

William Altham, apothecary and surgeon

William, born in 1805 in Bentham, was one of four sons of John Altham, a well respected Bentham surgeon. William started life as an apothecary and worked in partnership with three brothers in Hornby. This was in the days when there were several medical disciplines with physicians, (who had degrees to diagnose illness), surgeons (who conducted operations, having had a successful apprenticeship) and apothecaries (who made drugs to treat disease, following an apprenticeship). In reality these roles overlapped and success depended on the reputation and popularity with their fee paying patients.

In 1853 William qualified in the science and practice of medicine as well as apothecary [1]. Immediately afterwards he was appointed as medical officer to the Clapham Union in Bentham [1]. After practising in Bentham, in 1855, William made the move to Settle taking over premises behind the Shambles from *William Armistead* [5C]. This is likely to be one of the small cottages on Castle Hill, originally owned by *Isabella Harger*. William later moved to the Market Place in the building later occupied by Dr Buck and practised from here until his death in 1880, aged 75.

William married twice. His first wife, *Jane Taylor*, was the daughter of the manager of the Higher Bentham Flax Mill. She was 13 years younger than William but died after the birth of her third child in 1840. In 1842 William married *Agnes Duckett* [ph2], the daughter of *Charles Duckett*, a successful farmer who had previously farmed at the Folly in Settle. He has an interesting life story! Agnes was 18 years younger than William and had at least 12 more children although *Charles*, *Mary*, *Eleanor* and two sons, both named *William*, died in infancy.



During the early 1870s William's workload increased considerably due to the influx of navvies to Settle for the building of the Settle to Carlisle line. Navvies arrived with diseases from other parts of the country and had more than their fair share of serious accidents. In 1871 William was called to attend to *Christopher Wright*, a 75 year old beer seller in Langcliffe with just one arm who had been fatally beaten by a navy *Ellis Nelson*. William's testimony is detailed and thorough and makes it clear that Christopher's death was not due to natural causes [2].

In 1875 William also certified the death of *John Barrett*, a 53 year old navy who died of complications arising from cirrhosis of the liver. He'd been lodging at Poole's Row in Settle. Obviously navvies drank copious amounts of alcohol for rehydration and relaxation purposes. Up

BENTHAM.—Mr William Altham, of Bentham, passed his examination, on the 18th ult., in the science and practice of medicine, at the Apothecaries Hall, London, and, of course, received his certificate to practise.

THE GUARDIAN'S APPOINTMENT OF A MEDICAL OFFICER.
On Tuesday last, pursuant to notice, the guardians of the Union proceeded to the election of a medical officer for the Clapham district, which comprises the towns of Austwick, Clapham, and Lavkland. There were four candidates, viz.: Mr Christopher Deighton, of Clapham, William Altham, Bentham. The former proved successful.

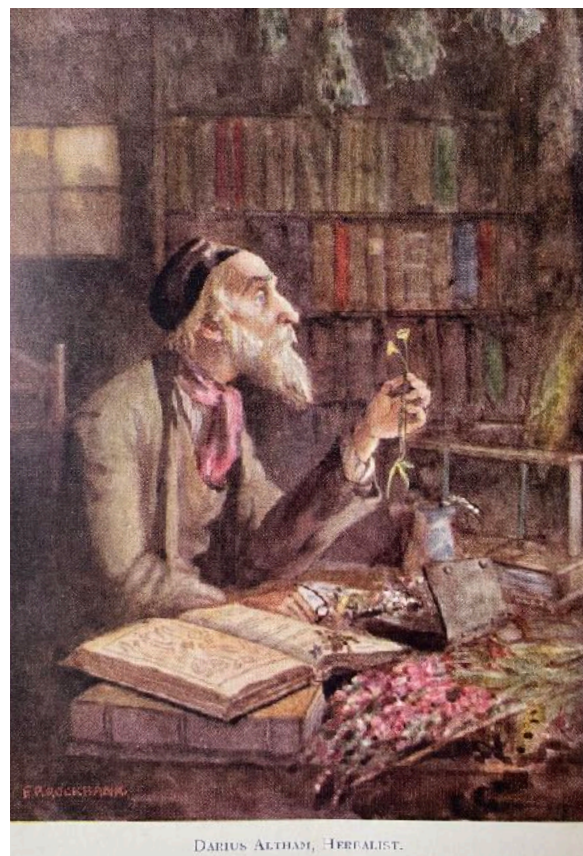
MR. W. ALTHAM,
SURGEON, of Giggleswick, embraces this opportunity to announce to the Inhabitants of Settle and the Neighbourhood, that he has engaged premises near the Town Head, SETTLE, the property of and late residence of Mr. Armistead, Chemist and Druggist, where, on and after the 12th of May, he purposes practising Professionally as heretofore.
Giggleswick, May 1st, 1855.

