

## William Perkin, stonemason and sexton with a problem

William Perkin, born in Clapham on 23 May 1808, was the eldest son of Christopher Parkin, a farmer from Orton, Westmorland, and his wife Ellen Robinson from Clapham. They had son William, seven daughters and then son John whilst living in Clapham and then moved to Bentham and then Ingleton. Christopher began life as a farmer but, in January 1845, when he was 59, an outbreak of 'distemper' affected the cattle in the region [2]. Christopher lost his whole of his stock of six good milch cows. Extremely fortunately, 'two charitably disposed gentlemen in London, having seen the account of his loss in the paper, immediately made enquiry into his character and found it to be of a sober, industrious man, consequently each made him a very handsome present, though perfect strangers to him'[3]. Lucky Christopher.



extending in Lancashire:—"Ingleton—Epidemic among Cattle.—The distemper among cattle has at last reached this neighbourhood. Christopher Parkin, a small farmer in this village, has within the last few weeks lost six good milch cows by it, which formed the whole of his stock. Subscriptions are at present in progress towards making up his loss, as he is a sober and industrious man."

BENEVOLENCE.—We are this week glad in having to relate that a spirited subscription has been entered into, for Christopher Parkin, of Ingleton, the poor farmer whom we mentioned a few weeks ago, as having lost the whole of his stock of cows in the distemper which has been so prevalent in the neighbourhood. Great praise is due to Messrs. J. Ray and Wm. Green, of Ingleton, for their unwearied exertions in rendering their assistance towards the welfare of Parkin, under his severe and unavoidable trial, which has arisen to him in the dispensations of Divine Providence. We understand that two charitably disposed gentlemen in London, having seen the account of his loss in the paper, immediately made inquiry into his character, and found it to be that of a sober, industrious man, consequently they each made him a very handsome present, though perfect strangers to him. Such acts of charity are indeed worthy of imitation.

At the time of the following census Christopher had abandoned farming and worked as a stonemason with his son John. Ellen died in 1851, aged 65 and Christopher in 1866 aged 80.

Somehow the family name of Parkin had changed to Perkin during the 1840s. William, now Perkin, moved to Settle with his wife, Mary Wildman who was from Tatham and worked as a stonemason based in the Market Place. On November 2nd 1843, church vestry records tell us 'That Mr Butterfield having resigned the situation of vergers of Ascension Church, Settle, that William Perkin is hereby appointed to the situation and that he is to have the yearly salary of five pounds for attendance on Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day. That he is to attend to the warming apparatus and lighting of the Church, also that he is appointed Sexton of the said church.' Poor William Butterfield had resigned after his wife died and his son accidentally shot another man dead, whilst shooting sparrows, but that's another story. The roles of vergers and sextons overlapped and between them were responsible for the order and upkeep of the church, the care of sacred relics and preparations for liturgy. They had to maintain the church buildings and grounds and dig graves. The salary would have nicely supplemented the income from William's masonry work.

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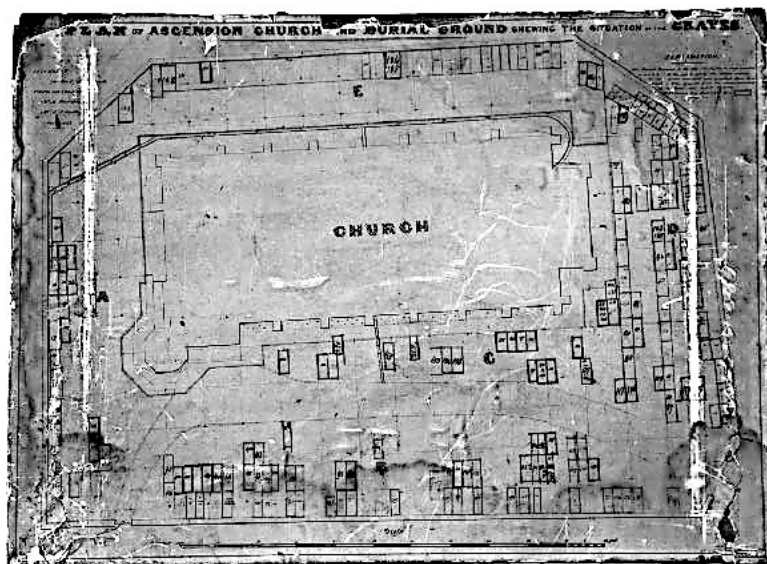
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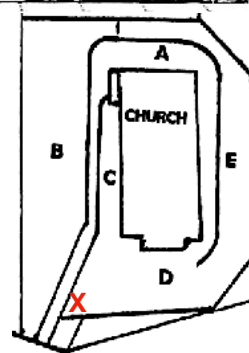
The church heating and lighting apparatus was fraught with problems. A report in 1866 explains how the steam from the heating apparatus and the soot from the camphine lamps (which used distilled turpentine) had damaged the organ machinery [SC]. Oh dear, was this in any way William's fault?

