylum, the inmates along with outside support raised funds for a marble bust to be made of Alston by the Glasgow sculptor, James Fillans. At the ceremony to present Alston with the bust on 30 September 1843, an address was read out prepared by the inmates, printed in Alston type. The bust bore the following inscription:

Erected by the Inmates of this Asylum, aided by a few friends, in honour of JOHN ALSTON, Esq. of Rosemount, Honorary Treasurer, by whom the first Bible was printed, in raised letters, for the use of the Blind, and whose life has been passed in a series of benevolent labours to promote the interests of this institution. – 1843.¹⁶

It was placed in one of the rooms of the Asylum as a memorial of the 'father of the Asylum' who had done so much to help the blind inhabitants of the City. John Alston died a few years later, on 20 August 1846. The Blind Asylum continued its work, a new building being erected in 1881 designed by architect William

¹⁴ J. Alston, 'On Printing for the Blind', *Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow*, 9 April 1844.

¹⁵ Appendix VIII, Glasgow Asylum for the Blind Annual Examination (From the *Scottish Guardian*, 21 December 1841) reprinted in *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements adopted at the Asylum for the Blind, Glasgow*, 7th Ed. March 1842, (Glasgow, reprinted 1894), 56.

¹⁶ *Glasgow Citizen*, 27 January 1844.

Landless, and by 1899 around 250 blind people were educated, maintained and employed in the institution.¹⁷

*Books on Glasgow history and on the education of the blind and can be found on the Trades House Digital Library website at www.tradeshouselibrary.org

¹⁷ John K. M'Dowall, *The People's History of Glasgow*, 2nd Ed., (Glasgow, 1899), 65.