

WILLIAMS, HUGH (1796 - 1874), solicitor and political agitator

Name: Hugh Williams
Date of birth: 1796
Date of death: 1874
Spouse: Elizabeth Williams (née Anthony)
Spouse: Anne Williams (née Jones)
Partner: Mary Jenkins
Child: Eleanor Margaret Anne Williams
Child: William Arthur Glanmor Williams
Child: Hugh Dafydd Anthony Williams
Parent: Elinor Williams (née Evans)
Parent: Hugh Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: solicitor and political agitator
Area of activity: Anti Establishment; Law; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: David Williams

Born 18 February 1796 at Gelli-goch, Is-garreg, a mile and a half from Machynlleth on the road to Derwen-las, the son of Hugh Williams and his wife, Elinor Evans. [Azariah Shadrach](#) lived with the family for a time (c. 1801) at Gelli-goch, and acted as schoolmaster to the children. Of them, JOHN WILLIAMS practised as a solicitor at Verulam Buildings, Gray's Inn Road, London, from 1829 onwards; WILLIAM WILLIAMS became a lieutenant in the Brazilian navy and died in 1832; and CATHERINE ANNE WILLIAMS married, in May 1840, the statesman, Richard Cobden, with whom she had become acquainted through being in school with his sisters. The father, who was a timber merchant at Machynlleth from 1799 onwards, was also interested in industrial speculation. His attempt to develop slate quarrying at Tan-y-bwlch was unsuccessful, but, soon after 1815, in partnership with John Pughe of Aberdovey, he struck at Dylife, ten miles from Machynlleth, a new vein of lead which proved very productive. After his death (he was buried 19 May 1852) all interests in the enterprise were acquired by a partnership which included Cobden and John Bright.

Hugh Williams was admitted in the king's Bench at Michaelmas, 1822. (A John Williams, who may be the brother referred to above, was admitted in 1823.) Williams was distantly related to William Jones, the town clerk of Carmarthen, and it was this which induced him to settle there, although they did not go into partnership as had been expected. He practised at Carmarthen from 1822 to 1842, and then at Carmarthen and other places in the neighbourhood until his death. The warrant to search his letters in 1843 gives him a London address at 65 Hatton Gardens, London. He is later stated to be practising at 4, Verulam Buildings.

He married (date not ascertained) Anne Jones of Plwmp-coch, Kidwelly, a woman twenty-five years older than himself. For some time he lived at Kidwelly. His wife possessed at St Clears an estate called Gardde, part of which was held on a ninety-nine-year lease. On frequent occasions Hugh Williams sought to break the lease, and, against the wishes of his wife, unsuccessfully brought an ejectment action against the lessee at the Carmarthen spring assizes of 1842. Eventually he obtained possession of the property, and when an illegitimate child of his, Eleanor Margaret Anne (born 16 November 1847, the daughter of Mary Jenkins), was christened on 1 July 1849, he was described as solicitor at Gardde. In 1851 he became port-reeve of St Clears, and in the same year he and his wife built a market hall at St Clears, and tried, without much success, to establish a market there. He became recorder of St Clears in 1853, and, despite several protests after 1867 on account of his absence from the borough, retained the office till his death. His wife died at Llanfihangel Abercwywn on 5 August 1861, and two months later, on 9 October 1861, he married (at Buckingham Baptist chapel, Clifton) Elizabeth Anthony of Llan-saint, a woman thirty-nine years his junior. He is then described as living at Ferryside. Their first child was born on 30 July 1862 and died in infancy, as did their second son in the following year. The third son, Hugh Dafydd Anthony Williams, born at Ferryside on 28 May 1869, died in London on 15 May 1905. The fourth son, WILLIAM ARTHUR GLANMOR WILLIAMS, born at Ferryside on 19 September 1873 (a year before his father's death), was educated at Clifton and Sandhurst, was commissioned in the South Wales Borderers, awarded the D.S.O. for service in West Africa, and killed on 8 November 1900 in the South African War. Hugh Williams died at Cobden Villa, Ferryside, 19 October 1874, and was buried in the churchyard of S. Ishmael, Ferryside. His widow, who remarried, died 25 February 1909.

Hugh Williams is important because of his connections with the Chartist and 'Rebecca' movements. At an early date he had become the friend of Henry Hetherington and James Watson, two of the twelve authors of the *People's Charter*. In 1836 he organised, at Carmarthen, the first radical meeting in South Wales. He was elected a guardian under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and strenuously opposed its provisions. On 9 January 1838, he was elected an honorary member of the London Working Men's Association. In December 1838 he addressed Chartist meetings at various places, and was

elected delegate by the Carmarthen, Swansea, and Merthyr branches of the Working Men's Association to the national convention, but was unable to take his seat until 10 May 1839 owing to professional engagements. He gratuitously acted as solicitor in defence of the Llanidloes rioters at the Welshpool assizes in July 1839. His *National Songs and Poetical Pieces, dedicated to the Queen and her Countrywomen*, printed by Hetherington, bears the date 1839, but observations at the end of the volume are dated 18 February 1840. This is a compilation of radical poems, several written by himself. In 1841, on Hetherington's imprisonment, Williams lent [Thomas Powell](#) the money to acquire his business, which was restored to Hetherington on his release. His opinions did not prevent his being elected in 1841 for the second time as a member of the Carmarthen town council.

Hugh Williams's activities during the Rebecca Riots in 1843 and 1844 have been greatly exaggerated. He acted as solicitor in defence of the Talog rioters in July, and of the Pontardulais rioters in September 1843. He addressed several mass meetings in the autumn of 1843 and drafted their petitions to the queen. But he strongly deprecated the nocturnal activities of the rioters. Yet in October 1843 the Home Office gave instructions to open his letters, and in 1844 a careful watch of his movements was kept by the authorities. There is no evidence for the frequently repeated statement that he was struck off the rolls. In 1846 he took an active part in the agitation against the corn laws (repealed 23 May 1846).

Author

Emeritus Professor David Williams, (1900 - 1978)

Sources

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David Wyn Davies, *Hugh Williams the man who was Rebecca?* (2004)

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