

Notes on William Ewart – His Memorial Window in St Peter’s Devizes

An MP of “complete integrity” is difficult to imagine in 2009 when we are getting so much evidence of MP’s who are in Parliament to help themselves. At St Peter’s we can look at a window in our Sanctuary, dedicated to an outstanding Victorian Liberal MP who lived at Broadleas near Devizes. He devoted his life to helping others and for him the phrase “complete integrity” was accurately used by a biographer.



The dedication in the window tells us only his name and dates:



Perhaps this was because at the time of the dedication of the window it was assumed that he was too well-known to need further explanation. Those who know Victorian history might suspect there is a connection with William Ewart Gladstone, whose first term as Prime Minister began in the year before William Ewart died. Indeed, there is a connection between the two. William Ewart’s father, also called William, was a friend of Gladstone’s father, John. When John Gladstone’s 4th son was born in 1810 William Ewart Snr became his godfather, and gave his name as forenames.

The early lives of Ewart and Gladstone followed similar paths: both were born in Liverpool, the sons of wealthy traders, both were educated at Eton then at Christ Church College, Oxford.

In 38 years as an MP he represented constituencies that were nowhere near Devizes - Bletchingley (1828-1830), Liverpool (1830-1837), Wigan (1839-1841) and Dumfries (1841-1868). In 1849 he discovered the house at Broadleas south of Devizes and loved it straightaway. He described it as a "pretty spot in charming country ... with a broad terrace ... a pretty dell with violet covered banks the house surrounded by a well-timbered park". He bought it in 1850. Perhaps the coming of the Great Western Railway link to London had an influence on his choosing Devizes. (Picture of Broadleas taken 21 June 2009 on right).



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Refreshing visits to Broadleas also came to be enjoyed by his friends, Rev William and Mrs Gaskell (A Christmas TV special edition of Mrs Gaskell’s *Cranford* series has just finished filming at Lacock). In her book *William Ewart – Radical and Philanthropist*, Rosemary Marshal wrote of the friendship between William Ewart and Rev William Gaskell:

‘a strong friendship was formed between two men of complete integrity whose concerns for the working people were so similar’.

Significant for our church was his lifelong friendship with Edward Pusey, who after the departure of Newman and Keble became the leader of the Oxford Movement, of which St. Peter’s is a product. They had studied at Eton and Christ Church Oxford at the same time. Pusey also shared Ewart’s concern for the poor and in 1862 wrote in to him:

‘What a mess of human misery there is, I wish that the rich knew more of it than they do. They must do more to mitigate it; the East and the West of London are like two hemispheres and most of the rich know no more of the poor of London than they do about the Antipodes.’

Ewart accepted the prevailing Victorian belief in self-help – “God helps those who help themselves” - but he also believed that the poor needed schools and libraries to enable them to lift themselves out of grinding poverty. You might find a memorial to one of Ewart’s most famous achievements in your change. A special 50 pence piece issued in the year 2000 commemorates the 150th anniversary of one of his most famous achievements, his Libraries Act to set up public libraries to be paid for by public rates. [The 50p piece shown on the right was found in change given out in Devizes.] The bill was passed in the face of considerable opposition. There is a bust of William Ewart in the Library Association headquarters in London.



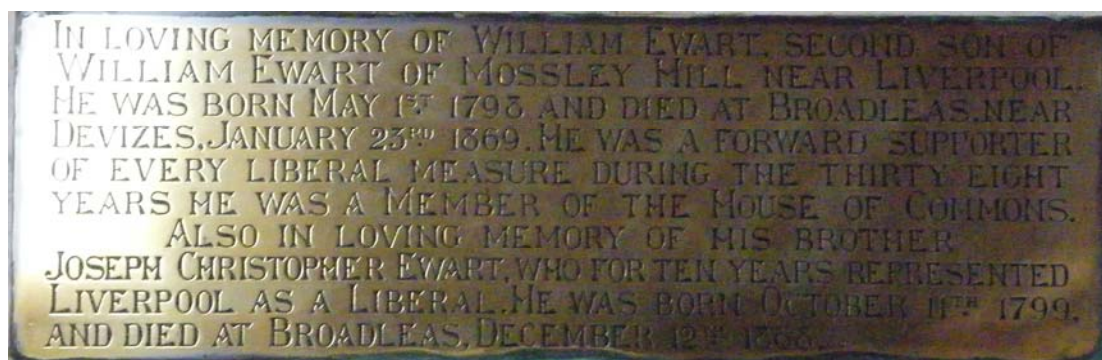
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He died of pneumonia in the year after his retirement. The funeral was conducted at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Bishops Cannings by his cousin, Rev William Ewart, who was its Vicar from 1862 to 1872. He is buried in a grave to be found on the south side of the path in the churchyard, alongside his brother, John Christopher also a Liberal MP, who died shortly before him.



The text on his gravestone is

'Blest are the pure in heart for they shall see God'



A memorial in the sanctuary of St Mary’s, Bishops Cannings records that he was “A forward supporter of every liberal measure during the thirty eight years he was a member of the House of Commons”.

