

## David Foster (1848 – 1928) : Merchant, Politician and Inventor of Table Tennis

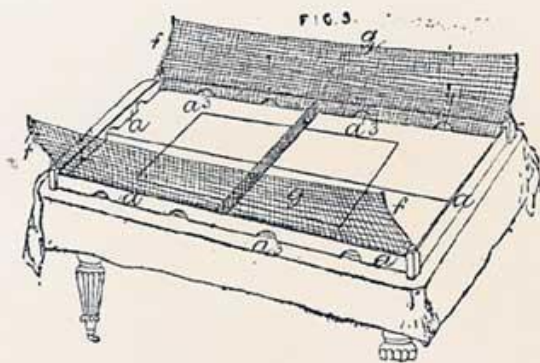
*A locally-important trader devises an indoor game for amusement during the winter months which becomes one of the world's most popular pastimes.*

David Foster was a local businessman, mainly dealing in dairy products and cheese. Although originally from Hull, from 1885, for a decade of his life in Selby, Foster lived with his wife at 34 Micklegate. This is the second house along Micklegate, after crossing Wren Lane from the library, and is now a commercial premises.

As well as being in trade he was also a staunch Wesleyan Methodist and an officer in the local Liberal Association at a time when Selby and district was steadfastly

Conservative. His claim to be the inventor of table tennis derives from the patent shown to the left, which is the first such patent. Much of the information on Foster comes from the studies of table tennis researcher and historian, Alan Duke.

11,037. Foster, D. July 15.



*Games played with tables, balls, &c.*—Relates to apparatus for imitating known games, such as lawn tennis, football, and cricket, on an ordinary table. The table is covered by a cloth marked out in any desired way, and upon this is fixed a fence *a*, having openings *a*<sup>3</sup>, as shown, at intervals therein. The frames are preferably hinged at the centre of each section for convenience in packing, and the sections are joined together by corner blocks. For lawn tennis, brass wires *f* are inserted in the corner blocks to carry nets *g*, and to posts at the centres of the two long sides is secured the central net. The game is played by two persons with small balls. For imitating football, the nets are arranged across the ends of the table behind the two model goal posts. In this case the balls are moved about by model boots fixed at the end of handles. For imitating cricket, stumps are provided at one end, and small model bats.

Patent no 11037, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1890 was for “apparatus relating to imitating known games such as lawn tennis, football and cricket to be played on a normal table” and is shown on the left. It's clear that this is not the modern game of table tennis as we know it, but an attempt to create indoor versions of several games. The idea for 'table tennis' occurred to 4 other games inventors around the turn of the 1890s, all of whom separately designed indoor tennis games.

These games went under various titles, such as ping pong, pom pom, whiff waff and gossima.

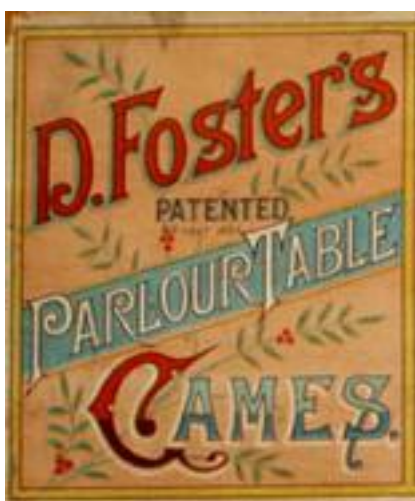
Although later shown to be factually incorrect in his references to 'whiff waff', Boris Johnson famously referred to these forgotten games in his Olympic speech in Beijing in 2008. However, these games did not have the simplicity of equipment of the modern one.

Whilst the pastime became hugely popular in the 1890s, the influence from America of the fragile white celluloid ball along with the modern style of bat gave rise to a ping pong craze in the early part of the 20th century which led to it becoming a fixture in youth clubs up and down the land.

Not only did Foster's game have side nets, but the ball was hit with a racquet that was just a scaled-down version of an outdoor racquet. Apparently advice was given that '*Gentlemen may remove jackets and bow ties to play and ladies are advised not to wear bustles*' The International Table Tennis Museum has found a second surviving boxed set of Foster's game, suggesting that it was not just one man's whim, but actually made it into commercial production.

Foster made 6 other successful patent applications, as shown. He had moved from Micklegate to one of the then-new houses on Leeds Road, popularly called the 'Twelve Apostles' by 1896. The census of 1911 shows that he was still in business, but now as a 'Commission Agent'. The household was wealthy enough to have a live-in cook. Foster moved to Streatham in London where he died in 1928. Although married, there were no children.

