

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 – 1865)
and her association with
Cairo Street Unitarian Chapel



Elizabeth Stevenson was the daughter of William Stevenson, who had studied and taught at Manchester Academy. He was to become Minister at Dob Lane Unitarian Chapel, Failsworth, a position he resigned from to become Keeper of Records at the Treasury in London. Her mother Elizabeth Holland was of a family of Cheshire Dissenters who farmed at Sandlebridge near Knutsford. The couple were to have eight children but only Elizabeth, born in 1810 and her older brother John, born in 1798 survived beyond infancy. Mrs Stevenson was to die when Elizabeth was only a year old, and Elizabeth was taken to Knutsford to be cared for by her aunt, Mrs Lumb.

After the death of her father and her brother who disappeared whilst on a Naval voyage to India, Elizabeth went to live in Newcastle Upon Tyne at the home of Mr Turner, a family member and a Unitarian Minister and School Master. There she continued her education and witnessed, at first hand, the involvement of a Minister in the improvement of social conditions for the poor of Tyneside. When she married William Gaskell, Elizabeth would involve herself in that aspect of his ministry. She would also find that William's two brothers, Robert and Samuel and two sisters, Ann and Elizabeth were all heavily involved in working for improvements in social conditions and the welfare of the poor. It is said that Elizabeth was not only beautiful and intelligent, she also had a natural charm that put people at ease. She and William had much in common. They shared the same religious beliefs, beliefs that gave women equal rights to men. They both loved literature, music and art. They believed in living an unpretentious way of life and a desire to be of service to others. On the 29th August 1832, Elizabeth and William were married at Knutsford Parish Church. Elizabeth was married from her aunt's house overlooking Knutsford Heath and her uncle Peter Holland, a local doctor gave her away. His daughters were her bridesmaids and William's

brother, Samuel was the Best Man. Their honeymoon was spent touring North Wales, arriving back to their new home in Dover Street, off Oxford Road, Manchester on the 29th September. It is a sad relic of the official hostility towards Dissenters that the couple could not, by law, marry at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford or Cairo Street Chapel Warrington as Dissenters at that time by law had to marry at an Anglican Church, not their own place of worship.

What kind of family had Elizabeth married into when she married William? Firstly of course, they shared their beliefs and social attitudes. They were forward thinking, looking to a more humane future with a strong belief in equality. The family also had a strong commitment to Cairo Street Chapel and their Unitarian beliefs.

His grandfather, another William Gaskell, was a hand weaver and his wife Alice Ashall settled in Warrington around 1710. Both their families had been resident in Upholland for generations where they had been hand weavers and labourers. In Warrington, William found employment in the flourishing sail cloth industry and the family had risen rapidly as entrepreneurs establishing their own sail cloth business. Their son Roger became a Malster owning a Malt Brewery and a leather merchant. He married Elizabeth Barnes, the daughter of Zachariah Barnes and Ellen Spoth. Both the Barnes and Spoth families were original and prominent members of Cairo Street Chapel from its establishment in 1662 when the Revd Robert Yates was ejected from Warrington Parish Church. Their sons Samuel and Roger married sisters Ann and Ester Woodcock. The Woodcock family were prominent members in the life of Warrington and the chapel. Samuel and Roger were to play a prominent role in the governance of the chapel. Samuel was to become Chapel Warden and appointed Ministers who were Socinians, ensuring that the Chapel followed Unitarians beliefs and worship long before it was lawful to do so. Intellectually, the Gaskells, like so many other members of the chapel, had been

influenced by the staff of the Warrington Academy including the Revd Seddon, John Aitken and Joseph Priestley in their religious beliefs and practice.

Their forward thinking looking to a more humane future with a strong belief in equality is best demonstrated by the marriage register of St Mary the Virgin Parish Church, Leigh in 1809 of William's father and mother. His father, also William, is described as a gentleman, his occupation that of a Caption (a merchant selling cloth) and living in Liverpool, while his mother Margaret is described as a housemaid in service in Atherton. She marked her name with an X which indicates she could not write her name. The novels of Jane Austen are full of how mothers strove to marry their daughters off to rich men and how important a dowry was in this transaction. Margaret, the daughter of a modest farmer from Leyland, would not have been able to provide a dowry. William himself seems not to have any concern for the lower social position of his bride. Interestingly, their grandson, Edward Swinton Holland in 1902 "The Hollands of Mobberley and Knutsford" wrote that it was said that Margaret Jackson 'was the handsomest and best lady married in Leyland Church for some considerable time'. It was of course Leigh Church and not Leyland Church. The portrait painting of her now in Plymouth Grove shows us an extremely attractive woman. When she died in 1850, Elizabeth wrote that her mother-in-law had died full of years, surrounded by loving children whom she had brought up to fill their place in the world. In the summer of 1845, with their three daughters Meta, Marianne and Florence and their nine-month-old son, William, the family went to North Wales for some seaside air, away from the scarlet fever outbreak in Manchester. William however sickened with the illness and on the 10th of August, he died in Porthmadog.

Unable to return to Manchester because of the continuing scarlet fever outbreak, it was to Latchford that the family returned to find

comfort from her mother-in-law. William was buried in Cairo Street Chapel burial ground. The tomb is a large vault for such a small child and is close to the tombs of his grandfather, great grandparents and other members of the Gaskell family. Whilst staying at Latchford, Elizabeth fell into a deep depression over the loss of her beloved son and William suggested that she put her literary skills into writing a novel. The novel *Mary Barton* took two years to complete and Elizabeth commenced writing it in the family home in Latchford. In the home of her much-loved mother-in-law, she recognised how Margaret Gaskell, at no small sacrifice to herself, had released William as her eldest son from family ties so that he could set about preparing himself to fill his place in the world. In her correspondence to Williams mother, she always refers to her as mother while she refers to William's stepfather as Mr Dimmock, a man of whom she had reservations.

