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# William Knibb – Social Reformer, Baptist Minister, Missionary and Friend of Slaves

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*Mike Stroud MA*

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**William Knibb (1803-1845)**

William Knibb was a native of Kettering, Northamptonshire. He was born on the 7th September 1803 in a corner house in Market Street. He was the son of Thomas, a tailor and tradesman who is said to have been frequently drunk and who eventually went bankrupt in 1810, and Mary Knibb (nee Dexter) who was the pious religious partner of the marriage and was a teacher and member of the nonconformist Kettering Independent Church called “The Great Meeting” which was in the pastoral care of Revd. Andrew Toller (1754-1815) (the building is now part of The Toller Chapel). William was one of twins, his sister, Ann, says they were born on the 6th September. He was the fifth of eight children and the third son born to the Knibbs.



*The Toller Church,  
Kettering.*

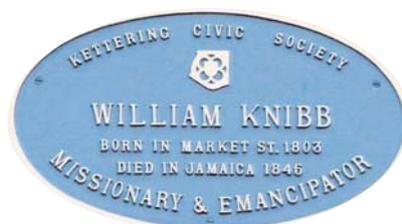
In 1776 a century of ministry under the name of Toller began with the induction of Revd. Thomas Northcote Toller, and then succeeded in 1821 by his son Revd. Thomas Toller. Revd. Andrew Toller also began preaching in the town in 1782 until his death in 1815. The church then became

known as “Toller’s Chapel” later “Toller Congregational Church” and now “Toller United Reformed Church”.



*Dame School.*

William was first educated at a Dame School. Education was not compulsory for children from 5 to 10 years old in England until 1880. Dame schools were referenced by Charles Dickens in his novel *Great Expectations*, which was first published in serial form in Dickens’ weekly periodical ‘All the Year Round’, from December 1860 to August 1861. These schools were a phenomenon of the Victorian period and were called Dame Schools because they were usually run by elderly women from their own homes. They catered for the youngest children, usually those too young to work. Some were taught the three ‘R’s, others were taught skills they could use to gain employment when older like sewing and knitting, which, today, we would call vocational courses. Any instruction was didactic and learnt ‘parrot fashion’ by rote. Fees for this were up to 4d per week and in many cases were considered child care.



*Blue Plaque in Kettering.*

William gained a place at Kettering Grammar School, where the Head Master was the Revd. James Hogg, a clergyman of the Church of England. William attended for three years. It is said: ‘he was not remarkable for application, but was quick and clever at his lessons, so that, without making any remarkable attainments, except in arithmetic in which he took precedence

of all his schoolfellows, he was never a disgrace’. It is also said he was good natured, and liked by his peers. He was extremely successful at marbles, a game of which he was passionately fond. He won money on the game which he spent on copies of ‘Youth Magazine’. There were a large number of magazines for youths’ around at this time; most had a religious background. On one occasion he spent so much spare time playing marbles that his mother commented: ‘William I am afraid you have not learned your catechism for the Sabbath’ William replied ‘O yes I have mother. It rained the other day, and I could not play, so I went up an entry and learned it there’.

On Sunday 30th September 1810 at the age of seven William and two of his older brothers, Thomas and Christopher (who later became a draper in Birmingham), were admitted to the Baptist Sunday School connected to the congregation of the Revd. Toller. Mr. Gill, his teacher, describes him as a ‘good boy but somewhat volatile and very difficult to manage until his affections had been gained’. He was quick to come to the defence of anyone he thought had been wronged and ‘maintained these generous quarrels with great resoluteness, it may be said, with pugnacity’. He remained at Sunday school, acquitting himself with great credit, until 1816, when he was thirteen and deemed ‘too old’ to receive further instruction.

His elder sister describes him thus: ‘The chief traits of his early character were warm affection, unbounded generosity, management and economy, accompanied with great vivacity’. These traits, and the ones described by his teachers, were to stand him in good stead for the challenges that were to come in his life.



*Revd. Andrew  
Fuller.*

His brother Thomas was born on the 11th October 1799 and was the eldest of the family. His character was somewhat different to William’s; he had equal energy but much less vivacity, and absolutely no

volatility. He was a religious boy; he would study the bible by candle light from four in the morning. On the recommendation of Mr. Gill a situation was obtained for Thomas in the printing establishment of Mr. J. G. Fuller, son of the Revd. Andrew Fuller who is best known in connection with the foundation of the Baptist Missionary Society, and was its secretary, to which he for the most part devoted his energies. His work in promoting the missionary enterprises of the Baptist church began about 1784. Fuller, a particular Baptist, was a controversialist in defence of the governmental theory of the atonement against hyper-Calvinism.



