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John Wheeler and the *Hampshire Independent*, 1835-40

John Wheeler was a member of an influential Manchester family. Baptized at Manchester Cathedral on 23 November 1807, he was one of ten children born to John Wheeler and his wife Mary (*nee* Sergent). His time in Southampton was relatively brief, but it corresponded with a critical period in the fortunes of the Liberal party in the town. In the political world he is synonymous with the campaigning Liberal newspaper the *Hampshire Independent*.

The *Hampshire Independent* was born out of political necessity. It was founded in the immediate aftermath of the January 1835 general election, in which all four Liberal candidates for the Borough of Southampton and the South Division of Hampshire were defeated. These included the foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, a sitting member for the South Division. A letter from William Lankester to Palmerston, dated 3 February 1835, shows that the original impetus came from the borough:

“In consequence of the turn which the recent elections have taken in this and the neighbouring counties, it has been deemed expedient by several Old Reformers to start a Newspaper upon liberal principles thus concentrating the strength of the various districts and enabling us to strike an effective blow whenever the proper time shall arrive for so doing. This measure of self defence is the more indispensable as there is not one organ of communication favourable to Reform principles in this or the adjoining counties. We have in this town raised £700 in part of £1500 (the total sum required), but to make its basis as broad as possible we desire it necessary to solicit our Reforming friends at a distance to assist in the undertaking. We hope also to be favoured with contributions from several Gentlemen of Property and Influence – Mr Bonham Carter, Mr Easthope, Mr Atherley and others have already promised effective aid. It is our wish to ensure its permanency by providing ample funds to meet the loss which must in the first instance necessarily accrue. The whole establishment will be placed under the influence of a Gentleman long connected with the *Morning Chronicle* [who has] received the highest testimonials” (Hartley Library, University of Southampton MS 62 Broadlands Archive 113/20).

This introduces us to two of the leading players in our story. John Easthope was one of the Liberal candidates rejected in 1835 for the Borough of Southampton. He was chairman of the London and South Western Railway and proprietor since June 1834 of the *Morning Chronicle*, quickly establishing itself as the leading Liberal daily newspaper and a staunch support of Palmerston’s foreign policy. Easthope had recently consulted Palmerston over the appointment of the paper’s correspondents in Paris and Brussels (Kenneth Bourne, *Palmerston: the early years 1784-41*, 1982, p 486). The “gentleman long connected with the *Morning Chronicle*” was John Wheeler. He was only 27 years of age but was well grounded in the newspaper business. He had served his apprenticeship as a printer on the Tory *Manchester Chronicle*, founded by his grandfather Charles Wheeler in June 1781 and managed – after his death in September 1827 – by his father John Wheeler. By talent and hard work – “by day I earned my bread – by night I read hard” (*Hampshire Independent*, 10

December 1836) – the young reporter came to the notice of the metropolitan press and was brought down to London to join the large team of parliamentary reporters on the *Morning Chronicle*. Here Wheeler came under the influence of the paper's legendary editor, John Black (for whom see the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*) and became a professional colleague of Charles Dickens, also a parliamentary reporter on the *Morning Chronicle*. Dickens captures their frenzied, claustrophobic working environment in his 1836 essay 'A Parliamentary sketch, with a few portraits' published in the semi-autobiographical *Sketches of Boz*. James Grant, a fellow reporter on the *Chronicle*, later recalled Wheeler's talents and generosity, but hinted at a darker side: "I scarcely ever knew one who was more the creature of impulse, or who was more obstinate in his adherence to his own views" (*The newspaper press: its origin, progress and present position*, volume 3, 1871, pp 237-8).