William Altham was then called and said: I reside in Settle and am a Licentiate of the London Apothecaries Society. I was called in to attend Christopher Wright on the 9th inst. I found him very much bruised. There were two contused wounds on the tibia of the right leg, the right thigh, and along the back were much discolourment. An incised wound across the olecranon process of the ulna on the left side, about three quarters of an inch long and also contusions of the forearm of the same side. These wounds were evidently caused by violence, the wound on the back of the head was such as might be caused by a heavy fall. On the 16th inst. I made a post-mortem examination with the following results: The body was well nourished. On the head there was a contused wound above the right orbit with extravasation into the subjacent tissue. Contused wound on the occipital protuberance, and also extravasation into the subjacent tissue. On removing the calvarium there was a slight extravasation of blood (about two inches square) on and between the anterior convolutions of both hemispheres, likewise on and between the convolutions of both posterior hemispheres (about one and a half inches square) corresponding to the external wound. On opening the chest two ounces of fluid in the pericardium, heart rather large and loaded with fat. Liver large but healthy. Kidneys highly congested, dark and mottled. The bladder contained very little urine. I could not discover any disease to account for death. The injuries done to the brain and the kidneys, and the general shock to the nervous system, I consider to account for death. The external wounds were no doubt the cause of the internal injuries.

at Ribblehead William certified the death of **James Rawlinds**, alias **James Gutteridge**, who died of tuberculosis on 28 December 1877, aged 53. James was the last navvy to die at Ribblehead.

| | | | | | |
|--------------|------|----|---------|---------|--|
| John Barnett | Male | 53 | Railway | Laborer | Liver disease 9 months Ascites 6 weeks Certified by William Altham L.D.S. |
|--------------|------|----|---------|---------|--|

Around this time William went to the Horner Studios to have a photo taken, which has since been slightly damaged [ph4]. It's possible that William was also caricatured in the book written by W Riley and illustrated by **Elisabeth Brockbank**, as Darius Altham, a rather eccentric apothecary whose house was cluttered and chaotic [A].



Altham gent, photograph by the Horner Studio.
Horner Collection©NCBPT (CC-BY 4.0)

In 1897, a report in the Lancaster Guardian remembered *'William was well liked and respected by the tradesmen and the working class. There was nothing about him proud and haughty, and no doubt it was his uniform geniality which made him a special favourite with the mothers and their children.'*

A further reminiscence in the 1920s gave a different perspective, explaining his role as a dentist. *'I went in fear and trembling and I remember the doctor ordered me to sit on the floor and, getting my head between his knees, he inserted his 'pliers' and, with a tug, out came the troublesome offender. With the tooth in one hand and my handkerchief, held to my mouth, in the other, I made my way homewards, 'bleeding like a stuck sheep' as Robert Calvert (butcher) put it, when I passed the Shambles.'* William was described as *'a typical doctor of the old*

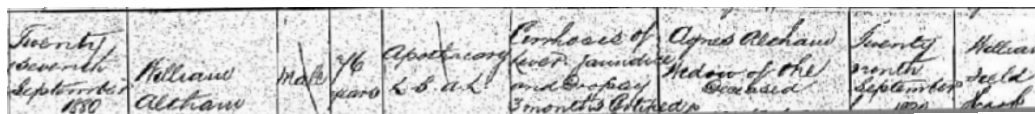
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Doctors in those days were not so plentiful as they are to-day, and as for dentists they were an unknown quantity, at any rate at Settle. Dr. Altham was a typical doctor of the old school, rough and ready, but with a wonderful capacity for healing. Having a troublesome tooth I was sent by my parents to Dr. Altham to have it extracted. I went in fear and trembling, and I remember the doctor ordered me to sit on the floor and, getting my head between his knees, he inserted his "pliers" and, with a tug, out came the troublesome offender. With the tooth in one hand and my handkerchief, held to my mouth, in the other, I made my way homewards, "bleeding like a stuck sheep," as Robert Calvert put it, when I passed the Shambles. There were none of the airs of refinement of the dentist in those days, and yet the world went very well for all that.

Settle Graveyard Project

school, rough and ready, but with a wonderful capacity for healing. '[CH].

William died on 27 September 1880, aged 76, from cirrhosis of the liver, despite his clean lifestyle and Agnes was present at his death. The registrar



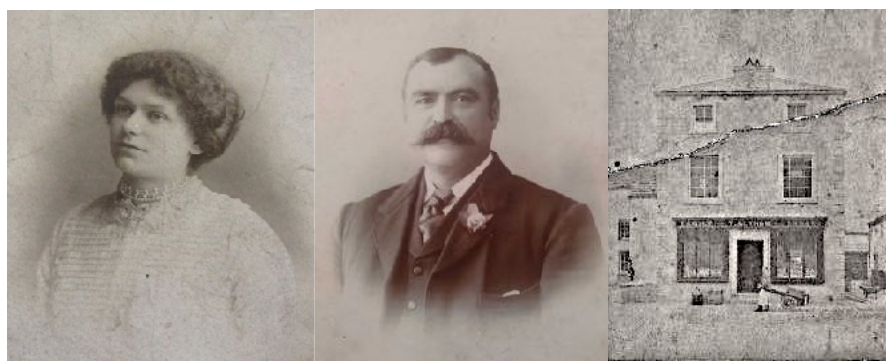
was **William Field Hook**. He left a very generous estate. Agnes moved to the cheaper houses on Victoria Street with some of her daughters working as dressmakers. She died in 1899, aged 76 and is buried with William and their spinster daughter **Mary Eleanor** in the Quaker burial ground. Originally their graves were distributed in the area to the back of the Quaker resident house [ph5].