*Dr. John Ryland.*

In 1816 Fuller, the younger, moved the printing business to Bristol. Thomas requested that Fuller give employment to his younger brother William and both Thomas and William moved with Fuller to Bristol. Thomas was subject to religious impressions as a result of his mother's influence as well as that of the Baptist Church. Thomas became baptised on the 10 February 1820 by Dr John Ryland, the distinguished Baptist and missionary supporter, Pastor of the Broadmead Church and Principal of Bristol College, the oldest Baptist theological school, he was also on the Executive Committee of the Baptist Missionary Society.

Both Thomas and William became Sunday school teachers. This was to mark a great change in William's attitude. He became more committed to the church and wrote letters and sermons on Baptist belief. His words had great effect on both Thomas and J.G. Fuller. Toward the end of 1815 Thomas was asked if he would like to go to Jamaica as a missionary. He was apprehensive and felt he might be too late as 'should native preachers be speedily be raised up, European missionaries would not be required' and he was not old enough at this point. Thomas started evangelistic preaching in the poorer parts of Bristol and was having great success, with more and more people coming out to listen to him. This spurred Thomas on and prepared him for missionary toil. Thomas had an opportunity in early 1822 to fulfil his dreams. The church at Kingston, Jamaica had established a free school and was in need of a master. Thomas volunteered and with the

blessing of his parents he went to the British and Foreign School Society in London for three months to become more qualified for the post and set sail aboard the *Ocean* for Jamaica at the end of October 1822. The *Ocean* was forced back into Falmouth because of the weather 'and was detained there by contrary winds'. The ship finally set sail on 10th December and landed in Kingston on 20th January 1823.

William was inspired by his brother and decided on a Christian profession. He threw himself into Sunday school and preaching the gospel in the more destitute parts of Bristol and the surrounding villages. He and his fellow Baptist found themselves in some danger on several occasions, but William's tenacity showed and he succeeded in getting through to the people in these poor areas. In letters to his brother, William made it clear that he wished to follow his brother to Jamaica and be a missionary. He was also becoming interested in the slave trade. Of course Bristol was a major player in the trade and undoubtedly William was influenced by what he saw. He wrote to Thomas on the 2nd April 1823: 'endeavours are making to emancipate the slaves in the West, and is hoped they will succeed. It is proposed to be gradual. There is a society in Liverpool, and a public meeting will be held at the Guildhall, Bristol, this week, the mayor to preside. Several merchants are on the committee. Mr. Foster will preach his next lecture on the subject; and I do trust that the poor degraded Negroes, will, ere long, be set free from the chains of thralldom'.

William was surrounding himself with intelligent, pious high minded friends, who debated the hot topics of the day, particularly those of religion. It seems that they got heated at times and several of his letters indicated either apologies or to clear up any misunderstandings. However, the death of his brother, Thomas, on the 25th April 1823, after an illness of only three days, renewed his thoughts and redoubled his energy toward the West Indies. William returned to Kettering to be with his family at this time of grieving. William began to feel that this may be an opening for himself, an opportunity to become the thing he most wanted, to become a missionary. He declared: 'then if the society will accept me, I'll go and take his place'. However, this declaration did not lead to an application on his part or indeed an invitation from the Missionary Society. It would seem, however, that Dr Ryland and the Missionary Society had other plans for William; he was to be sent to Sumatra. On the 27th March 1823 Dr Ryland sent a note to Mr. Dyer at the Society in which he stated that: "As to W. Knibb, he will be twenty-one next September. He has already formed an acquaintance with one of our members, and I do not think he would be willing to go out

single. I do not think he would be willing to go to Sumatra at all. I rather question his capacity for learning a new language. He is a good printer and I conceive would have talents for preaching far from contemptible. But I think he would be more suitable for the West Indies than the East." Mr Dyer replied: "William is a good lad, but not equal to Thomas. The whole meaning, I suppose, of this is, that Thomas was characterised by application and acquirement, William by vivacity and discursiveness. Men, however, even sagacious men, are short-sighted. Thomas Knibb was, and, undoubtedly, under the blessing of God, would have continued to be, an admirable and useful missionary; but William, as his course has shown, was the man for events – the man to mount the whirlwind, and control the storm".