John Wheeler was part of a sparkling generation. His eldest brother, Charles Henry Wheeler, became part of the Winchester *elite*. In July 1823, after moving from Manchester, he married Eliza Gilmour. She was a sister of George Gilmour, bookseller and printer with whom Charles was briefly in partnership, and niece of James Robbins, a Winchester printer, publisher and bookseller and a founder – briefly sole proprietor – of the *Hampshire Chronicle*. Wheeler and Robbins went into partnership in 1824: booksellers to Winchester College, proprietors of the Public Library and Reading Room in the High Street, official printers to the county and publishers of antiquarian and topographical works aimed at the new professional classes then colonising the city. Eliza Wheeler continued the partnership after her husband's early death in 1833. On his own account, Charles published *Wheeler's Hampshire and West of England Magazine* (January-December 1828) and *The Crypt, or Receptacle for Things Past, and West of England Magazine* (January-September 1828). Both were monthly digests of literary trivia. Charles also wrote for *Blackwood's Magazine* and edited *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare (with a Sketch of his Life, an essay on his writings and a Literary and Historical Notice prefixed to each play)*. Published in 1827, but with a preface dated Winchester 1824, this is the first collection of Shakespeare's plays to be arranged according to their setting in time. John's eldest sister, Elizabeth Wheeler Stone, was a social novelist, amongst the first to expose the distress of the manufacturing districts of Lancashire in the hungry forties. Her first novel – *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord*, published in 1842 – is perhaps her best known. Some thought her to be the author of *Mary Barton*, published anonymously in 1843 (*Oxford dictionary of national biography*: entry on Elizabeth Stone). Thomas Wheeler, two years John's senior, was the only one of the siblings to be university educated (St John's College, Cambridge). A solicitor in Manchester between 1827 and 1842, he was called to the bar at the Middle Temple in January 1846 and was a judge in Marylebone County Court between 1862 and his retirement in 1883. Two younger brothers were also trained for the bar: Henry, who never practised, and James, an attorney in Manchester who later acted as solicitor for the abortive Manchester and Southampton Railway. Before training for the bar, James was a printer and author, amongst other works, of *Manchester: its political, social, and commercial history, ancient and modern* (1836) and the anthology *Manchester poetry* (1838). The latter included 'Ode to Manchester Grammar School' written by his brother Henry. The former work was shamelessly advertised on the front page of consecutive issues of the *Hampshire Independent*.

The *Hampshire Independent* made its first appearance on 28 March 1835. The title seems an afterthought for even as late as 3 March the promoters were using the working title *Southampton Herald*, the original name of the Tory paper established in 1823 and predecessor of the *Hampshire Advertiser*. The task of settling the legal constitution of the paper was given to the young barrister John Bullar, only a few months older than Wheeler and appointed to Gray's Inn the previous year. Bullar was a member of a family at the core of the Liberal, Congregationalist *elite* in Southampton (although probably himself now a convert to Anglicanism) and had previously acted professionally on behalf of James Chaldecott Sharp and his son James Sharp, solicitors for the *Hampshire Independent* and more generally for the Liberal party in Southampton. In one respect, however, Bullar was atypical of the paper's founders. He was a Tory, an idiosyncrasy exploited by the younger Sharp. "No political differences will shake my feelings of respect and regard for you, - though I grieve to think how lamentably you are bewildered in the labyrinth of Liberalism" (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/N20/18/2/3: letter, 27 February 1835). The fundamental legal problem was the relationship between Wheeler and the financial backers of the paper. The Limited Liability Act lay more than two decades away, so any suggestion that the subscribers were shareholders would have left them potentially open to unlimited losses should the paper fold. The solution was to make the subscribers effectively mortgagees, their investments guaranteed by the intellectual and tangible property of the paper. It was John Wheeler, appointed editor, publisher, printer and sole proprietor, who alone legally bore the risk of failure. "The arrangement is of a very unusual nature, and requires to be effected in a circuitous mode; but I think that the Subscribers will be able to exercise almost all of the rights of partners, without incurring partnership risks" (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/N20/18/1: Bullar to James Sharp, 3 March 1835). Wheeler was understandably reluctant to sign such a dangerously unorthodox agreement. He had still not signed at the end of the year. He rejected one late revision with spirit: "Such an instrument as this I am prepared and anxious to sign but anything approaching to the draft already submitted I will not sign for all the men in Hampshire" (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/N20/17: letter to James Sharp, 22 December 1835).

