

James Clayton Williams (1834-1889)

James Clayton Williams was born in 1834 in Shrewsbury. He was baptised at the St John's Hill Wesleyan Methodist chapel, together with all his older siblings, which suggests his parents had shortly before joined that congregation. The parents, John and Emma, were married in Sheinton, 10 miles SE of Shrewsbury, by the Anglican curate there. Only Anglican clergy were allowed to conduct weddings in those days, so this doesn't prove they were Anglican, but I think it likely they were.

In the 1851 census James was living with his elder brother, John W Williams, at Edgebolton, near Shawbury, seven miles NE of Shrewsbury. Both he and his brother were tailors, the profession of their father.

There's a gap between then at 1859, during which time James seems to have joined the Primitive Methodists and trained as a preacher. In December 1858 he appears in a newspaper announcement as 'Mr James Clayton Williams' who was to give a lecture on temperance in Wellington, Shropshire in January 1859. In August, that year, however, he is 'the Rev J C Williams' delivering an address at a Primitive Methodist annual tea party in Aston, 8 miles east of Shrewsbury. And in April and May 1860 he appears as 'the Rec J C Williams, of Wrockwardine Wood,' preaching a sermon at the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Dawley, and delivering an address at a PM tea party in Horsehay Shropshire. Also in May that year he attended a Jubilee public meeting of PMs in Birmingham.

However, by 7th April 1861, when the census was taken, he appears as a New Connexion minister at Litchurch, Derby, and at the end of May that year he is a New Connexion minister at West Booth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

On 8th June 1863 he married Elizabeth Richards Shields at the Ebenezer New Connexion chapel, Town Walls, Shrewsbury.

More briefly, this was the remainder of his career.

New Connexion

West Booth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: 1861-62.

Macclesfield 1862-63 with two other ministers.

Leek, Staffs, 1863-64.

Shields (North & South), Tyneside 1864-65.

Gloucester, Worcester Street, 1866-68.

Sheffield, 1868-69.

Tyneside, March-July 1869, possibly just visiting to conduct services.

Bangor, Co Down, Ireland, 1870-73. Minister, and also chaplain to Orange Lodge in that town.

Unitarian

Congleton, Cheshire, 1873-74.

While there he married his second wife, Eliza Rowe, whose parents lived at Buglawton, a village adjacent to Congleton. I assume he already knew Eliza's family, whom he could have met in Derby, where they were living in 1851. They may have been, or become, Unitarians.

Longton, Staffs, 1874-81.

Newcastle-under-Lyme, 1876-83 (overlapping with Longton). Resigned due to ill health.

Guildford, Surrey, 1883-86. Resigned due to ill health.

Hastings, Sussex, 1886-88. Resigned due to ill health.

He then returned to Newcastle-under-Lyme, and may have taken services there. In October 1888 I found four services he may have led: in Scarborough ('The Rev J Clayton Williams,' 7th, morning and evening), and Sunderland ('Rev J C Williams,' 18th, morning and evening). He died on 7th March 1889 of 'Broncho-Pneumonia. Phthisis (acute)' [Phthisis is old term for TB].

His wife and four children (one from Elizabeth, the first wife) were left in poverty, and a petition was got up which raised enough to buy her a confectionary shop. Sadly, however, she died in 1896 and I am unclear who took care of the four children, one of whom was just ten.

James was a very well educated man, widely read, and able to translate from Greek. While in Longton he was probably involved in inviting the renowned atheists, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, to lecture in the Potteries area. At any rate he chaired the Bradlaugh meeting, and got into quite a bit of trouble for it. His argument was that as he claimed a right of free speech for himself, he couldn't deny it to others, but this didn't convince his critics that he agreed with everything Bradlaugh had said. The accusation that he was an 'infidel' led him to make a clear point-by-point statement of his Christian belief in the *Staffordshire Sentinel*, a local newspaper.

While at Hastings James produced a high quality Unitarian journal, the *East Sussex and West Kent Unitarian Magazine*. This only lasted one year because of James's declining health. He was also involved in a high-profile debate about William Gladston's policy of Home Rule for Ireland, roughly equivalent to the current devolved government for Scotland and Wales.

Despite James's earlier Orange Order connection, which might have led him to oppose Home Rule, he was an ardent supporter of it, and of Gladstone himself. The prominent Unitarian, Joseph Chamberlain (father of Neville Chamberlain) opposed Home Rule from an imperialist position, and played a major part in splitting the Liberals. The separate group called themselves the Liberal Unionist Party, which eventually joined with the Conservatives to form the Conservative and Unionists party.

Chamberlain's view was that if Home Rule was granted in Ireland, other countries would demand the same, and that would be the end of the empire. Most Unitarians supported Gladstone's policy (which he never managed to get through parliament, arguably with disastrous consequences) but a prominent member of the Hastings church was opposed, which resulted in fireworks at Liberal Party meetings in the town.

Francis Clark-Lowes