The society decided to send William to the Borough Road School, London to learn the British system of education, and William intimated his readiness to go to Kingston to occupy the post made vacant by the death of his brother. On 29th August 1824 he accepted the post. On the 14th October the Society decided William would sail with Captain Whittle, in the *Ocean*. This was the ship his brother Thomas sailed aboard and was a ship used by the Society, as the owner, a Mr. Angas, allowed free passage of missionaries. Before he set sail William returned to Kettering. Upon his arrival he found his mother sick and Betsy (Thomas's wife) in rapid decline. His sister Ann was so overcome with grief, that only three of his siblings could bear the farewell. Mrs. Knibb accepted the 'will of God' and sent a 'second large contribution to the welfare of Jamaica'. On the 5th of October 1824 William married Miss Mary Watkins, a member of the Broadmead Baptist church.

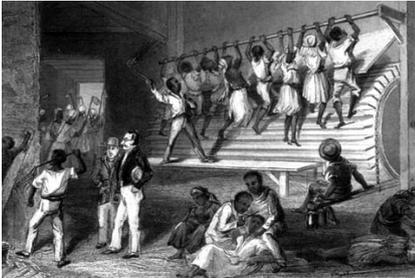
At noon on the 5th of November Mr. and Mrs. Knibb set sail from Blackwall for Jamaica. Later Mary's nephew, Benjamin Dexter, the son of her brother Worcester Dexter, was to make the same journey as a Baptist missionary with his wife Ann. William kept a journal of the voyage. It took twenty nine days to get to Cowes on the Isle of Wight where they had to stay until 5th January 1825 because of contrary winds. He records that on the 8th January they lost sight of 'beloved England'.

The Baptist Mission in Jamaica was started in the 1814. When William arrived



*Annotta Bay Baptist Church.*

to start his ministry, 'six missionaries were in service; namely, Messrs. Coultart and Tinson, pastors respectively of two churches which had been formed in Kingston; Mr. Phillips, at Annotta Bay; Mr. Phillippo, at Spanish Town; and Messrs' Tripp and Burchell, at Flamstead, near Montego Bay. There were many who opposed the missionaries, 'but the work of the Lord had prospered in their hands'. William was to be the seventh to join this dedicated and devoted group. In March 1825 William was preaching and working in Kingston, about which he wrote: "I have now reached the land of sin, disease, and death, where Satan reigns with awful power, and carries multitudes captive at his will". "The poor, oppressed, benighted, and despised sons of Africa form a pleasing contrast to the debauched white population. They gladly hear the word, and to them the gospel is preached". He was at the same church that his brother preached at and people commented on the likeness of William to his brother, Thomas, and that their voices were similar.



*Jamaica house of correction included beating females.*

William thought the whole concept of slavery was totally abhorrent, and he was determined to do all within his power to "slay the monster". However, the Baptist Missionary Society relied upon the goodwill of the masters on their sugar plantations and could not support (at least openly) the emancipationist movement. This suggests that for political and practical measures the Baptist Society supported slavery, or at least did not oppose it. Missionaries were firmly instructed and reminded not to interfere in civil or political affairs. He frequently wrote letters to people about his burning hatred of slavery "the cursed blast of slavery, has, like pestilence, withered almost every bloom".

William was adamant that the school house at Kingston was not fit for purpose, due to its poor construction, design and that it flooded on a regular basis. He resolved to build a new school. Building work commenced on the 9th August 1825; it resembled the Borough Road school and accommodated 250 children and was close to the chapel. It opened on the 4th January 1826. He also set up a 'Sabbath School' and within six months he had 150 new pupils. The school was highly successful, so much so that in July 1827 an extension was built. The school was always heavily in debt owing in 1827 £1000. William frequently

wrote to friends to support the school and church. He received donations of books, bibles and prayer books along with some money, mainly from the parishioners in Bristol.

He was asked to revive the church at Port Royal, which is across the harbour from Kingston. He travelled the four miles, across the harbour, by canoe every Sunday. Port Royal had been closed since his brother died. William preached there on the 18th April 1825 exactly one year to the day that his brother last took a service at Port Royal. He built the congregation up to 130 people and by 1828 the church had to be enlarged to take 'all the souls who wish to hear God's Word'. In 1828 he moved to Savanna-la-Mar and in 1830 he became the minister responsible for the Baptist church at Falmouth where he remained until his death.

