

DAVIES, GRIFFITH (1788 - 1855), actuary

Name: Griffith Davies
Date of birth: 1788
Date of death: 1855
Spouse: Mrs Davies (née Owen)
Spouse: Mary Davies (née Holbert)
Parent: Mary Dafydd (née Williams)
Parent: Owen Dafydd
Gender: Male
Occupation: actuary
Area of activity: Economics and Money; Science and Mathematics
Authors: William Gilbert Williams, Llewelyn Gwyn Chambers, Gwilym Arthur Jones

Born 5 December 1788 at Ty Croes, Llandwrog, Caernarfonshire, son of Owen David and Mary Williams. Apart from the Sunday school and the Welsh day school at Bryn'rodyn, and two quarters at an English day school at Llanwnda, his early educational advantages were scant. Owing to the hard conditions generally prevailing at the end of the 18th century, he had to find employment at an early age - at first with farmers and later at the Cilgwyn quarry.

At the age of 17 and after saving some money he attended for a time the school kept at Caernarvon by **Evan Richardson**, and here he discovered that he had special aptitude for mathematics. When his savings were exhausted he returned to the quarry, but in 1809 resolved to go to London to improve his English and his mathematics. He attended some classes in London, and sought to supplement his meagre means by undertaking manual labour in the daytime. He was offered a post as usher in a school at Sadler's Wells, but in the reorganization of that school his services were dispensed with. He then ventured to open a school of his own to teach mathematics and allied subjects. Gradually his pupils at the school increased in number, and as many of them were anxious to study actuarial and insurance work he set to work to attain proficiency in these subjects. His studies led him to discover new methods of assessing premiums and to give assurance work a scientific basis. He published a book, *A Key to Bonnycastle's Trigonometry*, for which he had to cut diagram blocks with his own hands. He developed a method of sharing earnings between partners in a bargain when some of them had been absent from work during the month. There is evidence to suggest that Telford had made errors whilst designing Britannia Bridge across the Menai Straits and that Griffith Davies had to re-do many of the calculations.

Having gained a high reputation as an actuary, he was offered a post as advisory actuary to the Guardian Assurance Co., and the subsequent success of the company was mainly attributable to his new tables. One of the competitors for the post when he was appointed was Benjamin Gompertz who was already a Fellow of the Royal Society. It is said that there was objection to him because he was Jewish, and that Nathan Rothschild established the Alliance office for him!

In 1827 his time was much occupied in opposing a parliamentary Bill promoted by some Caernarvonshire landlords for enclosing common lands in Llanwnda and Llandwrog, and confiscating the tofts already enclosed by squatters. His efforts, along with those of some influential friends, led to the withdrawal of the Bill.

In 1830 he was given the task of auditing the accounts of the Bombay military funds and, in the following year, of doing similar work for the Madras military funds; his services in both connections were eminently satisfactory.

He was elected F.R.S. on 16 June 1831. He was elected a Fellow of the Statistical Society of France in 1833. He was one of the interpreters of the Institute of Actuaries and was the first member to be elevated a Fellow of that institution. One of his accounting methods is still in use today. He also received the Royal Society of the Arts' large silver medal in 1820 for carving a sundial skilfully from a piece of slate. He was invited to become the first president of the Institute of Actuaries but declined. He was described as 'The father of the present race of actuaries'.

He had now attained to a position of influence and power, and was able to recommend some of his countrymen for responsible posts, e.g. **Hugh Owen** (1804 - 1881) to become secretary of the newly established Local Government Board, and **J. W. Thomas** (Arfonwyson) to a place on the staff of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich.

In 1812 he married Mary Holbert, she died in 1836, leaving one daughter who became the wife of Samuel Dew, a solicitor of Llangefni. For his second wife he married a widow, a Mrs. Glynne. Both wives were buried at Bunhill Fields cemetery.

Griffith Davies won the respect of a wide circle on account of his uprightness, honesty, and piety, as well as for his charity and benevolence. Throughout his life he remained devotedly attached to the religious faith of his early days. In 1837 he was made an elder of Jewin church (CM), London. He was a member of the Trefeca committee, and it is said that he set the denomination's finances on a firm footing. Between 1829 and 1832 he was a prominent member of the London Cymreigyddion Society, but left it in 1832 as a protest against the increase of Radicalism among its members. He believed strongly in education. He was a member of the old London Mathematical Society until its demise, and a member of the committee of the Islington Literary and Scientific Society where he lived.

He died 21 March 1855, and was buried on 27 March at Abney Park cemetery, London.

A number of his papers are lodged at the Library of the Institute of Actuaries, amongst them *An investigation of the basis for calculating life contingencies &c*, i.e. twenty-four reports which he wrote in 1831, and *A paper on the construction of logarithms* (1849). A hundred and five blocks of his key to *Bonnycastle's Trigonometry* are lodged at the N.L.W. as well as numerous letters from him. There are others also in the library of the University of Wales, Bangor.

Authors

William Gilbert Williams, (1874 - 1966)

Dr Llewelyn Gwyn Chambers

Gwilym Arthur Jones, (1925 - 1998)

Sources

Manuscripts in U.C.N.W., Bangor

parish registers of Llandwrog

Ll. G. Chambers, 'Griffith Davies (1788-1855) F.R.S. Actuary;', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1988

Transactions of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, 38 (1820)

minutes of the Royal Society, (1831)

Library of the Inst. of Actuaries

papers in N.L.W., University of Wales, Bangor, and the office of the Guardian Royal Exchange Assurance, London

Further Reading

Haydn E. Edwards, *Griffith Davies: Arloeswr a Chymwynaswr* (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru 2023)

Post magazine and insurance monitor, 31 March 1855

Wikipedia Article: [Griffith Davies](#)

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