

WILLIAM DAVIS - OUR FIRST SCHOOLMASTER. c1791 - 1846

William Davis was the first Church of England appointed schoolmaster in Wollongong and in fact must have been appointed almost straight off the Mary Catherine which arrived 21 October 1833 as Colonial Secretary: The General Returns of the Colony (The Blue Books) for 1833 show him as schoolmaster at Wollongong receiving £50 per annum for teaching 8 boys and 12 girls. Later returns show William as receiving £40 and Mrs Sarah Davis as receiving £10 [I understand she was teaching sewing]. William & Sarah remained at the school until 1837. In 1838 John A Allen is shown as schoolmaster. In 1840 Edward & Mrs Gregory took over and were teaching 50 boys and 38 girls.

Information conveyed by a correspondent, Mrs Stuart-Duff, allows me to fill in more of the story of William Davis. Alexander Stewart in his *Reminiscences of Illawarra*¹ tells the Wollongong part of the story - in speaking of the shipbuilder John Cunningham he states that Cunningham had two apprentices "... The other apprentice was called Davis, and was the son of a schoolmaster who lived here and then taught a school in Mr Smith's barn, which stood where Beattie's stables now stand. I think this apprentice Davis is now living at Brisbane Water and building vessels there, and I believe he has been for many years past" and then, talking of the arrival of Minister Wilkinson in 1832, he says "Mr Wilkinson lived in his new cottage as soon as it was built, and continued to hold service in the barn. In the week time the barn was now occupied as a Church of England day school. A Mr Davis was appointed school master and many of the present old residents of the district went to that school."

According to the *The Brisbane Water Story*² William originally came from Breagh near Portadown in the North of Ireland and first came to Australia as a Chaplain on a convict ship in the 1820s. This has not been confirmed nor does it seem very likely. Sometime before 1822/3 William lost his first wife, Isabelle née Milsop; exactly when this happened is unclear but the NSW Index to Burials shows Benjamin as the child of William & Sarah and so we know that Benjamin and subsequent children were born to Sarah. At this stage Sarah's maiden name is unknown.

This "story" goes on to say that on his earlier visit William was offered the position of Chief Clerk to the Supreme Court. As a result of this offer William, on returning home, gathered family (wife and 12 children) and belongings together, and set sail for Australia once again, this time as a Chaplain on a vessel going to Sydney in 1833. On arrival he found, much to his disappointment, that the position he had been offered was already filled. However, within two years of arrival, "he was building a school at Wollongong for the Church of England and teaching there".

No source references have been produced by Mr Swancott to confirm his statement regarding the offer of the position of Chief Clerk nor can I find any evidence that he came as other than a steerage passenger on the *Mary Catherine*.

The *Australian* of 25 October 1833 records the arrival of the *Mary Catherine* under the command of Benjamin Rock Jones. The ship had left Liverpool on 15 June and after a call at Hobart Town arrived in Sydney on 21 October. Among the passengers are listed: Mr William Davis, teacher, Mrs Sarah Davis, William, George, John, Benjamin, Elizabeth, Mary, Ann, and Rock Benjamin Davis - this is incorrect and should read **Rock Jones Davis**³. Mary & Ann should read as one person, Mary Ann, so that there were only two girls not three in the party.

So much for the listing in the **Australian**, the ships passenger list gives a slightly different listing:

William Davis,	40, teacher	John	12
Sarah	40	Benjamin	10
William,	16	Elizabeth	8
George	16	Mary Anne	8
		Thomas	4

The **Australian's** list leaves off Thomas altogether while the passenger list fails to show the baby Rock, born during the voyage. The ages are also suspect as being approximately 2-4 years greater than the age in 1833 as calculated from the family bible: at the same time it shows a couple of sets of twins.

Sarah Davis Jnr, is said to have stayed behind with her maternal grandparents and followed the family out sometime later. Sarah would have been about 16 and was possibly left as a companion for her grandparents.

