

William Altham, apothecary and surgeon

William Altham, born in 1805 in Benthams, was one of four sons of **John Altham**, a well respected Benthams 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 distinct 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 individual's reputation and popularity with their fee paying patients.

In 1853 'William Altham of Benthams' qualified in the science and practice of medicine at the Apothecaries Hall in London, allowing him to practise. Immediately afterwards, along with **Christopher Deighton** of Clapham, William was appointed medical officer to the Clapham District which served Austwick, Clapham and Benthams [1]. After two years in Benthams, in 1855, William made the move to Settle taking over premises behind the Shambles from the chemist **William Armistead** [SC]. 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 Benthams Flax Mill. She was 13 years younger than William but died after the birth of her third child in 1840. So, in 1842 William married **Agnes Duckett** [ph2], the daughter of **Charles Duckett**, who had previously farmed at The Folly in Settle. Charles has an most unusual 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.



So, William was a busy man and has shown his face in many of our accounts. We know that, in 1863, William joined fellow surgeon **Robert Simpson** and **John Preston**, the innkeeper of the Joiners' Arms, now *Wholesome Bee*, in endorsing the work of **Professor Adolph Isaac Siemms**, a Jewish chiropodist originally from Berlin, in removing corns 'without the least pain'[5]. Professor Siemms had also invented a '*Bunion Cushion, a mechanical desideratum which removes these sensitive and unsightly distortion without any operation.*'

FROM WILLIAM ALTHAM, Esq., Surgeon, Settle.
Professor Siemms, the Surgeon-Chiropodist, has very skillfully extracted two corns from the sole of my foot, without giving any pain. I can with the greatest confidence recommend him to any one suffering from the same.
January 28, 1863. J. PRESTON.

In 1868 poor **Nancy (Cornthwaite) Perkin** was seized with a fit of apoplexy, 'whilst preparing her husband's tea and died in less than two hours afterwards'[1]. She had been in her usual health and spirits, and William

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.

Altham was unable to save her, '*his services were unavailing*'. Nancy was the second wife of the church sexton (gravedigger) **William Perkin** and buried with his first wife Mary and 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.

In another reminder of 19th century reality, in August 1871, seven year old **George Allan Marsden** became a victim of one of the many smallpox outbreaks to hit Settle, this one in 1871 when he was just seven [2]. He had been ill for about five days. Due to the infectious nature of the disease with a mortality rate over 30%, the authorities, on the advice William and **John Lister**, took every precaution to prevent the spread of the disease. The family's clothes and premises were all thoroughly disinfected. George Allan was buried in an unmarked grave the Ancient graveyard.

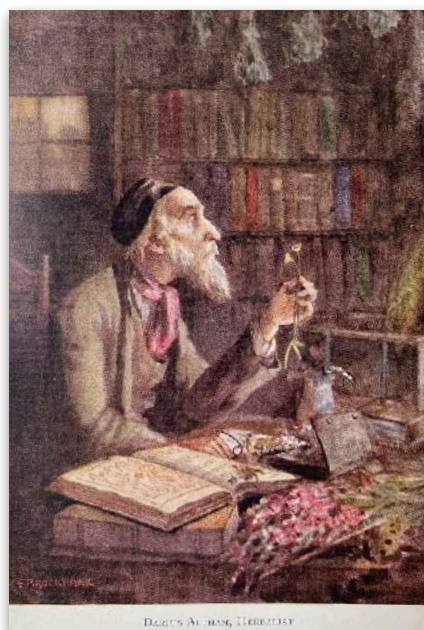
SMALL POX—We regret to have to announce the outbreak of small pox here, by which a boy aged 7 years, the son of Mr William Marsden, fruit dealer, has had to succumb to this direful disease. The deceased, who had only been ill about five days, died on Wednesday last and was interred the same day. Information was immediately given to the local authorities here, who without delay took every precaution to prevent the spread of the disease. The premises, clothing, &c., have been thoroughly disinfected; and it is to be hoped that the prompt measures taken by the advice of Mr. Lister, the Clerk to the Guardians here, aided by Mr. Altham, the medical attendant, will effectively put a stop to any further outbreak.

George Allan's death coincided with an outbreak of smallpox up at Ribbleshead. During the construction of the Settle to Carlisle Railway Line William's workload increased considerably due to the influx of navvies to the area. Inevitably, navvies brought diseases from other parts of the country with them and they also 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 navvy **Ellis Nelson**, alias **Ellis Parker**. William's testimony is detailed and thorough and made it clear that '*the injuries done to the brain and the kidneys and the general shock to the nervous system, I consider to account for death.*' Those with an interest in post mortem reports will find it fascinating [2], others may find it a bit too graphic!

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 discoloured. 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.

In 1875 William also certified the death of **John Barrett**, a 53 year old navvy 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, typically around 12 pints, albeit short beer (diluted), for rehydration and relaxation purposes. Up at Ribbleshead 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 Ribbleshead.

Around this time William went to the Horner Studios to have a photo taken, which has since been slightly damaged [ph4]. William also appears to have been caricatured, in his latter years, 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].



