

## WILLIAMS, ROBERT (1848 - 1918), architect, author and social reformer

**Name:** Robert Williams  
**Date of birth:** 1848  
**Date of death:** 1918  
**Spouse:** Margaret Williams (née Griffiths)  
**Spouse:** Elizabeth Ann Williams (née Kettle)  
**Child:** Inigo Rees Williams  
**Child:** Margaret Ann Travers Symons (née Williams)  
**Parent:** Rees Williams  
**Parent:** Mary Williams (née Evans)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** architect, author and social reformer  
**Area of activity:** Art and Architecture; Literature and Writing; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration  
**Author:** Robert Scourfield

Robert Williams was born on 27 January 1848 in Ystradowen, Glamorgan, the second son of Rees Williams, a carpenter, and his wife Mary (née Evans). Following his education at the Eagle Academy, Cowbridge, Robert worked for a local building contractor, before leaving Wales around 1873 to study architecture and building construction at the South Kensington School of Art, where he won several prizes (including a national medal).

He married Margaret Griffiths, and they had two children, Inigo Rees born in 1876 in Llantrisant, and Margaret Ann born in 1879 in Paddington. The 1881 census shows Robert a widower, lodging at Coggeshall, Essex, described as 'builder's manager'. Two years later, he married Elizabeth Ann Kettle at Braintree.

His training was far from orthodox. Instead of the usual tradition of being articled to a practising architect, he took a more practical route in working for a number of well-established architects on site. He was clerk of works to the noted Gothic architect James Piers St Aubyn (1815-1895), and then worked for Maurice B. Adams (1849-1933), who was architect to the philanthropist Passmore Edwards and from 1872 edited Edwards's journal, *Building News*. Williams worked as clerk of works for Adams at Blickling Hall, Norfolk, where improvements were carried out in the 1880s and 1890s for the Marquess of Lothian, including innovative drainage works. Next followed a spell in the office of Waller, Son & Wood of Gloucester.

Williams's later writings strongly suggest that his practical skills were balanced with self-taught theory. His choice of employers was to stand him in excellent stead. Both St Aubyn and Adams were fine draughtsmen and artists, and Adams was especially skilled in practical matters, including ventilation and drainage. Waller, as architect to the Dean and Chapter at Gloucester was a respected antiquarian. All of those skills define Williams's output and culminated in his admission to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1887 as an Associate (ARIBA), enabling him to start his own practice. By 1891, Williams was living in the respectable London suburb of Lee. Presumably his journeyings had commenced by then, his RIBA biography mentioning surprisingly extensive travel in Europe, Asia and North Africa.

It was as London County Councillor for North Lambeth that Williams showed his deep concern for housing reform. As an ardent socialist - counting among his friends and associates Keir Hardie and fellow councillor and Christian Socialist Frank Smith (founder of the *Workers' Cry*), he embarked on a series of booklets. One of the earliest was *London Rookeries and Collier's Slums - a Plea for more Breathing Room and for Amending the Building Laws Generally as Suggested for London by the London County Council*, in 1893 - a title aimed also at Welsh reformers. In the same year, he wrote *The Collier's House or Every Collier his own Architect*. The *Pontypool Free Press* advertised the publication on 20 January 1893, stating that the book was to contain drawings and details of cottages suitable for colliers, where the iniquitous collier's tub was to be substituted with a proper bath. Remarkably for the time, Williams insisted that the book be available in both English and Welsh.

In 1894, there followed *More Light and Air for Londoners - the Effect of the New Streets and Buildings Bill on the Health of the People* and three years later, *The Face of the Poor or the Crowding of London's Labourers*. In 1905, Williams published *The Labourer and His Cottage*. He was a member of the Cambrian Archaeological Association, preparing beautiful sketches at the 1897 field visits in Cardiganshire, published in both *Archaeologia Cambrensis* and *The Builder*.