The financial settlement was in two parts. One-third of the original initial target of £1,500 was to be met by simple donations, with no legal commitments attached to them. Thirty six separate donations between £1 and £50 raised £495, just £5 shy of the target. The list was headed by Lord Palmerston, John Easthope and John Bonham Carter, MP for Portsmouth, each giving £50. Lord Palmerston gave his donation on the understanding that "I have no connection with the Paper as Proprietor, & my £50 is taken as a gift" (Hartley Library, University of Southampton MS 62 Broadlands Archive 113/20: reply of 4 February 1835 to William Lankester). Smaller donations came from Sir Francis Thornhill Baring (MP for Portsmouth and later Chancellor of the Exchequer), Charles Shaw-Lefevre (MP for North Hampshire and later Speaker of the House of Commons), William Henry Ord (MP for Newport, Isle of Wight), Sir John Barker Mill of Mottisfont and William Nightingale of Embley Park, together with a phalanx of Southampton Liberals including Richard Andrews, Richard Laishley, Charles Maul, Henry Buchan, Arthur Atherley and Rushworth Keele. The remaining two-thirds was to be raised by forty subscriptions of £25, yielding no interest for

the first two years and then 5% *per annum* for the remaining five years of their term. The subscribers were to be repaid after seven years provided that the paper was in profit. Thirty three subscribers can be identified. Most were what William Lankester called “Old Reformers” and included John Drew and his son John Watkins Drew (the latter Palmerston’s agent for the South Division), William Colson Westlake, Benjamin Ford, Henry Hattatt, Thomas Bradby, George Laishley, James Quick and John Rubie. James Grant was later to write that he was privately advised at the time that Palmerston had contributed “no less than £1,000”. This appears to be unsubstantiated.

Two trustees, appointed by the subscribers from amongst their own number, ensured strict adherence to the terms of agreement under which Wheeler operated. Joseph Lankester was a furnishing ironmonger, a member of a leading Congregationalist family in the town and brother of William Lankester. Joseph Hill junior was a surveyor, valuer and architect. Both were on the radical wing of their party. Wheeler had a free hand in the appointment of staff - compositors, printers, reporters, agents, clerks, *etc.* – and had effective day-to-day control of the paper. But in other respects his actions were carefully circumscribed. He owned virtually nothing of the paper. The printing office at 41 Above Bar, together with adjacent house, gardens and outbuildings, were sub-let to Wheeler at a fixed rent of £80 *per annum* for the first two years of his contract, increasing to £125 *per annum* for the final five years. The printing presses, type, paper, ink and other printing necessities were likewise leased from the trustees for the seven years of his contract. They could then only be assigned to Wheeler if the paper was in profit. He was prohibited from taking a partner without the consent of the trustees and from taking outside employment unless connected with printing or the stationery trade. He was prevented from buying out the subscribers by a clause in the formative indenture requiring that at least £125 of the subscription – representing five subscribers – remain in force at the end of seven years. John Bullar thought that these restraints were sufficient to keep Wheeler in line. “The powers given to the Trustees will be amply sufficient to keep Mr Wheeler under their control. As long as he fulfils his terms, his property will be quite his own management; but on any deviation from them (except as to delay in payment of interest) the Trustees can effectually put an end to his editorship” (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/N20/18/1). Even as editor, Wheeler was bound by fifteen covenants, with damages of between £500 and £2,000 for each transgression.

Cracks soon began to appear in the legal and financial edifice so carefully built by John Bullar. Within six months a new appeal for money was made, occasioned in part by the sudden withdrawal of financial support by John Drew, a brewer and one of the richest men in Southampton. A letter of 25 October 1835 from Henry Holmes, Romsey solicitor and agent to Lord Palmerston, shows a groundswell of opinion against the wayward editor:

