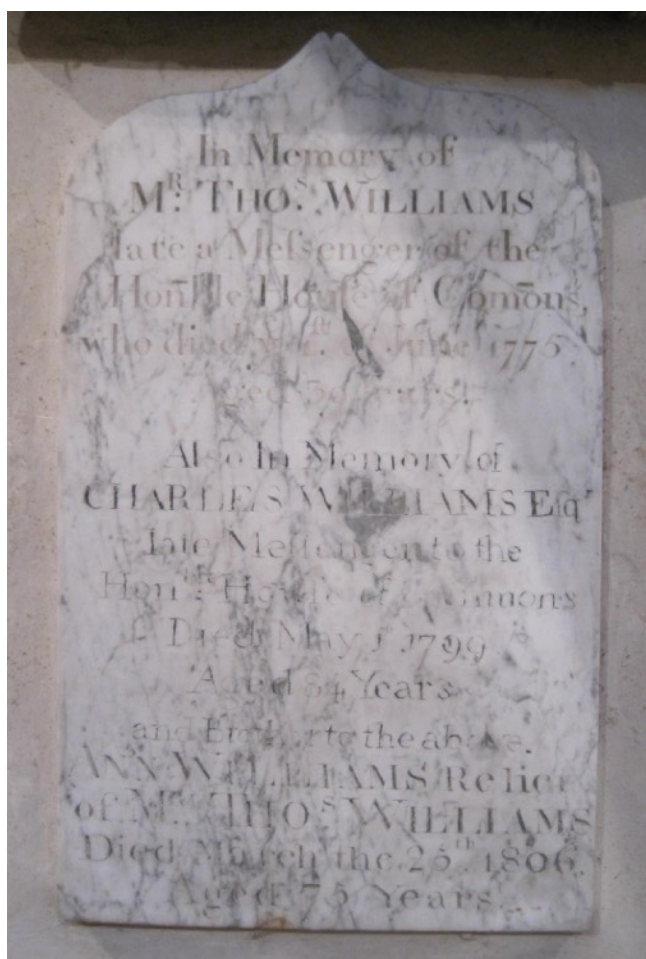


The Williams memorial tablet

I have long been intrigued by the memorial by the blocked door in the north aisle of St Nicholas church. Two brothers, born about twenty years apart, both served as messengers in the House of Commons. This is not just a memorial of some distant burials. The parish registers record that Thomas, Charles and Thomas's widow, Ann, were all buried here. So why do they lie here in Compton and what brought them to the parish?



In Memory of
Mr THO^S WILLIAMS
late a messenger of the
Honourable House of Commons
who died the 1st day of June 1775
aged 39 years.

Also in memory of
CHARLES WILLIAMS Esq
late messenger to the
Honourable House of Commons
Died May 1st 1799
Aged 84 years
and brother of the above.

ANN WILLIAMS Relict
of Mr THO^S WILLIAMS
Died March the 25th 1806
Aged 75 years.

Charles Williams 1715 - 1799

Charles Williams was born in Madley, Herefordshire and baptised there on 11 Mar 1715. He was the son of Charles and Elizabeth Williams.

He lived his adult life in the parish of St Margaret's, Westminster, but he retained strong connections with Herefordshire: his will records many bequests to family members from that county and his death was reported in the Hereford Journal.¹ However, it would seem that his principal residence was in London; when he wrote his will in 1794, he was living in the parish of

¹ Will proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), 1799

St Margaret's, Westminster where he was still working as a messenger to the Commons at the age of 78.²

Charles is listed in the Compton land tax returns for the years 1780 – 1782, which record that he owned a freehold property in the parish, although it is not named. He does not appear to have lived there at that time for it was occupied by John Bonner. It is probable that Williams occupied it himself in earlier years but there are no surviving records to confirm this. His disappearance from the returns suggest that he sold the property in 1782 or thereabouts. There is no indication in the land tax or in the records of the various Compton manors that he owned or occupied any other property in Compton after that date.



Broadbridges and Laburnum Cottage in the Avenue are a Victorian rebuilding of the property that was owned by Charles Williams.

It is possible to trace the property in the land tax returns from 1780 to 1831, which is the full extent of the series. They indicate that it had come into the hands of James Bishop by 1831. Nine years later, at the time of the Compton tithe survey, Bishop owned a house and land in the Avenue that was known as Bishop's Lodge on the 1871 Ordnance Survey map. It is now divided and named Laburnum Cottage and Broadbridges. This is almost certainly the house and land that belonged to Williams up to 1782.