<u>Patent Applications</u>		
<u>Year</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Description</u>
1890	11037	Parlour Table Games
1891	5572	New method for Football
1895	18039	Travelling table for games
1895	24843	Sandwich board
1896	25115	Railway indicator
1903	20289	Railway indicator
1905	7996	Railway fog detonators



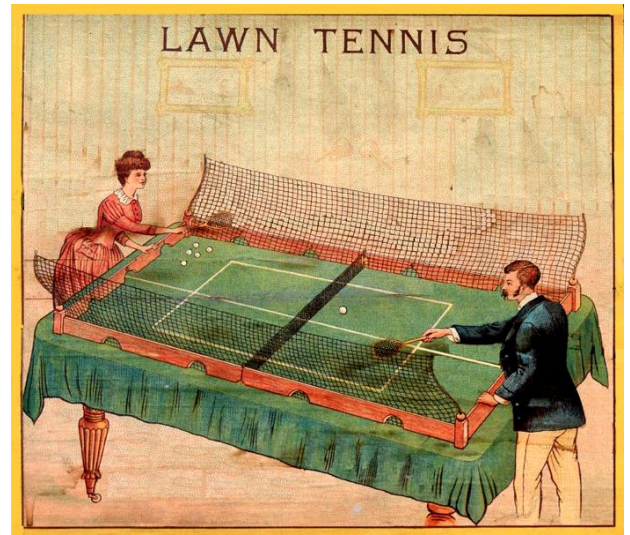
### Taking things further

These images of Foster's game are from the International Table Tennis Federation's website, and are copyright of the ITTF.

For fuller detail, go to [www.ittf.com/museum/indextech2.html](http://www.ittf.com/museum/indextech2.html), then select "Patents and trademarks" from "Select A Gallery", then "item 1" from the drop-down menu.



Illustrations of Foster's game - the right hand one from the original box.  
(Courtesy of Alan Duke, Chuck Hoey and ITTF)



[www.itf.com/museum/history.html](http://www.itf.com/museum/history.html) gives a comprehensive history of the game's development.

A timeline of the development of table tennis is at

[http://tabletennis.about.com/od/beginnersguide/a/history\\_of\\_tt.htm](http://tabletennis.about.com/od/beginnersguide/a/history_of_tt.htm)

Foster's political activities led him to be tangentially involved with the election of Joseph Andrews in 1905. Andrews is one of the very few MPs to have been elected yet never to have taken his seat. Selby has returned Conservative members for much of the 200 years or so that it has been part of a constituency : currently Selby and Ainsty, formerly Selby and before that Barkston Ash.

A by-election was held in Selby in October 1905, and, owing to local disputes, Mr Lane-Fox, the Conservative candidate, was defeated by the Liberal Joseph Andrews. However, Parliament was not sitting, so Andrews could not take his seat, and at the General Election of early 1906, the voters returned Mr Lane-Fox.

Andrews shares the distinction of never taking his seat with very few others - the most recent example being Bobby Sands, the H-block IRA candidate in 1981.



Pollington FC : winners of the Andrews Cup in 2014  
(courtesy of Pontefract and Castleford Express)

Andrews was a keen sportsman, and the Andrews Cup is still competed for by local clubs in the Selby and District Football League. Details are at [selbydistrictleague.co.uk/Andrews%20Cup.htm](http://selbydistrictleague.co.uk/Andrews%20Cup.htm)



An Andrews Cup medal from the early 20th century  
(courtesy of a Selby resident)

Boris Johnson's Olympic speech can be seen on YouTube.

His misunderstandings are corrected by the ITTF  
at [www.ittf.com/museum/TTIscans/TTI73.pdf](http://www.ittf.com/museum/TTIscans/TTI73.pdf)

No images of David Foster are known to exist. If anyone has an image, or knows where one can be found, please contact Selby Civic Society via the website.



David Foster's house in Micklegate (the right hand property with the plain sign)  
Oct 2014

Playing ping pong clearly remained a popular 'society' pastime in Selby, over a decade after Foster's patent was published, as this clip from the Selby Times of 1902, forwarded by Alan Duke, shows. Amongst the participants are locally important businessmen, the Liversidge family and a member of the Tyson ironworks family. The motion of thanks is proposed by Mr. W.D. Foster, a cousin of David Foster and his wife.

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