The great excess of expenditure over the amount subscribed and collected has been occasioned by the great and unexpected outlay which has been made upon the organ. It was originally intended simply to remove the organ from the gallery to its present position. This would have been effected at a cost from £20 to £25. But when the Instrument was examined, it was discovered that the steam which had been allowed to escape into the works from the warming apparatus in former years, together with the soot from camphine lamps, had so injured the mechanism, that entirely new works were necessary.

1866 transpired to be a bad year for William. One of William's responsibilities was to maintain the graveyard plan showing where bodies were buried. He did this until 1855, but then just stopped. This was just a few years after the appointment of the second vicar, *Rev William Frederick Pierson*. In 1866, the Vestry records describe that churchwarden 'Mr John Winskill do require Messrs Perkin to supply the necessary sketch for completing the map of the graves in the church yard without delay.' There had probably been informal requests before this. There was a further request in May 1867 as the churchwardens were required to send copies of the burial plan to the Diocese. William never completed these records, so we will never know where over 400 bodies are buried. That's really not helpful! Was he just lazy or was there another reason he was unable to do it?



William had married **Mary Wildman** in Clapham in 1830 and they had five children while living in the cottages of Howson's Yard, just behind the Market Place on the north side, owned by the *Howson sisters*. Two of their children died in 1841 – **Eleanor Jane** in May, aged just ten months, and six months later **Christopher**, aged 11. William was very quick to purchase grave **DX22** in a prime position, **X**, just next to the church gate. Everyone would have to walk by and remember those in the grave as they entered the church. As a stonemason serving the church, William probably planned to erect a gravestone.



Mary died in June 1852 and was buried with the two children. In October the same year, just four months later, William, aged 44, married **Nancy Cornthwaite**, 13 years his junior and the daughter of a joiner from Milnthorpe. She had come to Settle to work in service for **Margaret Bolland** at the grand Townhead estate. William and Nancy had a daughter, **Fanny**. In April 1855 the family moved a few doors away to one of the small cottages on Constitution Hill [SC].

**TO BE LET, A COTTAGE**  
LATELY occupied by William Perkin. Apply to Miss Howsons, Settle.

Poor Nancy was seized with a fit of apoplexy from which she died in 1868, aged 48 [1]. She had been in her usual health and spirits, and surgeon **William Altham** was unable to save her. Nancy was buried with first wife Mary and the two children. Nancy pre-deceased her mother who made sure her life was commemorated on the gravestone of her family's grave at Preston Patrick:

**SUDDEN DEATH.**—A very sudden death happened here on Tuesday last. The wife of Mr William Perkin, sexton, whilst preparing her husband's tea, was seized with a fit of apoplexy, and died in less than two hours afterwards. Up to the moment of the attack which so suddenly proved fatal deceased, who was aged 45, was in her usual health and spirits. Mr. Altham, surgeon, was called in immediately she was seized with the fit, but there appeared little hope of her rallying, and, as the result shows, his services were unavailing.

**George Cornthwaite**, joiner of Milnthorpe d.11 November 1853 aged 64; also **Mary**, wife of George, d. 4 September 1871 aged 84; son, **George Gibson** d. 8 October 1864 aged 33; dau. **Nancy** d. 31 March 1868 aged 45.

Just a year after Nancy's death William, now aged 60, married again, this time to **Martha Satterthwaite** who was 22 years his junior. He obviously didn't like being alone and liked the company of a younger woman. Martha had also worked in domestic service and at the time of their marriage lived at Ingfield, so probably worked with **Rev John Swale** and family. As William was the verger, it was custom and practice that his wife should be the church cleaner. Nancy had done a good job. After Nancy died, the church agreed that her teenaged daughter Fanny could do the cleaning in the absence of a wife. However, William's third wife Martha obviously didn't enjoy cleaning – the church 'redefined' her job description and arranged payment to her 'only when the tiling and stone steps have been washed.' A few years later, they decided that 'in the future the cleaning and dusting of the church be committed to the charge of a few ladies to be selected and authorised by the vicar and churchwardens.' Martha was probably very relieved!

William's second and third marriages were at Settle Church. In wedding documentation, William provided 'his mark' which suggests that he was illiterate, and this may explain why those burial records were not completed. It seems strange that Settle church should appoint someone to a salaried job when they knew didn't have the basic literacy required to do the job. It's also surprising that after William failed to respond to reminders that were formally recorded in the vestry records they left matters there. It was until the appointment of the next vicar, **Rev Jackson Mason** that records began again in 1885. Incredibly, despite this, William Perkin held this post for an 46 years. He was remembered as having quite a relaxed attitude to the job [CH].