Charles Swancott's story tells that one of William's sons "was apprenticed to a shipbuilder, **Robert Dryburgh Cunningham**, formerly of Dawes Battery ...". I beg to differ: I believe young Davis was apprenticed to **John Cunningham**⁴, an ex convict shipbuilder who had arrived per Shipley in 1822 and built a number of ships in Wollongong in the 1830s. As far as I can make out R D Cunningham was never in Illawarra.

Shortly after young Edward's birth in 1837 William took his family to Kincumber. Exactly what his occupation was between 1837 and 1843 is unknown. Rock, in an affidavit stated that the family moved to Kincumber in 1839. In the 1841 Census William is shown as living at Cockle Creek in a stone house.

William had a family of twelve:

By Isabelle Milsop:-

George	b. Sept. 1 1815 d. Ireland
Sarah	b. April 6 1817. Died of consumption
William	b. 6 May 1819. d. c1858 child of William and Isabelle ⁵

Uncertain as to mother - probably Isabelle

George	b. 11 June 1821 m. Jane Metcalf, d. Kincumber 1860 - mother unknown ⁶ .
John	b. March 19 1823 did not marry, d. 1840,
Thomas	b. February 6 1825 d. Ireland.

By his second wife, Sarah:-

Benjamin	b. July 13 1826 d. 12 May 1883 child of William & Sarah
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Elizabeth b. 15 March 1828 . On 28 March 1851 Elizabeth of Balmain m. Charles Johnson of Sydney in the Wesleyan Church. Witnesses: William Davis & Matilda Hollebhone. Elizabeth Johnston (sic), shown as the daughter of William & Sarah, died in the central Sydney area about 1866

Mary Ann b. March 14 1830 d. 1850

Thomas b. March 1 1832 d. 1883. m. Sussannah Pickett 1855 (372 43) d. 1893 father William, mother unknown. The Probate Index shows a Thomas Davis of Terrigal dying 13 April 1893.

All the above were born in Ireland.

Rock J b. at sea 2 July 1833 m. 1855 Mary Ann Ward (371 43) d. 1904.

Edward b. Wollongong 10 January 1837 m. Lydia Piper in 1857. Iss: Johnathon 1858, Bertha 1860, Ida 1863, Edward 1867, William 1868: m. 2nd Emily Ward 1879 Iss: Thomas 1882, Eva 1883, Keith 1885, Rock 1887, Catherine M 1889,

It would appear that the first George and the first Thomas died in infancy otherwise William and his wife wouldn't have given subsequent children the same names. This means then that it was George born June 11 1821 who married Jane Metcalf on 21 January 1853 not George born 1815 as shown in **The Brisbane Water Story**. This appears to be born out by the following 1) only one George is listed on the passenger list of the Mary Catherine, 2) George is shown in the **NSW Index to Burials** as the son of William and dying at Gosford and 3) his tombstone indicates he was aged 38, i.e. born 1821/2. George, is shown in the Probate Index as of Kincumber, died 26/4/1860: he left a probated will No. 4920 Series 1. John died 11 May 1840 so that perhaps 6 sons grew to full adulthood. It looks then as though either William or George was apprenticed to John Cunningham in Wollongong in the 1830s.

During his stay in Wollongong William was able to invest in a little land buying 30 acres from James Stares Spearing (part of Spearing's 2000 acre grant). 13 of these acres were sold to **John Barrett** on 1 April 1838 while the remaining 17 acres were sold to **James & Robert Osborne** on 27 May 1839.

1. M.Organ (ED), Illawarra Historical Publication, Wollongong, 1987. ISBN 0 73160978 6
2. Charles Swancott, Honorary Research Officer, Brisbane Water Historical Society. 1954
3. **The Brisbane Waters Story Pt.3** states that he was named after his material grandmother who was a Miss Rock. However a descendant, Gwen Dundon, tells me that he was named after the captian of the ship which seems more likely.
4. See in **Illawarra Branches No.33**
5. Shown as such on Index to Burials.
6. Mother shown as "Unknown" on Index to Burials.