In the early nineteenth century Jamaica had become one of the British Empire's chief sugar exporters, and this colonial wealth was being reaped through slavery. As with most English nonconformists of the time, Knibb sided with the slaves and the cause of emancipation.



*Slaves working in fields Jamaica.*

Knibb did not hesitate to make his feelings clear. When Sam Swiney, a black slave, was unjustly accused of a minor offence, Knibb spoke for him in court. In a gross miscarriage of justice, the colonial authorities convicted Swiney and had him flogged. Knibb refused to let it drop. He published full details in an island newspaper, for which he was threatened with a prosecution for libel. His account reached the Secretary of State in London, who eventually dismissed from office the two responsible magistrates.

William and other Baptist ministers were instrumental in opposing continued attempts by the House of Assembly to introduce draconian Consolidated Slave Law during the 1820s. They persuaded the British parliament to outlaw it. William was extremely popular with slaves, whilst not endearing himself to the slave owners and the white population in general. It is recorded that at the meeting where William was proposed as minister at Falmouth the chair asked for a show of hands and the entire congregation of slaves stood, held up both hands and wept.

Pressure was growing in Britain for the abolition of slavery, particularly in the



*Now known as the Baptist Manse, the building on the corner of Market and Trelawny Streets, Falmouth, was built as a Masonic Temple in 1798.*

British colonies. The colonial authorities opposed the British stance and exerted political influence to halt it. Meanwhile the slaves' excitement and anticipation grew. Eventually the turmoil resulted in the Great Jamaican Slave Revolt, the leader of which was Sam Sharpe. The colonialists put the revolt down using great violence. All the missionaries were treated with grave suspicion. William was put under armed guard, only obtaining bail with the help of two prominent colonialists who were sympathetic to the slaves' plight.

An Anglican clergyman called Bridges formed the Colonial Church Union, which was opposed, by all necessary means, to the anti-slave movement. This group used the cover of martial law to carry out terrorist attacks. On December 27th 1830 they burnt down a dozen Baptist chapels, including William's at Falmouth, forcing some missionaries to flee Jamaica in fear of their lives. They however, did not see off William. There was a plot by planters to assassinate him. He found out about it and sought refuge with a leading islander. 50 white planters stoned his lodgings for three successive nights. His family had been threatened and told that he had been executed and gone to 'hell'. John and Sam Sharpe were accused of being the instigators behind the insurrection and of burning or destroying the churches and building of those against slavery. Two thousand slaves lost their lives either massacred or executed. In one such incident one hundred and fifty were 'suspended from one gallows'. However, no white person lost their life at the hands of a slave. By the end of the fighting thirteen chapels were destroyed costing the Baptist Missionary Society twenty three thousand pounds alone. Today that would be about one million one hundred and thirty eight thousand two hundred and seventy pounds.

In February 1832 it was decided that William should go directly to England and inform the British public of what was going on in Jamaica. He and his family sailed from Kingston on the 26th April 1832 aboard the Anfield. He returned in time to attend the Annual Baptist Missionary Society meeting held on the 21st June 1832.

As William stood on the platform he was cautioned about moderating his tone and being less vocal about slavery. He refused to do this and vehemently denounced slavery saying that he 'would never desist from his efforts until that greatest of curses was removed'. There was a feeling at the meeting that slavery was doomed to be consigned to history once and for all.



*The William Knibb Memorial Church, Falmouth, Jamaica.*

On August 15th 1832 a great meeting was held in London with the purpose of pushing the government to abolish slavery in the British Dominions. William was one of the main speakers. The consensus in Britain for abolition was building. Eventually on 28th August 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act was accepted by Parliament. The act made all slaves apprentices from 1st of August 1834 for four years or in the case of 'field' slaves six years. Although the act was too little too late, inadequate and insufficient, it was met with great joy and thanksgiving by the missionaries and slaves. Plantation owners were compensated to the tune of twenty million pounds. The Society had to argue long and hard with the government of the day for compensation for the damage done to the chapels and schools. The government eventually offered six thousand one hundred and ninety five pounds, on the proviso that the rest of the money needed was raised by public subscription. Fourteen thousand pounds was raised this way, within a few months.