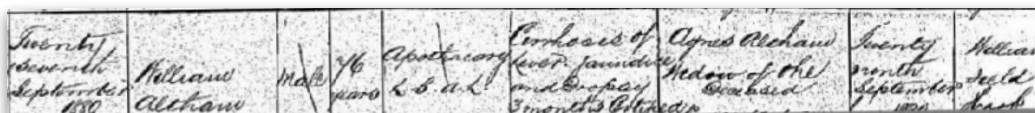
Altham gent, photograph by the Horner Studio. Horner Collection©NCBPT (CC-BY 4.0)

In 1879, a year before William's death, a report in the Lancaster Guardian remembered *'William was well liked and respected by the tradesmen and the working class and was known as 'the poor man's doctor'. 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. He was well known for his practical knowledge and experience. He was quiet and unassuming in his habits; he was a well read and deep thinking man. The mental abilities of the deceased were of a high order, and there was scarcely a subject with which he was not familiar [4].*

A further reminiscence in the 1920s gave a different perspective, explaining William's 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 school, rough and ready, but with a wonderful capacity for healing.'*[CH].

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 arts of refinement of the dentist in those days, and yet the world went very well for all that.

William died on 27 September 1880, aged 76, from cirrhosis of the liver, jaundice and dropsy, despite his clean lifestyle. He had suffered from a cold *'when he had an attack of jaundice, followed by other evils'*[4] and Agnes was present at his death. The registrar was



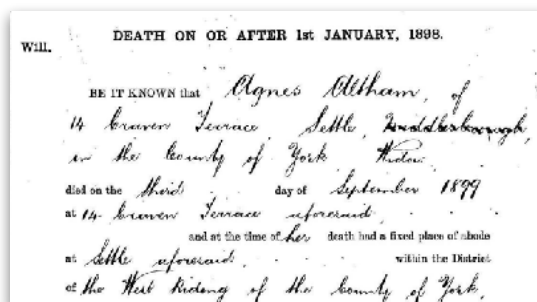
William Field Hook. William left a very generous estate. Agnes moved to the cheaper houses on Victoria Street with some of her daughters, all working as dressmakers. She died in September 1899, aged 76, and is buried with William in the Quaker burial ground. Their 74 year old spinster daughter **Mary Eleanor Altham** joined them there when she died in 1934. Originally their graves were distributed in the area to the back of the Quaker resident house [ph5]. The memorial stones were later moved to the edge of the grounds to ease the maintenance of the land.



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

When Agnes died she left a very detailed will for her £1200 estate, ensuring most her children benefited. It gives us a lovely insight to the items such a family owned and regarded as valuable in those days. She left:

- *A diamond ring and six silver spoons, marked with the letter R and a light wood bedstead to daughter Jane (Robinson)*
- *Six silver spoons, marked with the letter A D, silver tongs, mahogany chest of drawers to daughter Agnes (Johnson)*
- *Six silver spoons, marked with the letters S K and six Electus forks to daughter-in-law Elizabeth Ann Altham*
- *Six silver spoons, China tea set, silver cream jug, mahogany ornamental desk and one feather bed to her daughter Anne (Barker)*
- *A dressing table, washstand and her late husband's watch, a long clock, American chair, weather glass and boot jack to her son Thomas Altham*
- *A silver watch to her son-in-law John Henry Barker*
- *An old fashioned tea set, dinner set, five silver spoons, two silver tablespoons, a gold watch, mahogany bedstead and four candlesticks and snuffers, the dining room mahogany desk and one feather bed*
- *A gold watch chain to son-in-law William Henry Johnson*
- *All remaining jewellery, clothes, plate furniture, linen and china to be split equally between the children who were alive at the time of her death.*



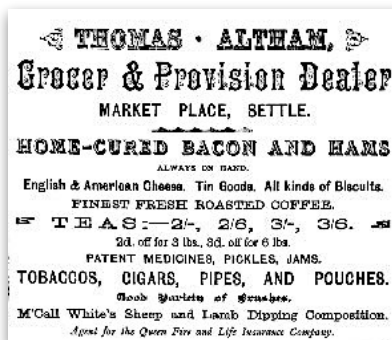
That's a lot of silver spoons! Unsurprisingly, as a spinster, daughter **Mary Eleanor Altham** inherited more than her fair share as she had no man to provide for her. Mary Eleanor spent the rest of life living with siblings. The will was prepared by **Dr Charles William Buck** and **George Marshall Robinson**, son of **Dr Thomas Robinson**.

Unusually, none of William's children worked in a medical profession. Several worked in the grocery trade and most moved away. Daughter **Agnes Alice Altham** married **William**

Henry 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. James had predeceased Agnes by four years so his widow and children didn't receive anything from her in the will.



William and Agnes' son Thomas Altham married Elizabeth Ann Morris [ph2] and they had five daughters. Thomas worked in Settle as a grocer in the Market Place, opposite the Royal oak [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 couple of minutes later, the unknown man had decamped

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. Askham arrived on the scene a couple of minutes later, the unknown man had decamped "over the garden wall."

'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, sadly, it appeared to do!

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 and the furore over the Three Fishers may have been a factor in this decision! Thomas and Elizabeth Ann took the family to Ormesby near Middlesborough where several siblings also lived. Thomas died in 1916, aged 60.

William and Agnes' daughter **Jane Altham** remained single, until the age of 42 when she became the second wife of **John Robinson**, a butcher and the son of **Dr Thomas Robinson**. John was 74, more than 30 years her senior. Jane had been working in domestic service for John in Chapel Square. John retired and they moved to live in 7 Craven Cottages in Settle. John died in 1904, aged 85 and was buried with his first wife in Giggleswick graveyard. Jane moved away to Skipton to live with her sister Ann and her husband **John Henry Barker**, a railway telegraph clerk.



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, 4 – Lancaster Guardian

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