

## WILLIAMS, WILLIAM (1732 - 1799), Baptist minister, and justice of the peace

**Name:** William Williams  
**Date of birth:** 1732  
**Date of death:** 1799  
**Spouse:** Dorothy Williams (née Lewis)  
**Parent:** Anne Williams  
**Parent:** William Williams  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** Baptist minister, and justice of the peace  
**Area of activity:** Law; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration; Religion  
**Author:** Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born at Tre-fach, Llanfair Nantglyn, Pembrokeshire, the son of William and Anne Williams; his father was a justice of the peace related to many of the local gentry and possessing an estate worth £1,600 a year. His parents died when he was six years old, but he was well looked after by his trustees, and went to good schools. It has to be admitted, however, that next to nothing is known about him until, at the age of 19, he married one of the **Bowen** family of Llwyn-gwair, Nevern. His wife died within a year, to his very profound grief; at the end of December 1753 he wrote out a 'covenant' which can be read in **David Jones's** book (below). An Anglican by up-bringing, he was attracted to the Baptists and was baptized at Cilfowyr in 1760; at his baptism he made it clear that he did not approve of the laying-on of hands, but that for the nonce he was prepared to submit to this ritual. He began to preach in 1762. In 1766, the question of laying-on of hands became a matter of great controversy; the opponents of the rite (himself included) left the congregation and formed themselves into a separate church, getting permission from the church at Blaen-y-waun to use their chapel on two Sundays a month; when their minister died, William Williams was ordained in his place - he wrote a memorandum to the Baptist Association defending his stand, and also published (in 1770) a sermon he had preached on the subject in 1769. In 1768, the new church moved to Ebenezer chapel which had been built on the Tre-fach estate. Williams remarried, but his second wife also died. At Ebenezer, he was troubled by some members of the congregation who sang and 'ranted' in the Methodist manner, and he excommunicated them. He appears to have written a poem about this 'hot-headedness,' and it is believed that he was the 'gentleman' to whom **Williams** of Pantycelyn wrote a rejoinder (*Atteb*) in 1784 for 'attempting in verse to rebuke the Holy Spirit.' He returned to the charge in an English pamphlet, translated (with additions) by **M. J. Rhys** in 1794, under the title *Sylwadau ar y Dirywiaeth mewn Pregethu a Chanu yng Nghymru*, although **Rhys** had refused to print it in the *Cychgrawn Cymraeg* in the previous year; it was republished with further additions by **Nathaniel Williams** in 1798. The dispute is of some importance for it was one manifestation of the growing estrangement between William Williams (and his supporters) and the (ultimately victorious) Baptists of south-west Wales who favoured the higher Calvinism and quasi-Methodism. Ironically enough, the principal factor in strengthening the hands of this party was the success of the Baptist mission in North Wales (1776), a mission started by William Williams, in conjunction with **Thomas Llewelyn** and **Joshua Thomas**, and of which he was the treasurer and organiser.

About 1774, he went to live at Cardigan; but it was Tre-fach which he regarded as his home as long as he lived. He founded a Baptist chapel in Cardigan town in 1775-6, and another in 1797 in Berwig a little distance away. He was a justice of the peace for the counties of Pembrokeshire and Cardigan as well as for the borough of Cardigan; contemporary writers frequently refer to this, and some go so far as to say that he was chairman of the quarter sessions (perhaps of the borough justices); **William Richards** of Lynn refers to him as a Deputy Lieutenant. It was natural for later research-workers to doubt this, in view of the fact that the Test Act barred Nonconformists from the bench - others hazarded the explanation that he had become a justice of the peace when he was still an Anglican, and that his brother justices had tolerated him. It is more likely that he was covered by the Indemnity Acts, for **B. Rees** (below) reports having seen the memorandum of his being sworn in at Cardigan, and that was in 1772, long after he had become a Baptist. And the records of quarter sessions in Pembrokeshire and Cardigan counties (now in the N.L.W.) show that he sat on both benches. His position proved an asset to his fellow-Nonconformists when war broke out in 1793. In 1792, he had supported **M.J. Rhys's** plan to send Bibles to France, and was, in fact, treasurer of the fund raised for this purpose. But when the 1793 crisis occurred he summoned a conference of ministers of the 'Three Denominations' in the west (about forty of them responded and met at Newcastle-Emlyn on 13 February), and drafted a resolution expressing loyalty to the British Constitution; the resolution was published, with a ballad (no. 541 in **J. H. Davies's** *Bibliography of Welsh Ballads*; see also *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, vi, 276) which may, or may not, have been written by Williams himself. It is doubtful whether this did much to allay the suspicion with which the Nonconformists of west Wales were regarded in 1797; but we hear nothing of William Williams during that pother.

Meantime, the cleavage among the Baptists was growing. In addition to his prejudice against 'hot-headedness,' Williams, like his colleagues mentioned above, was a 'Scriptural Trinitarian,' i.e. he believed that the Trinity represented not three 'persons,' but the three functional aspects of God. This led him to defend **Peter Williams's Bible**, and to defend even more strongly the Welsh edition of 'John Canne's Bible,' which was the joint production of **Peter Williams** and the Baptist **David Jones** (1741? - 1792), and which led to the excommunication of **Peter Williams** by the Methodists. There are some who believe (but without much foundation) that it was he who wrote *Dialogous* [sic] which was printed in 1791. In 1793 he published in *Y Cychgrawn Cymraeg* (205-8) a synopsis of Courmayer's views which were opposed to the orthodox doctrine of the Person of Christ. And when the 'unorthodox' Baptists felt compelled to leave the Association at Salem Meidrym in 1799, he published a protest against the 'despotism of Associations', *Gair yn ei Bryd at Lywodraethwyr y Cymanfaoedd, neu Yspryd y Byd a'r Yspryd sydd o Dduw yn cad eu gwrthyferbyn*, in which he equated the 'infallibility of the Association' with the 'infallibility of the Pope' (1799; republished in *Yr Ymofynydd*, 1849, 201-3; summarised in *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1930, 45-7). It seems probable that it was only his death which saved William Williams from excommunication.

In 1784, he had taken as his third wife Dorothy Lewis of Llwyngrawys, Llangoedmor (see **Meyrick**, *Cardiganshire*, for information about some of the family). He had eight children by this marriage, but only one son and three daughters survived him. He died 13 August 1799, 'aged 67,' and was buried (as was his widow in 1803) in the Ebenezer burial-ground on the Tre-fach estate. His children were not Baptists, and it is significant that the inscription they placed on their father's tombstone referred to him as 'William Williams, Esquire, of Trevach.'

### Author

**Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins**, (1881 - 1969)

### Sources

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Thomas Shankland, in *Cofiant J. R. Jones, Ramoth yn cynnwys casgliad helaeth o'i lythyrau* (Carmarthen 1913) (D. Williams), 761

B. Rees in *Seren Gomer*, 1903, 318-24; 1904, 57-67, 124-31 (and separately, 1905)

*Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1930 (correction in 1931)

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Gomer M. Roberts, *Bywyd a Gwaith Peter Williams* (Cardiff 1943) (index)

J. Gwili Jenkins, *Hanfod Duw a Pherson Crist: athrawiaeth y Drindod a Duwod Crist, yn bennaf yn ei pherthynas Āđ Chymru* (Liverpool 1931) (index)

and the other references given above

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