“With respect to the paper called “the *Independent*” I feel a difficulty in giving your Lordship an opinion. I do not think very highly of the editor. He is, I dare say, a clever reporter, and undoubtedly is a shrewd, strong minded man – with a smattering of common place – but he gives proofs continually that he has not eaten the oats. They say at Southampton, that his temper is not good – certainly he has already made a division in the camp. Drew and he are very much *a la distance*, this is not to be wondered at – as they are both in my opinion

equally vain and vulgar. Politics like misery associate all with strange companions. I humour them all as much as I can, without sacrificing personal sincerity for the good of the cause, and shall continue to do so – at the same time I must say, that I have long had my misgivings as to Wheeler’s making way, except among certain out and outers, whom Whigs will never encourage. He made an injudicious attack (to say the least of it) on the Yeomanry – he is always coming it with his “We” and protests of personal defiance after the manner of “Ancient Pistol”.... Then he is apt to abuse a fellow one week, and fawn upon him the next. I do not quite understand his steering. It is difficult to track these Disciples of Faust who appear to partake of some qualities peculiar to the great reported ally of their Master. I am now writing to your Lordship with my heart upon my sleeve (or pen) for I have really no personal feeling at all adverse to the man.... I wish him well, but I have strong doubts whether he will promote the good and honest cause – and if he has called for further pecuniary aid, I think it may be as well to pause a little.... Your Lordship’s note on this subject is destroyed – no one knows that it was ever written” (Hartley Library, University of Southampton MS 62 Broadlands Archive 113/17/39).

The financial situation worsened in 1836. Towards the end of the year it was admitted that “the monies contributed have proved insufficient to meet the exigencies of the undertaking”. The trustees made good some of the shortfall out of their own pockets, but Wheeler refused to co-operate with them in measures that might prove a more lasting solution. ” I am not disposed to be trifled with by him in this matter any longer” (Joseph Lankester to J C Sharp, 24 October 1836). To make matters worse, many subscribers had proved to be broken reeds. Joseph Hill threatened in April 1837 “to expose those who refuse to perform what they have agreed”. The only realistic course of action, although one fraught with future dangers, was to raise money on the security of the paper. A mortgage of 28 April 1837 saw £1,000 advanced at 5% *per annum* by Robert Chase, a yeoman farmer of Tye Oak Farm in East Harting, Sussex, secured on the copyright of the paper and the machinery, type, *etc* at the printing office. Chase was an unlikely angel: a Liberal but politically unambitious and with no obvious Southampton connections. A second mortgage of £200, secured on the furniture, books, implements, utensils and other household goods in Wheeler’s house in Blechynden Terrace (he had moved here from Above Bar in March 1836), was granted to Joseph Hill on 21 April 1838. The copyright of the paper and the machinery, types, *etc* at the printing office were re-mortgaged to Joseph Hill on 1 September 1838 (Southampton City Archives D/Z 750/7/1). These were desperate measures, leading to later claims that the mortgages on the copyright of the paper and the contents of the printing office were fraudulent.

The *Hampshire Independent* was an avowedly political paper. It was established “for the advocacy of that class of political principles now commonly known by the designation of ‘Liberal Principles’ and for the furtherance of the general objects of that party in the state which for the time being may profess and act on such principles” (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/N20/11: deed of arrangement between Wheeler and the subscribers). The promoters attempted to guarantee the continuing political allegiance of the *Independent*, but it proved impossible to formalise such a nebulous concept as Liberalism within a legal framework. Indeed, as John Bullar argued, even if it were possible to reach an acceptable

legal definition there was no legal remedy against a change in the character of the paper that may follow a change in the opinion of the subscribers. Wheeler, however, was an uncompromising Liberal editor, and in the early years put the *Independent* at the service of the more radical members of the party. In 1836 he became *de facto* parliamentary agent to a pressure group of town councillors – known as ‘The Section’ – who opposed the sale of part of the mudlands to the Southampton Dock Company. Wheeler was often absent in London as part of a delegation, which included trustee Joseph Hill, lobbying against the Southampton Docks Bill. His account of their work, written in Bellamy’s refreshment rooms in the Houses of Parliament and published in the *Hampshire Independent*, 12 and 26 March and 23 April 1836, show why his abilities were so highly prized by the paper’s political sponsors. Wheeler’s battles, both personal and political, with John Coupland, proprietor and part editor of the Tory *Hampshire Advertiser*, were likened by one correspondent to the *Independent* (14 July 1838) to the rivalry between the editors of the *Eatanswill Gazette* and the *Eatanswill Independent* satirized in the *Pickwick Papers* published in 1837. The two editors had both learnt their trade in the rough house of the metropolitan press, Wheeler – as we have seen – a reporter on the Liberal *Morning Chronicle* and Coupland a printer on the *British Monitor*, an anti-radical Sunday paper edited by Lewis Goldsmith. Two counter actions for malpractice (‘Wheeler v Coupland’ and ‘Coupland v Wheeler’) were heard before Winchester Assizes in July 1838. The judge, Mr Baron Park, thought both equally culpable and directed the jury in both cases to find for the plaintiff in the nominal sum of £1. “I think that in these cases each party ought to agree to bury all that has passed in oblivion, and not to attack private character, but to attack the political character on both sides as much as they pleased” (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 21 July 1838).

