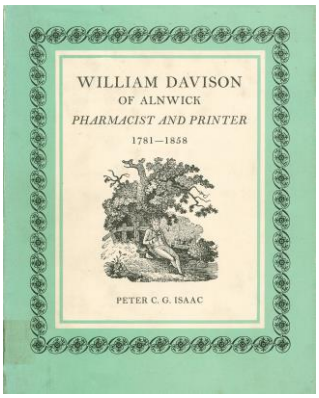
William Davison of Alnwick, Pharmacist and Printer (c.1780/81-1858)

In 2019, we included in *The Pheon*, a major article about William Davison, a much-celebrated local entrepreneur and philanthropist of Alnwick, Northumberland. This article included details about the recently installation of the blue memorial plaque on the front of the building which originally housed his business premises in Bondgate, Alnwick. We are still researching this Davison family and because we are holding our Gathering and AGM later this year in Alnwick, we have included another article about this important character.

Blue Plaque

William Davison's Trade Card



William Davison of Alnwick

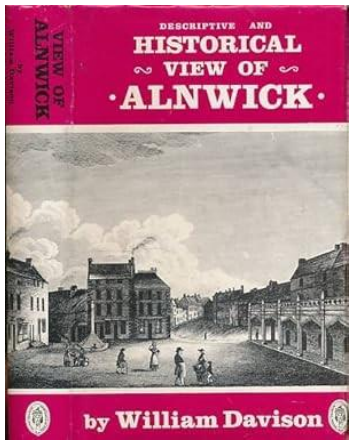
There appears to be a difference of opinion regarding William's date of birth and the identity of his parents. The late Professor Peter C.G. Isaac's biography of William Davison, entitled *William Davison of Alnwick, Pharmacist and Printer 1781-1858* published in 1968, states that he was born on 16th November 1781 in Alnwick, a younger son of William Davison and his wife, Mary. In 1990, the same author included a more comprehensive biography when he published a facsimile edition of *William Davison's New Specimen of Cast-Metal Ornaments and Wood Types.* In this book, Peter states that William was born in October 1780 in Newcastle upon Tyne, was baptized in St Andrew's Church on 22nd October, and was the son of John Davison, a joiner.

William had a long and successful career as a printer, publisher and author as well as managing his thriving pharmacy business and being involved with many local enterprises and community activities. Peter Isaac identified some 111 publications which can be attributed to William Davison. Among these publications, William Davison printed a number of short histories of Alnwick. First published in 1822, reissued in 1826 and 1829, he published and printed the *Descriptive and Historical View of Alnwick* which includes some fine illustrations. He was also assisted by Andrew Wright, Rev. William Probent and A. H. Tate, his foreman. The book is still available in various facsimile formats.

On 1st June 1854, at the age of 73, William published the first edition of the *Alnwick Mercury, Northumberland Advertiser and Entertaining Miscellany* newspaper. The first issue was 1000 copies. There were 12 pages, with most of the front page devoted to business advertisements. It is understood that part of the newspaper was printed elsewhere, possibly in London. After William's death, this newspaper was sold, and after various owners, it survives today as the *Northumberland Gazette, as* part of the Johnston group of regional newspapers.

THE
Alnwick Mercury
Northumberland Advertiser,. and
ENTERTAINING MISCELLANY.
Entrance to Alnwick Castle.
No. 1.—Vol. I.] PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY W. DAVISON, ALNWICK, JUNE 1st, 1854. [Price One Penny.
ADDRESS TO OUR FRIENDS.
In presenting our little Miscellany "The Alnwick Mercury" to the public, a brief notice as to our views and intentions will not be out of place.
The growing commercial importance of the country, and the constantly augmenting business transactions of the age, render a vast amount of advertisements—and of mediums for advertising—more and more necessary: and it is now generally acknowledged that the outlay of capital in this respect is ultimately a positive source of profit.
With a prevailing love of business, and active attention to its requirements, it is now not deemed impossible to combine a full appreciation of literature;
WILKIN & DICKMAN,
PLUMBERS, &c., ALNWICK,
Respectfully claim Attention to their improved Self-Acting SANITARY WATER CLOSETS, invented by George Wilkin, and Registered according to 6th and 7th Vic., Cap. 65.
These Closets were first introduced in the Great Central Railway Station at Newcastle, their Contracts for Plumbing, Glazing, Painting, Gas Fitting, &c. required for that magnificent Erection they having recently completed.
W. and D. are thus enabled to speak with some Confidence of the Efficiency of these Closets, which, from their simple Mode of Action are deemed vastly superior to any that have hitherto been placed in similar Situations. They have received the Approbation of several eminent Architects, Builders, and others, and are to be adopted in the Lunatic Asylum
WILLIAM BELL,
BOOT, SHOE, & CLOG MAKER,
CLAYPORT STREET, ALNWICK.
In returning sincere thanks to his numerous Friends for the liberal support hitherto enjoyed by him, takes this opportunity of inviting the Public generally to a trial of his Boots, Shoes, &c.
A careful selection of the primest material, combined with sound workmanship, places him in a position safely to challenge competition. Any article in the Trade made to order on the shortest notice.
THOMAS SHEPHERD BUDDLE,
CABINET MAKER & UPHOLSTERER,
BAILIFFGATE, ALNWICK.
Sincerely thanks his Friends and the Public generally, for the patronage awarded him since

Part of Front Page of the 1854 First Edition of the Alnwick Mercury



Facsimile of William Davison's Alnwick Book

As well as printing, William Davison was also involved in many other business activities including his thriving pharmacy business. In the 1834 *Business Directory*, there are two separate full-page advertisements for his two businesses based in Bondgate Street, Alnwick.