In his will, Charles Williams instructed his executors to bury him in a lead coffin in either the church at Compton or at Madley in Herefordshire, at the discretion of his executors. This suggests that he went to Herefordshire, at least occasionally, as he thought that there was a possibility that he might die there. That he was buried at Compton indicates that he died in London or nearby.

He made a large number of significant monetary bequests, many of them to people in the Hereford area. He was evidently quite a wealthy man; it would seem that being a messenger in the Georgian House of Commons was not a lowly job.

Thomas Williams	c.1735 - 1775
Ann Williams	c.1730 - 1806

We know rather less about Thomas and no record of his baptism has been found. That he was Charles's brother is noted on the memorial but, given the age difference, it is possible that they were half-brothers.

Nor is there any record of him owning or occupying any property in Compton yet his link was strong enough for him to be buried here. It was not his home and the burial register records that he was "of the parish of St Margaret's Westminster" when he was buried on 5th June 1775.

He married Ann Newman, probably in 1774.³ A search of national data bases has found only two marriages of a Thomas Williams and an Ann Newman for period 1755 - 1775. Both were in

² The Court and City Register, 1794.

³ Ann's maiden name is found in her will (PCC 1806) in which she leaves a bequest to her brother, Thomas Newman.



*The chamber of the old House of Commons 1833 by Sir George Hayter,
a place familiar to both Charles and Thomas Williams.*

London in 1774 but the most likely the one that took place, by licence, on 13th Feb 1774 at St James, Westminster, between Thomas Williams of that parish and Ann of St Ann's, Westminster. They both married comparatively late when she was aged about 44 and he about 39. Unsurprisingly, they had no children.

It was to be a very short marriage but Ann's widowhood was long, she dying nearly 31 years after her husband.

At the end of April 1775, about a month before his death, Thomas travelled to Hindon in Wiltshire to bring back two men who had been summoned to appear before a committee of the House of Commons.⁴ Whether this journey and what he encountered on the way had any bearing on his demise we don't know but a few weeks later he was dead. He was 39 years old and the fact that he had not made a will suggests that he was not expecting to die.

Ann made her will in 1799 by which time she was living in Lewisham, Kent. There is no evidence that she was had been married before and there are no children from a previous marriage named in her will.

Thomas appears to have died intestate so, in the absence of any children, Ann would have inherited her late husband's estate. She never remarried, possibly because she preferred to stay in control of her property: if she had married again, it would have passed to her new husband as married women could not hold property in their own right.

Like her brother-in-law, Charles, Ann Williams left a large number of monetary legacies that indicate that she was wealthy woman when she died although not, apparently, as well off as Charles. It is an extensive will with two codicils that runs to ten pages. Despite her apparent

⁴ Salisbury and Wiltshire Journal, 8th May 1775.

wealth, she was not gentry and many of the bequests went to family members and friends who were tradesmen. There is, however, no mention of any Compton property or other links to the parish in her will. Her desire to be buried in Compton was a result of her wish to be at rest with her late husband.



What was it that brought the Williams brothers to Compton, a place which at that time was a considerable journey from London? The answer is, in part, improved communications. From the sixteenth century onwards, it was becoming increasingly common for Londoners to buy a place in the country. This was especially so after the completion of the London to Sheet Bridge turnpike road in 1748, which made coach travel smooth and fast, reducing the journey time to London to less than a day. Other local examples of London incomers in Compton were John Manship, a wealthy stationer of London, who bought Field Place in 1709 and John Thwaites, a successful Clerkenwell clockmaker, who had a house in Compton where he died in 1826.

There were plenty of suitable places lying near the turnpike so why did the William brothers choose Compton specifically? The connection was probably John Fulham of Eastbury Manor House who was appointed as Chaplain to the House of Commons by Speaker Arthur Onslow of Guildford in 1749. The Williams brothers, as two of just four messengers employed in the Commons, were active in its day-to-day functioning. In a small place like the Palace of Westminster, messengers would have known everybody. We can only speculate on the relationship between them and John Fulham, whether it was friendly or formal, but it does seem more than coincidental that they should come to Fulham's village when they could have settled upon any number of other attractive places.

Philip Gorton, March 2021