A violent partisanship characterized much of Wheeler’s work as editor, leading him inexorably into a vortex of litigation. At one time, according to James Grant, he faced sixteen simultaneous actions, actual or threatened, for libel. “Those who knew him personally, as I did, can easily believe this, when there was no one to control him in his course”. Let one example out of many suffice. Joseph Lomer complained of misrepresentation in the report of a speech he made before Southampton town council. Wheeler’s reply was headed “Don Josepho Pomposo”:

“We look upon Don Josepho as every body in the town has looked upon him for years – as a splendid specimen of the restive donkey species – always bringing annoyance and kicking up his heels, careless of bespattering those about him so that he is but brought into notice. We really wonder donkey Joe has not been purchased by the Directors of the London Zoological Society. How the Regent’s Park would be crowded on Sunday afternoons to get a glimpse of the ‘Southampton ass’” (*Hampshire Independent*, 9 April 1836).

Lomer’s defence counsel at the resultant trial for libel thought that “for bitterness of language [this] exceeded anything he had ever witnessed in his whole professional career”. Wheeler was ordered to make a double apology – in court and in the pages of the *Independent* – and to pay costs of £15.

The mortgage of 21 April 1838 on Wheeler's household goods and furniture set in motion an inexorable slide into bankruptcy. The most pressing debt was to Thomas Goble, one of Wheeler's agents in Portsmouth and secretary of the Reform Committee in that town. It possibly relates to the shared publication of the *Independent* from 101 Queen Street, Portsea between 3 December 1836 and 26 January 1838. Goble was a formidable opponent, a master's mate on HMS *Victory* at the Battle of Trafalgar and (although only 18 years of age) promoted to secretary of the fleet during the battle. He is one of those leaning over the stricken Lord Nelson in Benjamin West's celebrated painting of the admiral's death. The debt was still unresolved at the end of the year. Goble obtained a writ – executed on 5 December 1838 - from the Court of Queen's Bench instructing the Sheriff of Southampton to take possession of the goods and property comprised in the mortgages of 28 April 1837, 21 April 1838 and 1 September 1838. The following month – 14 January 1839 - Wheeler defaulted on all his debts. His personal estate and the newspaper were assigned to the mortgage holders and the surviving subscribers. Joseph Hill, Joseph Lankester, Robert Chase and George King of Redbridge (land steward of John Barker Mill and collector of rents from his Hampshire estates) were the principal creditors. Wheeler was relegated to the post of salaried editor at £5 per week. A fiat of bankruptcy was filed on 19 February 1840. The accountant William Brooks was appointed assignee of the bankrupt's estate and effects in March. Two months later George King gave formal notice of objection to the creation of any further financial liabilities (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/N20/17). Wheeler's house in Blechynden Terrace became the residence of James Hill and his family. The case for debt between Wheeler and Goble was heard before the Court of Queen's Bench in June 1840, transferred from Southampton for fear that the strength of party feeling in the town would not permit a fair trial (*The Examiner*, 21 June 1840). The end came when the *Hampshire Independent*, thought by many to be on the verge of extinction, was sold to Thomas Leader Harman on 5 September 1840 for £1,933.12s. James Tucker took over as printer and publisher. The fate of the paper under its new owner is a theme of 'Thomas Leader Harman: a gentleman of fortune in mid-nineteenth century Southampton' in *Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum*, no.16, Winter 2010.

