

ROBERT WILLAN: DERMATOLOGIST OF THE MILLENNIUM

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On the 12th November 1757, the man was born whom a meeting at the Royal Society of Medicine recently voted the dermatologist of the millennium. Robert Willan was born at 'The Hill' (Figure 1), a house on the outskirts of Sedbergh, a small market town which was then in the county of Yorkshire⁽¹⁾. On the east wall of the house there is a blue plaque commemorating his birth; this plaque was placed there some years ago by the Willan Club, a group of dermatologists. Robert's father was the local doctor and his family were members of the Society of Friends; there were many Quakers in the area, notably in Kendal and at Swarthmoor near Ulverston.

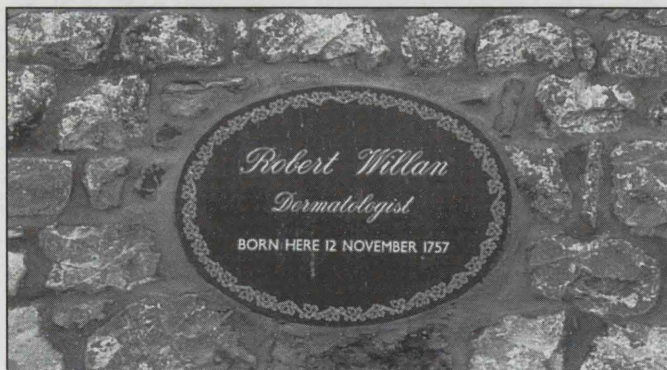


Figure 1 'The Hill', Sedbergh, Willan's birthplace, and the plaque on the east wall

Robert went to the local school, Sedbergh Grammar. The building is still there today, and it was old when he attended in the 1760s. This building now serves as the library of Sedbergh School (Figure 2), which is the successor to the Grammar School. Robert did well at school, where he was taught Latin, Greek and Mathematics.

In the autumn of 1777, he went to university to study medicine, choosing Edinburgh medical school where his father had also studied. He would not have been able to

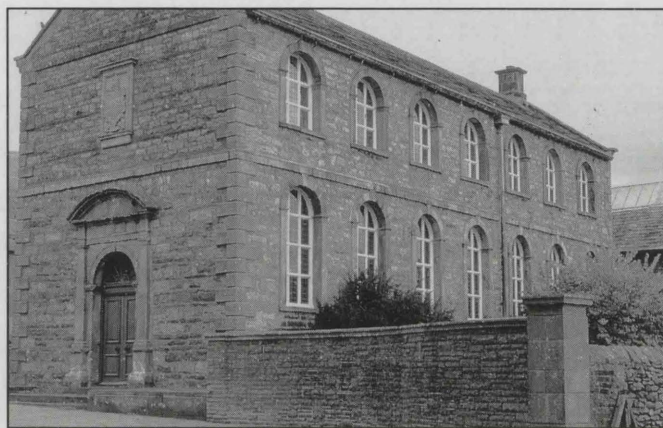
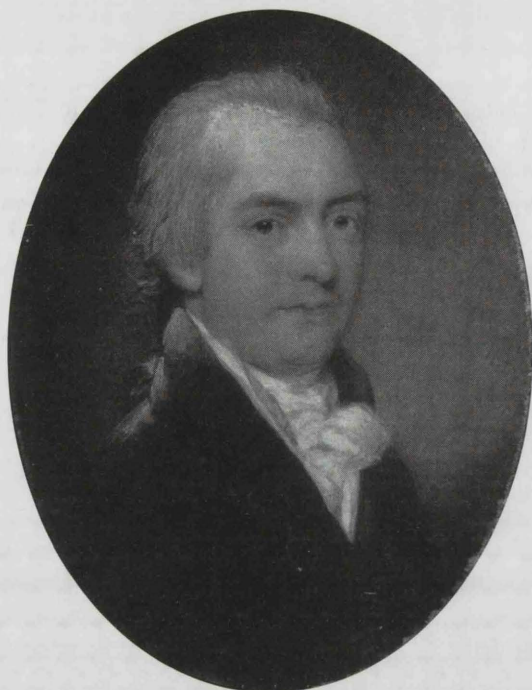


Figure 2 The old school at Sedbergh

attend Oxford or Cambridge at this time, as these universities were only open to members of the Church of England. Once again he did well with his academic studies and his thesis 'De Jecinoris Inflammatione' (On Inflammation of the Liver) was accepted by the university. He then moved to London to attend lectures and sit at the feet of the great and the good. Following this, he hoped to join a friend of his family, a Dr Fothergill, in his London practice, but unfortunately Dr Fothergill died before these arrangements could be completed. Willan went instead to Doncaster where he took over the practice of another friend of the family who had also died. Unfortunately, the Doncaster practice did not suit him and in the Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal of 1812, in a biographical memoir of Willan, it is recorded that he was not happy in Doncaster and he was determined to return to London⁽²⁾. But not, however, before he had written an article on the 'Observations on the Sulphur Waters of Croft near Darlington.' In this article he compares the waters of Croft with those of Harrogate, and perhaps this is an early example of audit by a dermatologist.