Elizabeths relationship with Williams brother, Samuel, known to the family as Sam was very strong. When Marianne was weak as a baby, Sam recommended the seaside air of Morecambe Bay and they frequently spent time at Lindeth Lodge, Silverdale, later building a cottage which they named The Sheiling with views of the sea and fells. As a doctor, Sam provided much medical advice to both William and Elizabeth, spending many days with the family when Marianne had croup. He also enjoyed many walking holidays in The Lake District with his sister-in-law. The novel *Half a Life Time Ago* written by Elizabeth concerning Susan Dixon and how her life was shaped by caring for her mentally ill brother, William on the family farm between Skelwith and Coniston was influenced by her knowledge of Sam's work as Residential Superintendent of the Lancaster County Asylum.

In the novel, set a generation before in time span, the Dixon family are small fell farmers and following the death of her parents, Susan breaks off her engagement to local farmer Micheal Hurst. She had

discovered that he was secretly making arrangements to send William to Lancaster Asylum. To Susan, the thought of her brother being sent to an asylum where the living conditions were so primitive and inhumane and that her betrothed not only supported the idea but had secretly travelled to Kendal to arrange his entry to the asylum, resulted in her breaking off her engagement and committing herself to caring for her brother until death divided them. The knowledge of mental health issues that Elizabeth demonstrated in the novel shows how her conversations with Sam regarding mental health influenced her writing of the novel. Her description of the geography and topography of the southern Lake District equally demonstrated her great knowledge of the area.

Elizabeth known to the Gaskell family as Lizzie had a strong and loving relationship with both her sisters-in-law, Ann Robson and Elizabeth Holland. Both sisters had a strong Unitarian faith. Ann, with her husband, William Robson established The Warrington Anti-Slavery Society. William Robson visited America to see the living conditions of the slaves and met and corresponded with William Lloyd Garrison a leading American Abolitionist. On his return to Warrington, William addressed many meetings of churches, chapels and local organisations on the evils of slavery. At the end of many meetings, William proposed and the meeting supported that slavery was incompatible with Christianity. He organised a petition against the evils of slavery signed by over 3,000 citizens of Warrington including the Mayor and the Member of Parliament which William sent to Congress. William invited Sarah Parker Redmond to Warrington where she spoke to packed meetings on the evils of slavery. Sarah became a lifelong friend of the Robsons and at one time lived with the family in Lymm. Elizabeth found in Ann a fun loving and warm-hearted sister-in-law, they corresponded a great deal and the Robsons visited quite often. She supported their work involved with the Warrington Anti

-Slavery Society and found support from Ann when she raised her concerns of William taking on so much work and responsibilities.

The relationship that Elizabeth had with William's sister Elizabeth Gaskell was extremely strong. William's sister Elizabeth had lived in Manchester with William and assisted him in furnishing his house in Dover Street prior to his marriage. The friendship was further cemented when she married Charles Holland, a Liverpool Broker and member of The Unitarian Ancient Chapel in Toxteth. He was related to Elizabeth through her mother who like Charles was a Holland of Mobberley.

The two Elizabeths, both called Lizzie, shared an interest in assisting the poor, writing, poetry and the arts. Elizabeth Holland was a great social benefactor she founded a nursing service in Seacombe on the Wirral. She established a family centre for the poor to spend their evenings in warmth and comfort. A training school was established where unemployed men could learn new skills to assist them to gain employment. She also wrote poetry and published many poems and literary articles as well as translating the works of German authors. Her correspondence with her sister-in-law not only included family business and discussions on literary matters but also their mutual dislike and suspicion of the Rev Edward Dimmock. Their dislike and suspicion which they shared with other members of the family was later proved to have great substance.

Rev Edward Dimmock was appointed Minister of Cairo Street Chapel in 1822. On the 6th of November 1823 at the age of 26 years of age, he married Margaret Gaskell aged 43, the mother of William, Samuel, Ann, Elizabeth and Robert and widow of William Gaskell. In 1841, Edward Dimmock resigned as Minister of Cairo Street and moved to Rivington. Margaret however, in the 1841 census, is recorded as living in Latchford with her youngest son Robert whilst Rev Dimmock is recorded as living at Spring Cottage,

Rivington with Ellen Rothwell as a servant. When Margaret Dimmock died in Warrington on the 12th of January, 1850, she is buried with her first husband William and their two deceased children Margaret and John in Cairo Street burial ground. On the 6th of November 1850, the Manchester Times announced that Edward Dimmock was married to Ellen Rothwell in Goosnargh Parish Church by the Revd Robert Studholme.

The break-down of Edward and Margaret Dimmock's marriage was not revealed at the time. The Warrington Nonconformity published in 1922 to celebrate the 1662 establishment of the chapel only provides half a sentence of Edward Dimmock's twenty- year ministry as though to dismiss his existence. Other biographies of the family write of the Dimmock's living in Rivington when Dimmock lived there with Ellen Rothwell alone. That was only for short time as his ministry at Rivington lasted less than a year before he moved to Holly House, Church Lane, Goosnargh, near Preston with Ellen Rothwell and he never ministered again.

William's younger brother Robert and his wife Susan, a member of the Carpenter family, enjoyed a close association with Elizabeth. Robert had interests in Manchester connected to his leather business and often visited both William and Elizabeth. Their daughter Susan was to marry William Greg the grandson of Samuel Greg, the founder of Quarry Bank Mills. The Gregs were great friends of William and Elizabeth and members of Cross Street Chapel.

Not only did Elizabeth establish great friendships with William's siblings she also established friendships with wider members of the family including Holbrook Gaskell and his wife Francis Ann Bellhouse.