

WILLIAM MOUNTSTEPHENS - 1823-1837 **ROBERT MOUNTSTEPHENS - c1767-1829**

Memorial 15

On Sunday 30th July 1837 fourteen-year old **William Mountstephens** went for a swim in the river Exe. Tragically he got into difficulties and was drowned. The details of the accident and quite where it happened are currently unknown; perhaps he went with a group of friends who didn't know how to save him. He might have gone to Head Weir, just above the paper mill (now the Mill-on-the-Exe pub), which was a popular, though hazardous, spot for 19th century bathers. Eventually in the 1860's, after several more drownings, the City Council appointed a superintendent to look after the bathers.¹

William was buried at the Dissenter's Graveyard on 6th August 1837. A memorial stone was erected which, like most of the others at the graveyard, has become very weathered and hard to read. The original wording was probably:

**"In Memory of William son of William and Mary Mountstephens
who was drowned whilst Bathing in the River Exe
July 30th AD 1837 Aged 14 Years"**

There were several Mountstephens families in Exeter and it isn't entirely certain which one William belonged to. He was probably the son of William, a saddler, who married Mary Way on 31st August 1819 at St Sidwells in Exeter. Mary came from South Tawton and was the daughter of John Way, a wool-comber, and his wife Grace.²

William Mountstephens (senior) was born in 1794, the son of **Robert Mountstephens** and his wife Jane. Robert was a wagoner and labourer, he was listed as willing to serve in the local militia for St Sidwells parish in 1803³ but spent the latter years of his life in the parish of St Mary Major. He was buried in the Dissenter's Graveyard on 29th December 1829 at the age of 67.⁴ Unlike that of his grandson, his grave has no headstone.

Following their marriage William and Mary Mountstephens had a son, John, in 1820 and soon after moved to Plymouth where young William was born; he was baptised at St Charles church on 29th June 1823.⁵ The family returned to Exeter prior to 1837 and following William's drowning they moved to Topsham where both the elder William and John were working as saddlers in 1841.⁶ William is listed in Pigot's directory of 1844 as a saddler living on the High Street in Topsham.⁷ In 1845 John Mountstephens married Mary Ann Vicary, daughter of John and Catherine, at St Mary Steps church in Exeter.⁸ The Vicary family had also spent time in Plymouth but were living in Topsham in 1841 where John was working as a blacksmith; by the 1860's they had returned to Plymouth.⁹

William and Mary lived in Topsham for the rest of their lives. Mary died aged 78 in 1872 and William died the following year at the age of 79; both were buried at St Margarets church.¹⁰

John and Mary Ann Mountstephens also spent their lives in Topsham where they had a daughter, Mary Jane, in 1846. John carried on his father's business and was listed in White's Directory of 1878 as a saddler living in the High Street.¹¹

The non-conformist community in Exeter was close-knit; many families had baptisms and burials recorded in the ledgers of the various Meetings over several generations and were linked to each other by ties of marriage and business. In contrast the Mountstephens appear to have had no connection to

other dissenting families and the burials of William and his grandfather Robert are the only documented evidence for their beliefs. Were they in fact dissenters at all?

Sources

- 1 Exeter Memories. 2015. *Head Weir Bathing Place*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.exetermemories.co.uk>. [Accessed 12 March 2017].
- 2 <http://search.findmypast.co.uk>
- 3 Genuki. 2009. *Militia List 1803, Parish of St Sidwell, Exeter*. Available at: <http://genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/Exeter/StSidwell/StSidwell1803.html>. [Accessed 12 March 2017].
- 4 Piece 1085: Exeter, Georges Meeting (Presbyterian) 1824-1837. Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk>
- 5 <http://search.findmypast.co.uk>
- 6 1841 Census Topsham. Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk>
- 7 <http://ancestry.co.uk>
- 8 <http://search.findmypast.co.uk>
- 9 1841 Census Topsham and 1861 Census Plymouth. Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk>
- 10 <http://search.findmypast.co.uk>
- 11 <http://ancestry.co.uk>

Sarah Taylor
June 2017