In London he applied for the post of physician to the new public dispensary in Carey Street, and he was helped in this by Dr Fothergill's surviving sister, who actively supported his application. The dispensary was opened in 1783, and he was appointed as Physician-in-Charge. His colleague was the surgeon, Mr John Pearson. He was treating the diseases of the time, notably tuberculosis, scarlet fever, typhoid, typhus and smallpox. His work at the dispensary not only concerned the care and treatment of patients, but the teaching of young physicians who had recently graduated, and he became well known for this aspect of his work. It is recorded that at least forty physicians attended Willan over the years and many later held responsible positions. The work must have been hard and hazardous; for instance in 1791, it was noted in the records of the dispensary that the apothecary had died of smallpox. In consequence of this, and in view of the 'increasing prevalence of contagious fevers amongst the



Figures 3 & 4 Miniatures of Robert and Mary Willan, kept at the Royal College of Physicians, London

poor' which the treasurer reported, it was decided that 'physicians and surgeons of the charity do inoculate for cowpox all recommended persons, and that they further requested to make this regulation known to the poor within the limits of the dispensary'.

In spite of this heavy workload, he continued with his studies and in March 1785, he was admitted as a Licentiate of the College of Physicians. It is recorded that he greatly impressed the censors with his excellent address in Greek verse. For twenty years he laboured away in the dispensary in London, but he had other interests as well. He presented papers on ancient Greece to the Society of Antiquaries and in 1791 he was elected as a Fellow of that Society. In 1803, finding his private practice incompatible with his duties in the dispensary, he resigned as a physician in Carey Street. In recognition of his many years at the dispensary, he was nominated as Consultant Physician by the governors of the charity. He lived in various houses in London, but in 1801, on his marriage to Mary de Beaufre Scott (Figures 3 and 4), the widow of a colleague, he established a home in Bloomsbury Square.

In 1790, Willan was awarded the Fothergillian medal for his description of cutaneous disease. It is this work on the classification of skin disease which is the basis of Willan's fame as a dermatologist⁽³⁾. Willan's classification followed that of Joseph Plenck, Professor of Botany and Chemistry in Vienna⁽⁴⁾. In 1798 the first part of Willan's book was published in London, and shortly afterwards was translated into German. Coloured engravings accompanied the text and more parts of the book appeared in 1801, 1805 and 1808, entitled 'Description and Treatment of Cutaneous Diseases'. This was the first English textbook of dermatology. Willan was famed for his teaching of junior colleagues and for his standing with other doctors in London and elsewhere in the country. In 1809, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society⁽⁵⁾.

He wrote not only on dermatological subjects, but also on wider aspects of medicine, and he contributed many case reports to the London Medical Journal. In 1796 he commenced a series of monthly reports on the state of the

weather and its relevance to prevalent diseases in London. These reports were brought together in 1791 under the title of 'Reports on the Diseases of London'. In 1782 Willan wrote 'The History of the Ministry of Jesus Christ, combined from the Narrations of the Four Evangelists', which comments on the diseases mentioned in the gospels⁽⁶⁾. He even wrote an article on the speech of his home county - 'A list of the Ancient Words at Present Used in the Mountainous District of the West Riding of Yorkshire'.

In 1810 his health began to fail and he had difficulty with breathing and suffered a cough and hoarseness. He moved out of the city to Craven Hill in an attempt to get cleaner air, but he continued to travel to Bloomsbury daily to see patients. On the advice of friends, in an attempt to avoid the English winter, he undertook the voyage to Madeira. After leaving the Thames on 10th October, he had a bad journey due to adverse winds in the channel. It took 53 days to reach Funchal in Madeira, and though his condition on arrival was poor, he made some improvement and was able to do some writing by dictating, but his condition deteriorated and he

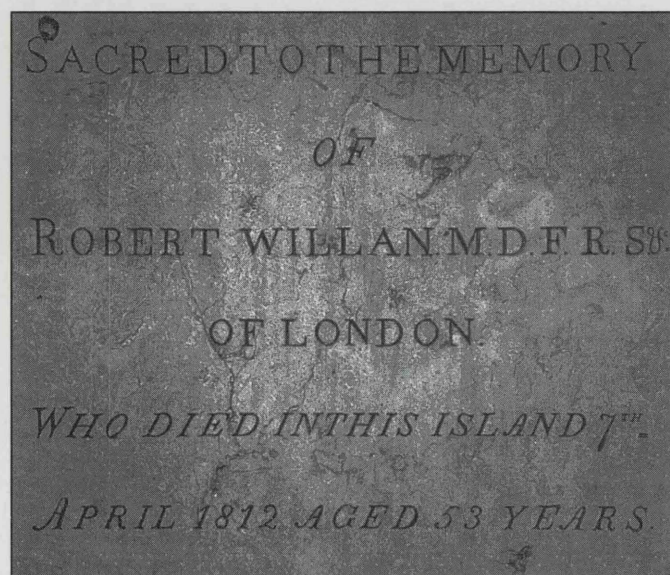


Figure 5 Robert Willan's gravestone in the British Cemetery, Madeira

died on 7th April 1812. He was buried in the old British cemetery, but when this was closed his gravestone (Figure 5) was removed and now stands against the wall in what is described as the new British cemetery in the Rua da Carreira. The gravestone can be seen to this day in the cemetery which is hidden away in a quiet corner of Funchal.

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