Negotiations for the sale took three months, delayed by disputes as to whether the original subscribers, the creditors or the assignee under the bankruptcy were legal owners of the paper. The complexities of the original settlement came to haunt John Bullar, now of Lincoln's Inn, as he tried to find a way through the legal maze. Wheeler was ignored throughout. "We understand that Mr Wheeler is not likely to be induced to concur in the deed, and unless therefore his concurrence is deemed very important perhaps it will be better to waive his being made a party lest an application to him on the subject should engender an apprehension of mistaken right" (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies M92/G8/7: James Sharp to Harman and the trustees, 3 October 1840). Harman took on debts of £8/900, owed to at least 400 creditors. The bewildering legal *impasse* between the interests represented by Thomas Goble and the mortgagees Robert Chase and Joseph Hill dragged on for more than a year, only resolved after a full day's hearing in the Court of Common Pleas in July 1841. It was a case that set legal precedence.

John Wheeler did not go quietly. He approached old allies in an attempt to raise sufficient capital to purchase the paper. “Friends at Manchester” were expected to contribute £500. John Easthope, over the course of two meetings with Wheeler, offered to help provided that two or three others could be persuaded to join in. This may be a *quid pro quo* for Wheeler’s unvarying support as editor for the London and South Western Railway Company, “the Father and Forerunner of the prosperity of Southampton” that had exposed Wheeler to the charge of being a paid retainer of the company. Wheeler responded with the names of Sir Francis Baring, MP for Portsmouth, and Ralph Etwall, MP for Andover. Easthope was reluctant to lose the services of his former *protégé*. He pressed Harman to retain Wheeler as “a paid editor”, his employment terminable on a month’s notice: a “servant of the proprietors so that his indiscretions might be controlled and be kept in due subjection”:

“He still thought he possessed more moral influence over him than perhaps any other and he thought he might keep him in check and make him more careful and perhaps more useful, and that believing if Wheeler was off the *Independent* he would have no other resource than to sell himself to the Tories or would exert his untiring energy till he succeeded in getting up some other organ or publication by which to annoy and harass those who bought the *Independent*, and indeed that he had avowed his intention if possible not to leave Hampshire” (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies 4M92/G8/7: memorandum of an interview between Easthope and James Sharp, 28 August 1840).

Harman, determined to buy the paper “entirely unfettered”, declined all such advances. Wheeler survived as editor for less than six weeks under the new regime. His final editorial on 17 October 1840 was an essay on sorrow: “The Father separates from the child of his hopes and affections in tears and bitterness”. It was also a warning of things to come, for the last page was given over to an account of a dinner to Abel Rous Dottin, Tory MP for Southampton, and included a verbatim report of the speech by John Coupland. This accommodation with the Tories lasted until the general election of May 1841. Coupland was supplied with a bootleg account of a closed meeting at the Blue Boar Inn of the Southampton Reform Protection Society, held to introduce the new Liberal candidate, Captain Charles Edward Mangles, to his constituents. This was printed in the *Hampshire Advertiser*, 8 May 1841 under the heading ‘Introduction of the Patent Radical Mangles into Southampton’. Wheeler took revenge on the leading Liberals of the town, ‘Posterity Lankester’, ‘Elegant Ellyatt’, ‘Trifling Tucker’, ‘Five-Points Pearce *et al.* Harman is “the young Eli of their age – once an Apothecary, but now an Heditor” and “your two-penny, half-penny counter-jumping mushroom”. Wheeler himself is self-parodied – perhaps to preserve the pretence of anonymity – as “double XX [a reference to the strength of gin and brandy of which he was notoriously fond], very saucy, looking thunder, and laughing from time to time as if his fat sides would burst”. Their candidate, Captain Mangles, was doomed to failure as “the men about him knew as much of electioneering as his stick did”.

Jacob Jacob, the new editor of the *Independent* who as head of the Winchester department of the paper had learnt the black arts of political journalism under the old *regime*, replied in kind:

“[Wheeler’s clandestine report was] an act which must sink him both as a politician and a man in irrevocable infamy; [he was] a traitor and a spy, ... polluting himself with a journal he has often treated as below contempt ... to gratify the spleen of a moment against individuals; [and] abandoning his long cherished principles for pay, [destined to] walk the earth the pointed at of men – the crawling loathsome thing, that lampoons for gold! That treats political principle as a humbug, and political honesty as a dream, and whose pen and whose abuse is at the command of any party that will give the *consideration*” (*Hampshire Independent*, 15 May 1841).