*William Perkin*  
his mark  
*Nancy Cornthwaite*

*William Perkin*  
his mark  
*Martha Satterthwaite*

The old sexton, William Perkin by name, who had been grave digger since the church was built till he retired through old age and infirmity, had generally to be consulted before a grave was started. On one occasion he was asked about a certain space as to whether it would hold another body or not, he replied it would not "because old Tommy so-and-so is buried there and he made me promise before he died to bury him as near the top as possible so that at the resurrection he would find no trouble in getting out when his body had to rise again, so I put him in a very shallow one; he lies very near the top."



William's illiteracy raises questions about his business too – how did he advertise, take orders, issue invoices and even carve gravestones without being able to read or write? William's wives

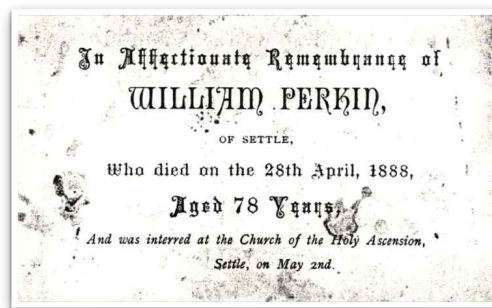
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were literate which will have helped. He probably had a good memory and customer service/gift of the gab? In fact, in those days, there were several tradesmen who were successful despite being illiterate. We have several examples of poor spelling on our gravestones – illiterate masons just copied what was written for them. This illiteracy also explains the interchangeable surnames across this family as Parkin, Perkin and Perkins were all used at various times by members of the family.

In 1885, when William was 77, he was presented with a hefty purse of £5 and 6 shillings in recognition of his 30 years' work as senior deacon for the Settle United Order of Mechanics which had similar principles to the Freemasons [1].

**PRESENTATION.**—On Saturday last, the members of the Settle United Order of Mechanics, assembled at their Club-room, for the purpose of presenting Mr. William Perkin, senior, with a purse containing £5 6s. in recognition of his past valued services as Senior Deacon, which office he has held for upwards of thirty years. The presentation was made by Mr. Adam Cokell, an old member of the Club.

William saw out his days with Martha on Constitution Hill and died, aged 79, on 28 April 1888 and was buried with his first two wives and two children in *grave DX22*. His funeral card celebrated this event but with his age being listed as 78 [ph1]. Perhaps William hadn't been completely honest with Nancy as she was so much younger than him? As a stonemason and having such a prestigious role at the church for so many years it's surprising William and his family didn't have a gravestone. Widow Martha ran their home as a boarding house for a while – one of her lodgers was **Christopher (Kit) Rawsthorne**. It's likely she kept her house clean! Then she moved to Leeds to spend her last days with nieces and nephews. She died 20 years after William.



The remaining children moved to Lancashire and had their own families. William and Mary's daughter **Elizabeth** married a tailor, **William Sharples**, in Blackburn. Son **William** worked as an asylum attendant in Lancaster for many years. Son **John** worked as a labourer in Blackburn. During his 40s John and his large family adopted the surname 'Perkins' on each census return but John was still a Perkin on his death documentation. Youngest Fanny married **John Taylor**, a moulder and had a son, **John William Taylor**.

Most of William's seven sisters married masons, weavers or cloggers and lived in Lancashire. Sisters **Isabella** and **Mary Ann** married brothers **William** and **Robert Furness** respectively, both cloggers. Mary Ann and Robert Furness had a daughter **Margaret Agnes Furness** who married **Christopher Perkin**, the son of brother John, the mason. William Perkin's mother **Ellen Robinson** was the daughter of **Edmund Robinson** and **Isabella Grime** of Clapham and the sister of a well known and respected Settle surgeon, **Thomas Robinson**. Thomas may have inspired William Perkin to come to Settle in the first place.



*This account has been compiled as part of the Settle Graveyard Project which has recorded gravestone inscriptions, updated church records and researched the lives of those buried. It has been written in good faith with no offence intended. If I have inadvertently included errors or breached any copyright I apologise and would welcome corrections.*

*Life stories can be found on [dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle-graveyard-project](http://dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle-graveyard-project). The 'Old Settle' family tree on [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk) includes the families buried in the graveyard. The project is ongoing and welcomes queries and information on [settlresearch@gmail.com](mailto:settlresearch@gmail.com). Latest news and events are on the Facebook page 'Settle Graveyard Project'.*

*Settle Graveyard Project*

*Thanks to descendant John Perkins for information in this account and to Teresa Gordon for illustrations. The life stories of people with italicised names have been researched as part of the graveyard project.*

*SC - Settle Chronicle, WLP – the diaries of William Lodge Paley with the kind permission of North Craven Building Preservation Trust*

*CH - with the kind permission of the Craven Herald and Pioneer*

*Newspaper cuttings with the kind permission of the British Newspaper Archives: 1 – Lancaster Gazette, 2 – Lancaster Guardian, 3 – Westmorland Gazette, 4 – Kendal Mercury*

*ph1 – kindly provided by descendant John Perkins*