

Revd. Dr. William Enfield

Born 29 March 1741

Died 3 November 1797

Minister at Sankey Street Chapel 1770-1785



William Enfield was born in Sudbury Suffolk on the 29th March 1741 to William and Ann Enfield. In 1758, he became a student at Daventry Academy in Northamptonshire with the encouragement of his teacher and minister, William Hextall. In 1763, at the age of twenty-two, he became the minister at Benn's Garden Chapel, Liverpool. Benn's Garden was wealthy and well-connected congregation of Liverpool Merchants. During his Ministry at Benn's Garden, a member of the congregation was William Roscoe, a Liverpool Merchant and Whig Politician, who was a strong opponent of the Slave Trade. The two men became great lifelong friends, being both opponents of Slavery. Due to his opposition to slavery, the Merchants of Liverpool voted against William Roscoe and he lost his Parliamentary seat. In 1767, William married Mary Holland, the daughter of a local draper and together, they had five children.

Following the death of John Seddon in 1770, William was appointed Rector of Warrington Dissenting Academy and tutor of Belles Lettres rhetoric and modern languages. He also became Minister of Sankey Street Chapel. The birth and deaths of chapel members recorded during his ministry show that many of the original members such as the Mills, Peake, Bate, Mather and Barnes families were still members of the congregation.

During William's Ministry, the leading member of the congregation was the Chapel Warden. It was an elected position of authority and power and was held by Samuel Gaskell. Samuel's brother Roger also played a leading role in the management of the chapel. The two brothers had married two sisters, Anne and Esther Woodcock, a family who were original members of the congregation. Samuel was a Freemason as were many in the congregation. His belief in the theology of Socinius, now known as Unitarianism, is evident in the appointments that he made as Chapel Warden.

Throughout his ministry, William Enfield focused more on ethics than on theology. His many published sermons and essays reflect this as do the hymns that he wrote for the Warrington Hymnal. Like John Aikin and Joseph Priestley, William Enfield wanted to remain current in many disciplines. Believing that natural philosophy was essential to his students, he studied mathematics one summer and subsequently

published a textbook dedicated to Priestley: *Institutes of Natural Philosophy, Theoretical and Experimental* (1783).

His most successful work, however, was *The Speaker* (1774), an anthology of literary extracts intended to teach elocution, and produced first for his Warrington pupils. He published a sequel, *Exercises in Elocution* in 1780. Enfield's *Speaker* was so popular that it remained in print until the middle of the nineteenth century and inspired other anthologies, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Female Speaker*. His writings and research did not go unnoticed and on the 8th of March 1774, the University of Edinburgh conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws.

Despite being a Unitarian, William, unlike Joseph Priestley, still respected the Established Church and supported the government which was intertwined with it. When Joseph Priestley attacked these institutions, Enfield published *Remarks on Several Late Publications in a Letter to Dr. Priestley* (1770). William believed that Dissenters would eventually win recognition from the government and decried Priestley's abrasive strategy. Priestley replied in a dismissive pamphlet, but the two still remained friends. Eventually, after the failure of the Feathers Tavern Petition, Enfield changed his position, agreeing with Priestley that Dissenters' civil rights were too slow in coming.

During his ministry, the Sankey Street congregation numbered over 700. The members became influenced by the Socinian beliefs of Joseph Priestley and other tutors at the Academy. The congregation was also very knowledgeable regarding the religious debates and arguments of the day. It can be of little surprise that when, in 1813, Unitarians were freely allowed to state their beliefs that it was the Chapel's Minister, Rev. William Broadbent who by his eloquence and passion persuaded the majority of Presbyterian congregations in Lancashire and Cheshire to become avowedly Unitarian.

The influence of the Academy its tutors and the visiting influential religious thinkers on the chapel congregation witnessed the development of Socinianism amongst the members of the congregation. Joseph Priestley when writing of his time at the Academy wrote "The only Socinian in the neighborhood was Mr.

Seddon and we wondered at him”. Rev. Seddon was probably the first Minister in Lancashire to teach the mere humanity of Jesus. It was during the ministry of William that the congregation became overwhelmingly Socinian and Unitarian, possibly one the first Presbyterian Chapels to become Socinian. This caused a minority of the congregation, including the Ryeland’s family, to secede and establish a Congregational Chapel.

William Enfield resigned from his ministry at Sankey Street Chapel in 1785 when he was called to be the minister of the Octagon Chapel, Norwich. His friends said of him that he was a charming man and a tireless worker, amiable, diligent, eloquent and persuasive in the pulpit and delightful in society. The decline of the Academy was in part due to his lack of firmness and authority. He was best suited to being a lecturer rather than an administrator. William Enfield died on the 3rd of November 1797 aged 56 years.

Thomas Bealey, a Socinian, previously Minister of Ainsworth Chapel succeeded William Enfield. In 1813, when Unitarians were free to proclaim their faith, Thomas Bealey declared from his pulpit “I am a Unitarian”.

Ray Beecham 2025