

William Gaskell born 1805 died 1884

Son of William and Margaret Gaskell



Rev. Samuel Yates Rector of Warrington and many of his congregation left the Church of England in the 1662 Great Ejection. The founders of the chapel were Presbyterian, however by 1805 the congregation was strongly Unitarian and William's father was one of the prominent members of the congregation and a leading unitarian theology teacher at the chapel. On the early death of his father in 1809, William's uncle Holbrook Gaskell, a merchant and radical politician in Warrington, assisted his mother with his upbringing. From 1820 to 1825, he attended Glasgow University taking his BA and MA. He then studied from 1825 until 1828 for the Unitarian ministry at Manchester New College, at that time located at York. Unitarians at the time were barred from studying at either Oxford or Cambridge because they were not Anglicans. Manchester New College then located at York was the successor of Warrington Academy. The academy had been at the forefront of dissenting academies and its tutors included Joseph Priestley and John Aitken. Cairo Street had been at the forefront of intellectual dissent and its Ministers, William Enfield, John Seddon, William Broadbent and Joseph Bealey had advocated Priestley's Unitarian beliefs. William's personal theology was Priestlian rationalism which rejected the doctrine of original sin, believing, as Unitarians do, that humans have an innate capacity for good. This belief system seems to have underpinned his lifelong commitment to charitable and educational

projects and that of his siblings Samuel, Robert, Anne and Elizabeth. A belief system founded in their upbringing at Cairo Street Chapel. William Broadbent, formerly a tutor at Daventry Dissenting Academy and a student and later colleague of Thomas Belsham, was a driving force in the Presbyterian Chapels at Chowbent, Knutsford Gateacre, Monton, Gorton, Stockport, Nantwich, Bury, Lancaster and Dob Lane amongst other becoming avowedly Unitarian. The atmosphere at the chapel and his own family's firm Unitarian beliefs must have strongly influenced William's decision to become a minister.

In 1828, William became Minister of Cross Street Chapel Manchester, a position he was to hold until his death in 1884. Cross Street Chapel had been founded in 1694 and was the major Unitarian chapel in Manchester. The congregation contained many influential members including, at one time, five MPs, prominent social reformers including James Kay, Benjamin Heywood, Samuel and William Greg of Styal Mill. William spent many walking holidays in Perthshire with Rupert Potter, a fellow unitarian and his family, including Rupert's daughter Beatrice. As the Minister of Cross Street, he did not engage in political involvement instead he was active in social work. He supported the Unitarian Manchester Domestic Mission which provided support to poor families. He championed the Lower Mosley Street Schools, which the chapel sponsored to serve the mill workers living near the River Medlock. Both he and his wife Elizabeth taught at the Sunday School. William insisted that besides teaching biblical studies on a Sunday, it was right to teach basic numeracy and literacy. He said that they were doing 'their Father's business by teaching reading'. A Fellowship Fund supported congregations in poorer parts of Manchester. A nurse superintended by a lady of the congregation was financed to visit local poor families. This work was replicated by other Unitarian districts such as Liverpool with its own domestic mission.

His personal philosophy can be summed up in his dedication which he penned at the publication of his poetry collection *Temperance Rhymes* 'to the working men of Manchester in the hope that they may as another small weight on the right end of that lever which is to raise them in the scale of humanity'

Apart from his Ministerial duties, and it is said that he often preached five sermons on a Sunday, in 1836 William started to give evening lessons at the Manchester Mechanics Institute of Science and Technology to teach the poorest mill workers.

William Gaskell worked for and advocated educational opportunities for working class members of society. He taught at night classes at Owen's Institute and was chairman of the Portico Library from 1849 until his death in 1884. In 1846, he was appointed Professor of History, English Literature and Logic, another colleague was the prominent Unitarian James Martineau. In 1858 William taught literature at the Manchester Working Men's College.

In 1861 William Gaskell co-founded the publication Unitarian Herald and was an editor until 1875. Into such a full and active life, he gave private tutoring to both men and women, including the hymn translator Catherine Winkworth and her sister Susana Winkworth. He assisted in the growth of Unitarianism when in 1854 he co-founded with John Beard, the Unitarian Home Missionary Board. It was established to train working class Unitarian ministers. From his study in Plymouth Grove, he taught literature, history and New Testament Greek. He became the Principal in 1874. William's ministry was spent solely at Cross Street Chapel, he rejected an offer from Essex Hall, London to become their minister.

He had a fascination with language and was an expert on the Lancashire dialect, extracts from his lectures on dialect were published in The Examiner. He had poem 'Sketches among the Poor, co-written with his wife Elizabeth, was published in 1837 in the Blackwood's Magazine. William's collection of poetry Temperance Rhymes published was admired by William Wordsworth. He wrote over seventy hymns including 'Hush the Sounds of War' and 'Through all the Coming Week' both found in Hymns For Living and still sung in Unitarian services.

William married Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson on the 30th of August 1832 at Knutsford Parish Church. Dissenters were prohibited to marry at their own place of worship. Like William, Elizabeth was of a prominent Unitarian family and was related to the Wedgewood,

Darwin and Martineau families. Their daughter Marriane was born in 1834, followed by Margaret Emily known as Meta in 1837, Elizabeth in 1842 and Julia Bradford in 1846. A son William born in 1844 died in 1845 and is buried in Cairo Street Burial Ground. He is buried close to his grandparents William and Margaret Gaskell their two young children who died young Margaret and John. Nearby is an obelisk commemorating the lives of his father's sister Ann and her husband William Robson and their two sons. Ann and William were leading members of the Warrington Anti-Slavery Society to which Ann and William's brother Robert and his wife Susan Carpenter were leading members. The tomb is large and contains only 'young Willie'. It is thought that the original intention was for both William and Elizabeth to be buried with him. The death of young Willie caused Elizabeth to go into a period of depression. To overcome her grief, William suggested that Elizabeth write a novel and in 1848, Mary Barton her first novel was published. William contributed in the novel to dialect conversations. Within his family circle, the staid minister was playful, especially when his children were young. He had a reputation for making endless puns, signing himself 'Mr. Goosequill.'

Elizabeth died in 1865 and for twenty years William continued living at Plymouth Grove and as Minister of Cross Street Chapel continuing his heavy workload of interests. He was preaching at Cross Street up to six months before his death on the 12th of June 1884 aged 79 years of age. Both he and Elizabeth are buried at Brook Street Unitarian Chapel Knutsford.

When he died, young Beatrix Potter, granddaughter of his close friend Edmund Potter, wrote, "If ever anyone led a blameless peaceful life it was he. There has always been a deep childlike affection between him and me."