On August 26th 1834 William and his family set sail from England aboard the *Antaeus*, bound for Port Maria, reaching there on 25th October 1834. He set about repairing and rebuilding the chapels and schools that had been damaged. He was allowed to use the court house in Falmouth for services. The chapel was rebuilt for one hundred and three pounds six shillings and eight pence.

On the 25th July 1837 William's young son, also called William died of Scarlet Fever at the age of twelve. In February 1840

William and his two daughters once again set sail for England. He left his wife Mary in Jamaica on this occasion. They got as far as Cuba and had to turn back to Port Royal because the ship sprung a leak. After repairs they set sail again. It was expected that William would be back in England in time for the Missionary Society's annual meeting. It is recorded that there was great sadness at his non-arrival due to the delays in the West Indies. The society convened a special meeting at Exeter Hall on the 22nd May to greet him when he eventually did arrive. The purpose of the meeting, which was packed out, was 'to receive the Rev. W. Knibb and hear his accounts of the success of his missionary exertions in the West Indies'. During his 5 months visit to Britain he travelled six thousand miles, addressed 154 public meetings and addressed two hundred thousand people. He was warmly received and treated as a hero by many.

He arrived back in Jamaica on the 7th January 1841. This time he found much less hostility from the plantation owners and the House of Assembly had exempted missionary property from taxation. Some of the troublemakers even repented. The renewal of Jamaica had begun, new houses were being built and William was given a piece of land that he called 'Kettering' upon which his parishioners built him and his family a house to live in. He commented on how well the island was looking with its neat cottages springing up.

In March 1842 William returned again to Britain. On 13th May 1842 he was an important speaker at the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society annual general meeting. He talked on slavery and European emigration to Jamaica. On every visit to Britain he always returned to Kettering to see family and friends. On the 2nd July he sailed upon the *Dee* from Southampton back to Jamaica, arriving on the 4th August. He was becoming more vocal about slavery in America. Because of his anti-slavery stance

William had been banned from entering the United States of America. It would seem the Americans were worried that he might cause problems with the slave trade there.

On the 20th March 1843 further tragedy befell the Knibbs'; he lost another son, Coultart, to scarlet fever; it only took 30 hours from the start of the illness to death.

William was asked to give a speech at the Baptist Anti-slavery conference in Boston,



*Kettering.*

Massachusetts in May 1844. This time the Americans let him in. He returned again to England in April 1845, doing yet another lecture tour, returning in August of that year. Upon his return there was 'tumultuous rejoicing, there was a procession a mile long to welcome him home'.

At 10am on Saturday 15th November 1845 at his home in Kettering, Jamaica he died of a virulent strain of yellow fever. Within a few hours the whole area knew of his demise. At 7pm that day his body was removed to the Mission House in Falmouth accompanied by several hundred of his congregation. The Falmouth Post said 'on its entrance to the town persons of all classes joined the mournful procession. The cry of lamentation that was raised afforded a convincing proof of the esteem in which the deceased was held, even by those who had been strongly opposed to his political movements'. Eight thousand people attended his interment on the Sunday morning.

William Knibb was a true evangelist, a lover of lost souls; he was a child of that golden age of the non-conformist church,



*William (circled) at Anti-slavery AGM.*

*The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840 by Benjamin Robert Haydon*

when Calvinists were true activists and soul-winners, who proved themselves for Gospel ministry by street preaching a ragged-school evangelism. William learnt his missionary zeal during this golden age. He believed that a missionary should never stand still and that the Lord had touched his lips to preach an irresistible call of mercy. Proof of his passion was shown by his translation of the Scriptures into Creole. His dream was that freed Jamaicans would

return to Africa and take the gospel with them. In a letter written in 1839 he prayed "O my Heavenly Father...save poor, benighted . . . Africa . . . My affection for Africa may seem extravagant. I cannot help it. I dream of it every night, nor can I think of anything else". William was a prolific letter writer and many of his letters are available to read in John Hinton's contemporary book, 'Memoir of William Knibb: Missionary in Jamaica'.

***To the Memory of William Knibb***

who departed this life on the 15th November, 1845, in the 43rd year of his age.

This monument was erected by the emancipated slaves to whose enfranchisement and elevation his indefatigable exertions so largely contributed; by his fellow-labourers, who admired and loved him, and deeply deplore his early removal; and by friends of various creeds and parties, as an expression of their esteem for one whose praise as a man, a philanthropist, and a Christian minister, is in all the churches, and who, being dead, yet speaketh.



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