

## MEMORIALS IN COWBRIDGE CHURCH: THE WILLIAMS MEMORIALS

Among the Williams memorials in the chancel of Cowbridge Church, the largest commemorates Revd William Williams and his family. He was headmaster of the Grammar School for 59 years, which must surely be something of a record. I had 36 years as a schoolmaster, and I have known people who have managed 40 years, but 59: the mind boggles! A native of Dolgellau, William Williams came straight to Cowbridge from Oxford at the age of 22. The story goes that he arrived riding down Church Street to the school, with his hair powdered and in a pigtail. As he rode by, the daughters of a previous headmaster, Thomas Williams, who lived in a cottage opposite the school (where currently new houses are being built) jumped up and stood on the window seat to see the new master. The eldest daughter, Elizabeth, married him five years later.

Elizabeth's death at the age of forty-six is also inscribed on the memorial, but of course what is not mentioned is that William Williams remained in mourning all his life. It is claimed that 'he never wore powder after her death' ; that was a sign of mourning, and he continued to have his silver plate inscribed with their intertwined initials after her death.

They had eight children, but two died in infancy. Their eldest son, Revd Robert Williams MA, Fellow of Jesus College Oxford and a schoolmaster at Bury St Edmunds, died aged 28 of a chest infection in Madeira, and Thomas William Williams also died young. He was a midshipman in the Royal Navy, and was drowned in a great storm in Plymouth Sound, after being washed overboard from HM brig Jasper while endeavouring to save the life of a fellow member of the crew. He was only 19. Just over a year earlier he had written from Hull, where his ship was berthed, to his aunt Jane Taynton in Cowbridge, sounding more than a little fed-up. He complained of the lack of space in his quarters, with only 4 feet 4 inches headroom, of the lack of facilities for washing, and of the general unpleasantness of being in Hull. "They are the most brutish uncivil set of beasts", he wrote, "they have not the least respect for officers, neither of the Navy or Army. What a set of ragamuffins! The first Sunday I went to church here I was dressed in the same uniform you saw me in in Cowbridge, with a cocked hat and long sword, and although everyone saw I was a stranger, nobody offered me a seat. . ." (and that would have been quite a problem, for in those days people paid rent for their pews in church). Poor Thomas; it seems to have been a short, sad life.

His sister Harriet Anne married firstly Revd Rees Howell, the vicar of Llanccarfan; they lived at St Quintin's Cottage in Llanblethian, and had one son, who is also commemorated in the chancel. Harriet's second husband was Revd Thomas Edmondes, the rector of Llanblethian and vicar of Cowbridge; they lived first at St Quintin's and then at Old Hall.

Two other sons of William and Elizabeth Williams were William, who was a wine merchant in London and retired to live at The Poplars and afterwards moved to The Armoury in Eastgate, and John, who had earlier lived, and died, in The Armoury. The last son was Charles who became Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, creating yet another link between Cowbridge and the College.

Another Williams memorial is to the father of the Elizabeth already mentioned, Revd Thomas Williams of Breach Farm in Llanblethian, who was headmaster of Cowbridge School from 1764 to 1783. Among his other children, Jane married Francis Taynton, a solicitor of the town (who lived where *Jenny Wren* is today), and Charlotte married BH Malkin who was headmaster of Bury St Edmunds Grammar School. Malkin dedicated his celebrated *The Scenery Antiquities and Biography of South Wales* to Revd William Williams; Jane Taynton was the recipient of the letter from Thomas William Williams . . . and so the links continue.

*J Alden*