

Samuel Williams (1808-82)

by Adrian King

The thirty-two year old student from Penywaun in Brecon must have wondered how he had allowed himself to get into this situation. He had only come to Cripplestyle to preach on probation, having spent a year with the Reverend Thomas Evans from Shaftesbury to ‘familiarize’ himself with the English language. It was June 1840, and Samuel Williams had recently travelled the twenty-five miles over The Chase to this isolated community on the edge of the Dorset Heathland. The congregation could not be faulted; they were poor by the world’s standards but rich in God’s love. They had built their chapel from mud and thatch with their own hands thirty-three years previously, and called it Ebenezer, ‘hitherto hath the Lord helped us’ – such was their love for Bible truths. Their pastor, William Bailey, had been dead two years.



Mr. Williams came for three months and did not originally intend ‘prolonging his residence in that isolated spot’ for longer than he could help, yet he remained as pastor there for forty-two years. He was ordained in 1842 by Dr. Condor from Poole.

Not long after he took up the pastorate he married Sarah Fry (1826-1912), a local girl, and they had eleven children: Thomas (1843), Elizabeth (1845), Henry (1847), John (1850), Susannah (1852), Morgan (1857), Ann (1859), Jane (1861), Arthur (1865), Mary (1868) and Sophie (1871).

Due to their circumstances, the people were not able to support the pastor fully but the Home Missionary Society and the County Association gave substantial help.

Samuel Williams had a social ministry; his love was for his flock, ensuring that they were fed and educated, both physically and spiritually.

In 1844, a schoolroom was built in which there was a day school and another room was added to this in 1861. Samuel collected financial support for a teacher right up to the time of his death. A story is told that whilst collecting support he was riding through a sunken track on the heath and he got stuck whilst his horse went from under him, leaving him suspended. In 1858, he held classes in Cranborne; the notice announced that ‘a certain proportion of time will be devoted to the Holy Scriptures’.

He also had an itinerant preaching ministry; walking seventeen miles to Salisbury to preach and returning that same day was a regular occurrence. He also had calls to other churches that were able to pay a greater stipend than he was receiving, but accepting them never seemed right.

He never quite settled with his second language. There was a time at college when he found that there were not enough words in that “dreadful English language” (as he called it); he had been struggling with the sermon from the start, but ‘could contain himself no longer, bursting forth with poetic eloquence and feeling in his native tongue, concluding in vigorous and stirring Welsh the sermon which he had so anxiously begun in English.’

In the early years of his ministry, he conducted an evening service at Cranborne but this was discontinued when a chapel was purchased at Damerham. He went there twice a week to conduct a Bible class and service and also ensured that the pulpit was supplied on a Sunday.

The “established church” never got on well with the non-conformists in the area. On one occasion a meeting was arranged for the Dissenters of the district. The local vicar, fearing trouble, arranged for two constables to be present. Samuel had been asked to pray and he confined his prayer ‘to asking God’s blessing on the vicar and upon his spiritual needs as he went in and out among his parishioners.’

Rev. Williams announced his retirement in 1881, but died on March 26th 1882, too early to be able to take up residence in the small cottage that the Marquis of Salisbury (the Prime Minister) had built for him in the grounds of the manse. A new chapel and manse were built in 1888 and named in memory of Samuel Williams.

How do you evaluate forty-two years of service? I can certainly give thanks for the life of Samuel Williams and the legacy that he has left us.

I was brought up at Cripplestyle where my “aunties” and “uncles” could still remember the younger children of Samuel and Sarah Williams.

Times change, people move on; in 2000 with an aging congregation and only a few members, the Williams Memorial Chapel at Cripplestyle closed its doors and joined with the Chapel at Alderholt.

2007 was the bicentenary of the building of Ebenezer.



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