One notable example of his support for advanced liberal causes was his campaign to abolish capital punishment. Hanging was not abolished for murder in Britain until Sidney Silverman MP’s private members’ bill - Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) - was passed in 1965. But William Ewart proposed the abolition of capital punishment as early as 1840. His Bill was heavily defeated in Parliament. He was, however, successful in achieving a partial abolition with a bill to abolish hanging in chains in 1834, and in 1837 the abolishing of capital punishment for cattle stealing and other minor offences.

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Another reform that he advocated was the end to the sale of commissions in the Army and the appointments to the Civil Service by patronage. This change was not made during his lifetime, but shortly afterwards in Gladstone’s first – and some would say greatest – Ministry open examinations were introduced to the Civil Service and to the Army, thereby making both institutions more efficient. In 1890 Gladstone described William Ewart as:

*"a cultivated man, a scholar, ... upon more subjects than one a pioneer ... doing the rough introductory work in his country's interest, ... upon subjects which at that time very few had begun to appreciate."*¹

His obituary in the then Tory *Wiltshire Gazette* summed him up as follows:

'We may truly say that his whole life was a life of philanthropy. Although unconnected with Devizes, either by family ties or political sympathy - for in politics the constituency of our borough and Mr. Ewart were as far apart as they could well be - there was no gentleman in our neighbourhood who was more ready than Mr. Ewart to aid by every means in his power, either by personal effort or by pecuniary assistance, anything which could to the moral or social well-being of its inhabitants.

'Of his anxiety for the poor we have ourselves had frequent and repeated proofs. It was but to present a tale of distress, and his heart was at once open to the appeal; while his anxiety for the poor during the hard months of winter was so great that his constant thought was to devise some scheme by which work (and therefore sustenance for themselves and their families) might be provided for the unemployed poor. And, when all other means had failed, we have known him, in excessively hard winters, give employment on his own property (about matters which were really productive of little or no benefit to himself) to every man who could not find work elsewhere.'

Writing in 1898, 29 years after his death and with the 50th of his Libraries Act of 1850 in prospect, John Joseph Ogle in his book *The free library – Its history and present condition – 1898*¹ wrote of his hope that Ewart would be remembered in the twentieth century:

'His work was that of a pioneer, and as such it would be fitting that some public recognition of that work should take permanent form in the approaching jubilee year of the free library movement.

'One who introduced a bill into Parliament (in 1834) which abolished hanging in chains, and (in 1837) another which did away with capital punishment for stealing and sacrilege; who (in 1836) drew the report which led to the establishment of the Schools of Design at Somerset House, since developed into the Government Science and Art Department; who (in 1841) moved for an annual statement on education from a minister of the Crown, and subsequently saw his motion carried into effect; who took the first public steps which led to the establishment of the system of civil, army, and diplomatic service examinations; who obtained the Select Committee on Public Libraries, and the Public Libraries Act of 1850, needs must be a considerable public benefactor.

¹ This book may be read at <http://books.google.co.uk/>

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When the din of political party strife shall have died away, and the history of the nineteenth century in Britain shall be written by the impartial historian of the twentieth century, it is not improbable that the name of WILLIAM EWART will have a distinguished place when that of many a more applauded politician shall have shrunk into oblivion.

‘William Ewart was the second son of a Liverpool merchant of the same name, and was born in Liverpool on 1st May 1798. He was educated at Eton, and passed in due course to Christ Church, Oxford, where, in 1819, he carried off the college prize for Latin verse. In the following year a poem of his obtained the Newdigate prize. He obtained a second-class in classical honours, and graduated B.A. in 1821. Nearly six years later he was called to the bar at the Middle Temple, and in the following year (1828) he entered Parliament for the borough of Bletchingley, in Surrey. In 1830 he was elected by a narrow majority a member for Liverpool, for which town sat until 1837, when he was defeated by his opponent. In 1839 he was elected for Wigan, and in 1841 for the Dumfries burghs, which he continued to represent until his retirement from public life in 1868. He died at Broadleas, near Devizes, on 23rd January 1869.

‘The important services of Mr. Ewart as Parliamentary leader of the public library movement have been recounted in the earlier chapters of this book. No celebration of the jubilee year of the Act of 1850 can be satisfactory which does not leave behind some permanent public memorial of the realness of this truly modest, accomplished, and patriotic educational reformer.’

John Joseph Ogle could not have foreseen in 1898 that by the 150th anniversary of his 1850 Libraries Act the ten shillings that he knew would be replaced by a 50 pence coin and the twenty-first century would begin with a special issue of that coin commemorating William Ewart’s Act of 1850. Furthermore by that time there would be memorials to him in various places around Britain – including one of our windows in St Peter’s.

After his death Broadleas was taken over by his daughter Margaret who died in 1922. After 1922 it was taken over by a nephew of Margaret and then in 1945 was sold to Lady Cowdray who died in 2009. Lady Cowdray did much to enhance the gardens at Broadleas to the point where they brought in coach loads from outside Devizes on Royal Horticultural Society tours, but local residents were largely unaware of them. After the death of Lady Cowdray the future of the Broadleas house and gardens is uncertain.

Sources

Thanks are due staff of The Library at Wiltshire Heritage Museum in Long Street, Devizes for making the following documents available:

William Ewart M.P 1798-1869: Portrait of a Radical by W. A. Mumford
William Ewart – Radical and Philanthropist by Rosemary Marshal
Cuttings from the *Wiltshire Gazette* 1869