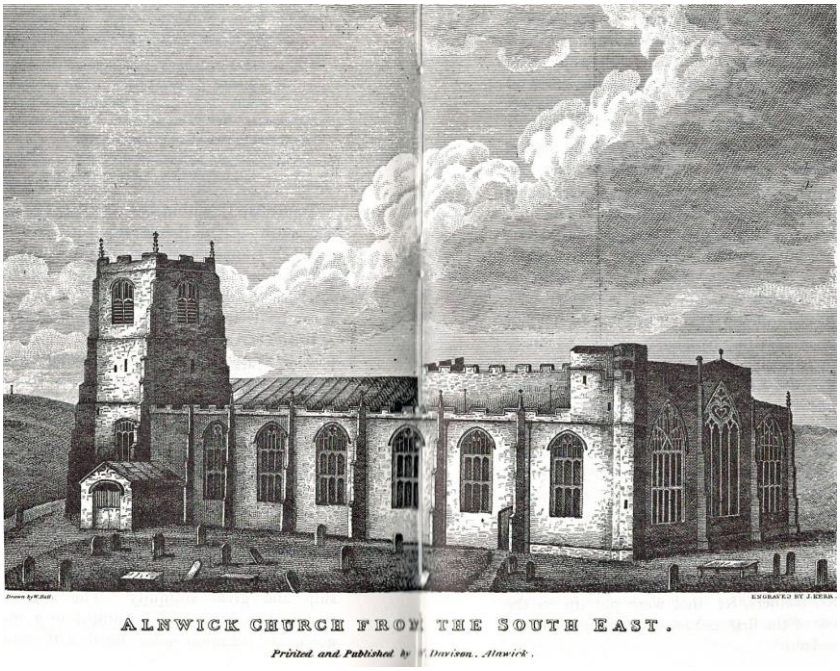
In 1810, he was a churchwarden, and with others, was responsible for the building of a new workhouse. In 1815, the Alnwick Dispensary, for which he was the apothecary was founded. He was also a subscriber to the Alnwick Scientific and Mechanical Institution established in 1824. He is also credited, with others, for bringing gas to Alnwick in c.1817. The extent of their gas supply

is unknown and following complaints about its quality and reliability the venture proved unsuccessful. This was a busy entrepreneur.

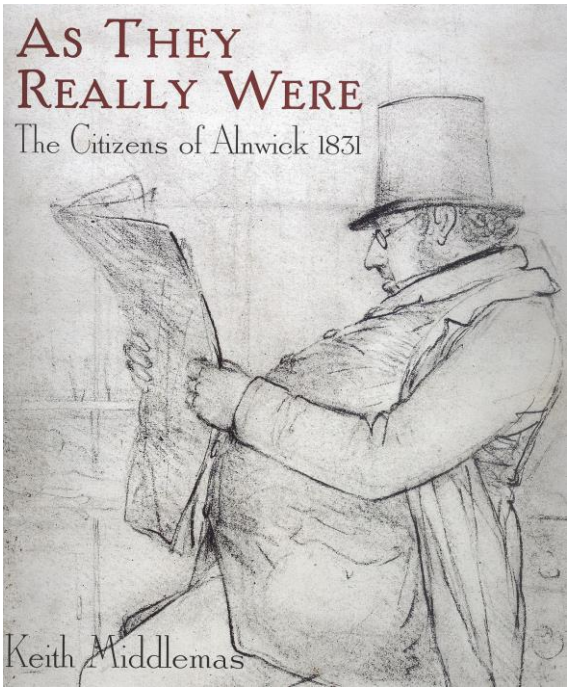
William Davison was also a family man. In 1803, he married Elizabeth Winship at Gosforth. She survived him, following his death in 1858. We are aware of at least 5 children; Thomas who died in infancy; John, a surgeon who died in 1855; William, also a surgeon and the executor of his father's will; Elizabeth Ann who died young; Jane Catherine, who married John Dixon; and possibly Robert. Interestingly, in his will, he refers to himself as 'Chemist and Druggist' with no mention of his printing or publishing business. He lists his 'Shop at No 21, Bondgate in Alnwick, with the yard workshops and stable and big house behind…'

No known portrait of William has survived which is a little surprising when we now know that Percy Forster, a talented local artist, was active in Alnwick when William Davison was in his prime. In 2011, Keith Middlemas published a wonderful book called *As They Really Were, The Citizens of Alnwick 1831*, which includes reproductions of many of the 117 Forster portrait sketches of the Alnwick folk at that time. The author inherited this collection from his grandfather who had been a country solicitor for more than 30 years, with offices in Alnwick.

Although there is no portrait of William Davison, Keith Middlemas draws heavily on these portraits for the image of Alnwick, as depicted by William Davison in his 1822 book about the town, to provide a background, which he fully acknowledges. The author also includes copies of several of the fine engravings used in William Davison's book. The book is almost as much a celebration of William Davison as it is about about the portraits. It is hard to think of another example of where a small town and its characters have been provided with such a background at this time in history. This is a valuable and important book for anyone wanting to understand what Alnwick and its people were like in the 1830s, when William Davison was still active in the town.



William Davidson's engraving of Alnwick Church



As They Really Were: The Citizens of Alnwick 1831 by Keith Middlemas

There is a permanent display in the Bailiffgate Museum in Alnwick which highlights the importance of this local entrepreneur. This display includes William's printing press and examples of the books printed by him such as his famous edition of the Bible.