Wheeler countered with a threat to stand against Harman should he offer himself as the second Liberal candidate for the borough (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 22 May and 5 June 1841: letters dated from Southsea). The second letter is headed ‘To Thomas Leader Harman, MP that is not to be’, inspired by Jacob’s description of Wheeler, allegedly training for the bar, as “a Lord Chancellor that is to be”. Shortly afterwards Wheeler and Jacob met by chance at the White Swan in Winchester. According to Jacob, Wheeler said that “he was studying for the Bar and should be three years ‘eating his terms’, and during that time he wished to support himself writing for the press” and that he was already writing leaders for the *Hampshire Telegraph* (based in Portsmouth) (*Hampshire Independent*, 12 June 1841). This supplication for employment was – apparently – repeated at a second meeting in the White Hart Coffee Room, when Wheeler was accompanied by an old friend, James Denison, representative of *The Times* on the Western Circuit and in Winchester to cover the assizes (*Hampshire Advertiser*, 5 June 1841). No offer was made.

Wheeler was now a broken and bitter man. Within four years he was a debtor in the Queens Prison in London, a bankrupt on his own petition. It was his second bankruptcy in less than five years. The notice of bankruptcy in the *London Gazette*, 31 May 1844 is a testament to a lost life: late of 51 Upper Stamford Street, Lambeth, newspaper reporter; previously of 8 Park Place, De Beauvoir Square, Kingsland Road, Hoxton (Middlesex), out of business; formerly of 24 Landport Terrace, Southsea, out of business, at the same time occasionally stopping at 9 Arundel Street, Strand, Westminster; then of 54 Liverpool Street, New Road, King’s Cross (Middlesex), out of business; then of Calais and Bruges, out of business.

In late summer 1845 John Wheeler was the London-based secretary of the Manchester and Southampton Railway with his brother James, still living in Manchester, as solicitor to the company. Unable to break the near-monopoly of the London and South Western Railway – supported so strongly in the *Independent* under Wheeler’s editorship – the scheme failed the following year. Harman reveals a degree of uncertainty in a letter sent from the United States of America – where he was attempting to resolve his financial interests – to John Chaldecott Sharp later in the year: “I have no idea of giving up the paper especially into the hands of such a fellow as Wheeler, who I have no doubt is doing all he can to injure me” (Hampshire Archives and Local Studies M92/G8/1: letter of 4 November 1845).

Wheeler spent the rest of his life in the metropolitan and provincial press. He was connected with the *Globe*, the *Morning Chronicle* (for a second time) and the *Herald* (*Hampshire Independent*, 23 December 1854: obituary). In 1850 he was appointed publisher, editor and

proprietor of the *Durham Chronicle*, a Liberal weekly paper established in 1820, and now the political opponent of the Marquis of Londonderry. Wheeler died, aged 47 years, on 7 December 1854 in Notting Hill. Married late in life, he left a widow, Jane, four years his senior and an adopted three-year old child, Margaret Frances Wheeler Dyce, born in Manila, the daughter of an East India merchant who died at sea.

It would be unjust to leave Wheeler's legacy in the hands of his detractors. He was a newspaper man to his very core. He believed that the proprietor and editor were legally accountable for all that appeared in their pages - "Liberty of the Press without responsibility is nothing but License" - and that a free press was the cornerstone of a free society. "You cannot find any quarter of the globe where the semblance of Liberty prevails, but where something or other which bears the mark of a free press is also in existence.... Bring all the powers that oppression can muster, and give me but a free press wherewith to fight them, and I know full well to whom will be the victory (Loud cheers). And why? Because, gentlemen, the press is at once the child and the champion of public opinion which, after all, is the one great, universal monarch at whose throne principalities and powers must now-a-days alike bend the knee and pay attention and respect (Loud cheers)" (*Hampshire Independent*, 25 August 1838: speech at the Blue Boar Inn at the first anniversary dinner of the Southampton Reform Protection Association).

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