Robert Williams remained close to his Welsh roots and indeed may be regarded as an early conservationist in Wales. He frequently wrote to the local press lamenting insensitive new buildings and alterations. He also wrote in support of a school of architecture for Wales (eventually founded in 1920, two years after Williams's death). To him, architecture was 'art by the people, of the people and for the people'. Old buildings he felt, 'should be carefully maintained and recorded and old architectural features preserved'. His criticism, though, was not solely on aesthetic grounds. In the *Weekly Mail* of 1 October 1904, Williams was highly critical that despite fortunes made in coalmining, so many hovels still existed, lamenting especially the resultant high infant mortality. Towns and villages in Wales, he felt, should be better planned - and one of the worst new towns, Williams argued, was Barry.

Despite practising from London from 1887, Robert Williams designed several buildings in south Wales. The most prestigious was the Pontypool Market Hall (1893-4, with D.J. Lougher as engineer). Another major work was the intermediate school for girls in Cowbridge (1895-6), the first such school for girls in the country. The school shows well Williams's high standards of construction, planning and amenities. His main work was public and educational buildings - and although his output was not huge, Williams had the accolade of being appointed consulting architect to Glamorgan County Council in 1893. He designed the showy Pontypool and District Hospital in 1903 (demolished), its turrets influenced by Seddon's exotic work at Castle House (the Old College), Aberystwyth. A number of minor domestic commissions are also recorded in Monmouthshire.

Of his architectural output in London, little is recorded, but two large temperance halls survive, the Grade II listed Wheatsheaf Hall, Vauxhall, 1896, and the People's Hall in Olaf Street, West Kensington, 1901. He also designed working-class housing and a small hospital in London, according to his RIBA file. A number of his designs were published in the *Building News* including that for a pair of worker's cottages published on 29 September 1899. These and his output to date have a strong Gothic tinge, but with emphasis on amenity, the cottages neatly planned to provide three bedrooms, with separate w.c. and scullery - at a time when the outside privy remained the norm.

The family rose to some prominence on 13 October 1908. Williams's daughter - who had evidently inherited her father's political views - was Margaret Travers Symons, secretary to Keir Hardie. She was a suffragette, who on the pretence of being an escorted visitor to the Houses of Parliament, burst into the Commons Chamber during a debate - thus making history as the first woman to speak in the House of Commons, as reported widely in the national press.

In 1914, Robert Williams left London to practice in Cairo. In his four remaining years, he designed prominent works in Egypt, including the Bible House and bank in Port Said, a bank at Tanta, and the soldiers' home and Marconi Tower in Cairo. He also continued to write (his *Notes on the English Bond* was aimed at the local masons, translated into French and Arabic). Of greatest interest in a Welsh historical context is the reason that brought Williams to Cairo in the first place - the designing of a shop for John Davies Bryan who had emigrated from Caernarfon, originally setting up a drapery stall within the Gwesty'r Continental. Joined by his brothers Edward and Joseph, he opened a larger premises on Cherif Pasha Street, Alexandria, which was refurbished by Williams, using red Aberdeen granite and Douling stone. Most notable of all, however, is the St David Building in Cairo, a massive emporium designed by Williams in 1910 for the Davies Bryan brothers. The building still stands, inscribed 'y gwir yn erbyn y byd' (truth against the world), along with the logo of the Gorsedd. The Davies Bryan link with home remained strong - Joseph in 1928 presented Aberystwyth University with 85 acres of land for new college buildings and in 1935 left £5000 to the National Library of Wales.

Robert Williams died on 16 October 1918 in Cairo. He was buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Cairo. Apart from his legacy of buildings, his library of architectural books now forms the core of the architecture rare book collection at Cardiff University.

### Author

Robert Scourfield

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VIAF: 2658152451236706650009

Wikidata: Q110935652

**Published date:** 2022-02-15

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### APA Citation



Scourfield, R., (2022). WILLIAMS, ROBERT (1848 - 1918), architect, author and social reformer. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 11 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s12-WILL-ROB-1848>

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