Quaker gravestones, photograph by the Horner Studio. Horner Collection©NCBPT (CC-BY 4.0)



None of William's children worked in a medical profession. Several worked in the grocery trade and most moved away. Daughter **Agnes** married **William Johnson** who produced sausage casings in Darlington. Only two sons, **James** and **Thomas**, from William's second marriage to Agnes, survived childhood and they were both educated at Giggleswick school. James [ph2] became a clerk in the coal trade in Birkenhead and had a large family with his American wife, **Mary Elizabeth Connor**. **Thomas** married **Elizabeth Ann Morris** [ph2] and they had five daughters.



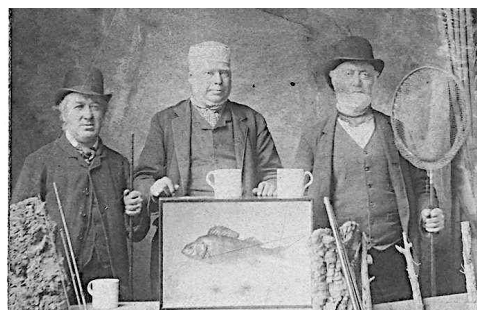
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TEAS:—2/-, 2/6, 3/-, 3/6.
 2d. off for 3 lbs., 3d. off for 6 lbs.
 PATENT MEDICINES, PICKLES, JAMS.
 TOBACCOES, CIGARS, PIPES, AND POUCHES.
 Good Variety of Groceries.
 McCall White's Sheep and Lamb Dipping Composition.
 Agent for the Queen Fire and Life Insurance Company.

Thomas worked in Settle as a grocer in the Market Place [ph1, LSA]. On 30 September 1889 a burglar attempted to steal from Thomas' house. Fortunately Thomas, '*being capable of a clever imitation of a policeman's whistle*', sounded an alarm. When **PC Askham** arrived on the scene a
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couple of minutes later, the unknown man had decamped 'over the garden wall'.^[3] Thomas was the Secretary of the Settle Butter Market Committee. In 1892 the butter market was struggling and Thomas wrote to the public begging them to support the market (rather than going direct to suppliers), otherwise it would fold – which it appeared to do!

ATTEMPTED BURGLARY.—At two a.m. on Monday, an unsuccessful attempt was made by a man to enter the dwelling-house of Mr T. Altham, Duke-street. Mr Altham, being capable of producing a clever imitation of a policeman's whistle, sounded an alarm, and when P.C. Askam arrived on the scene a couple of minutes later, the unknown man had decamped "over the garden wall."

During the 1890s it is possible that Thomas and **William Clark**, the innkeeper at the White Horse decided to have a bit of banter at the expense of three local fishermen who made a habit of fishing at Malham Farm but rarely caught anything. They wrote a 15 verse poem called 'The Three Fishers' ^[ph4] with verses such as:



Now Capstick and Hartley, and bold little Thi, Went up to the Tarn in the month of July;

They went up in style in a nice wagonette, On a fishing excursion, no doubt, you may bet.

Unfortunately, not everyone appreciated the joke. Friends of the fishermen issued a leaflet attacking the authors:

There's two men in Settle who sit at their ease, to scandalise people just as they please, They walk up and down and call themselves mashers, they can't leave alone Three Poor Little Fishers.

The full story is given in the account of **William Capstick**. Both Thomas and William Clark had moved away from Settle by the time of the following census return. The failed butter market may have also been a factor in this! Thomas and Elizabeth Ann took the family to Ormesby near Middlesbrough where several siblings also lived. Thomas died in 1916, aged 60.



This account has been compiled by Sarah Lister 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.

The life stories of people with italicised names have been researched as part of the graveyard project and 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 includes the families buried in the graveyard. The project is ongoing and welcomes queries and information on settleresearch@gmail.com. Latest news and events are on the Facebook page 'Settle Graveyard Project'.

A – A Village in Craven, pen pictures of a Yorkshire village, W Riley, illustrated by Elisabeth Brockbank

Newspaper cuttings with the kind permission of the British Newspaper Archives: 1 – Kendal Mercury, 2 – Lancaster Gazette, 3 – Craven herald

ph1 – photo credited to the Back in Settle Facebook page, submitted by Carol Jowett, ph2 – credited to the family descendants via ancestry.co.uk, username marylavook (James) Julie Boynton (Thomas), ph3 – with the kind permission of the Museum of North Craven Life, ph4 – Image 2022.1.68.109, ph5 – Image 2022.1.61.3 from the Horner Photographic Studio Collection provided courtesy of the Museum of North Craven Life.



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CH — with the kind permission of the Craven Herald and Pioneer