



# Keeping House I : The Janitor and his Wife at the English Presbyterian College 1860-1872

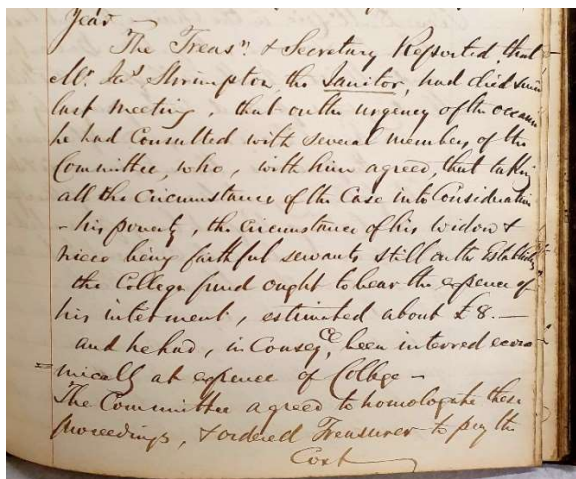
Most of the professors of the College and ministers of the Church are well documented, but what records do we have about the people behind the scenes, who made our College run? A deep-dive into our early archives gives some intriguing glimpses into the lives of our domestic staff.



Queen Square in 1812. From 1864, the College was in the building on the left with the large portico.



Queen Square House in 1880, by Miss Trina Twining



WM2/2 Minutes of the College Committee recording the death of Mr Shrimpton, 1860

Westminster College began life as the English Presbyterian College in London, founded in 1844. At first, the lectures were held in central rented halls and students arranged their own living quarters, but as the College grew, it became obvious that the students needed accommodation. Residential rooms were offered from 1859,<sup>1</sup> and the key reason the College moved to Queen Square House, in Bloomsbury, in 1864, was to gain more space: in the new building, there were 15 student bedrooms, as well as lecture rooms and a library.<sup>2</sup>

Around 5% of the population of England worked in domestic service in the 1850s and 1860s, and every large household needed the labour of servants to run smoothly and ensure the home was cleaned, warmed, lit, maintained, and the inhabitants fed.<sup>3</sup> The first reference to a housekeeper at the College, and indeed, the very first reference to domestic staff so far discovered, is a minute from April 1860, where Mr Ritchie, the Secretary of the College Committee – the group responsible for the practical management of the College – that “Mr. Jas. Shrimpton, the Janitor, had died”. This is probably the James Shrimpton whose death is recorded in the March quarter of the 1860 Registers for the district of Holborn.<sup>4</sup>

Mr Shrimpton appears to have been working alongside his wife, and there were probably one or two maids to help them as well, which we can see from the committee’s decision “that taking all circumstances into consideration – his poverty, the circumstance of his widow & niece being faithful servants still on the Establishment, the College fund ought to bear the expense of his interment, estimated at about £8.”<sup>5</sup> It’s later recorded that Mrs Shrimpton went to live with

her sister in Cambridgeshire, and Mr Ritchie proposed “as a parting gift – which was cordially agreed to” by the committee – that she be presented with ten pounds.<sup>6</sup>

The committee advertised for a new Janitor: in fact, they specifically wished to appoint “a man & wife without family [...] to reside on and live in the premises”.<sup>7</sup> And in September 1860, they appointed the second of our household stewards, Mr John Middleton, and his wife, on a joint salary of £35 a year – noted as “being about £10 a year beyond what Shrimpton and his wife together had”.<sup>8</sup> (Mrs Middleton was Eliza, but we only know this from the 1871 Census returns – her name isn’t recorded in the minutes).

There is no written description of their roles, but the Middletons, like the Shrimptons, would have been responsible for managing the College on a day-to-day basis, with duties probably including supervising staff, arranging general upkeep, cleaning, laundry, purchase of supplies and provisions, and cooking; and, most likely, keeping accounts and paying bills and tradesmen.<sup>9</sup> Middleton and his wife ‘lived in’, so their accommodation was provided as part of their employment. It would be likely that, as with most domestic servants in the nineteenth century, their food, drink, heating, and lighting were also included; however, given that in 1860 the average annual wage for a working man in England was estimated to be around £58, it’s not a particularly large salary.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, only a few years later, in 1863, their wages were raised to £45, following a “strong representation made by the janitor of the inadequacy of the salary allowed to himself and his wife”.<sup>11</sup>



WQ1/7 Interior of the College at Queen Square, where John Middleton and his wife Eliza were housekeepers



St George the Martyr, Queen Square – the church we think the Charity School girls attended. Photo: Mike Quinn<sup>12</sup>

Six years later, in June 1869, Mr Middleton asked for another increase to his salary – but this fell by the wayside amongst accusations of disobedience. Apparently, the Janitor “had refused to obey the order of the committee to allow the children of the girls’ charity school in Queen’s Square to pass through the college grounds on their way to church as heretofore. Thereupon it was resolved that inasmuch as John Middleton Janitor has refused to obey the orders of the committee, he receive notice to quit his situation at the end of three months from this date.”

The Ladies’ Charity School was (re)founded in 1702, supported by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, and moved to 22 Queen Square in 1859.<sup>13</sup> By 1869, it comprised around 50 girls aged 8-14, “the offspring of such [parents] as have been plunged, by the vicissitudes of life, from a state of competence and respectability, into the depths of adversity”,<sup>14</sup> and was supported by charitable donations from ladies. It’s intriguing to ponder why Mr Middleton might have wanted to deny the girls access – were they rude? Or noisy? Did they trample on the flowers



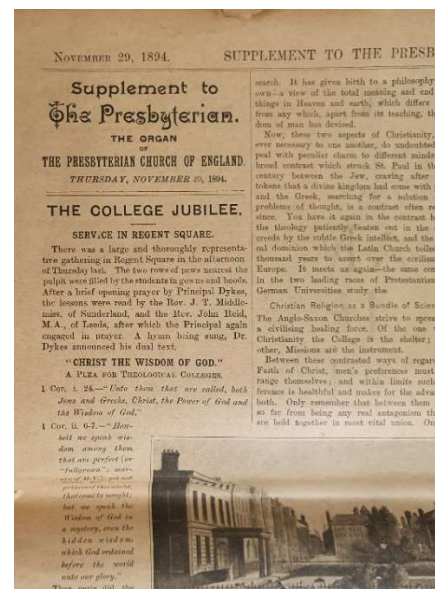
and leave the gate open? Whatever happened, Mr Middleton regretted it: the November 1869 minutes of the College Committee note that Mr Middleton had “expressed his regret for the conduct complained of”, and he was reappointed.<sup>15</sup>

A more cheerful side of John Middleton’s character is recalled by Revd. James Miller of Leicester, who studied at the College in 1870-1872. Writing in an 1894 article celebrating the College’s jubilee, Miller remembers his time at the College 30 years earlier, saying “The old Janitor met us at the entrance, but he was so genial that we quite forgot the cold and sombre outside appearance of the building. He spoke as if he were the Principal, and the Professors and Tutor his assistants. He was not slow to inform us how many students ‘had passed through his hands,’ and which he considered the best ‘he had ever turned out’.”<sup>16</sup>

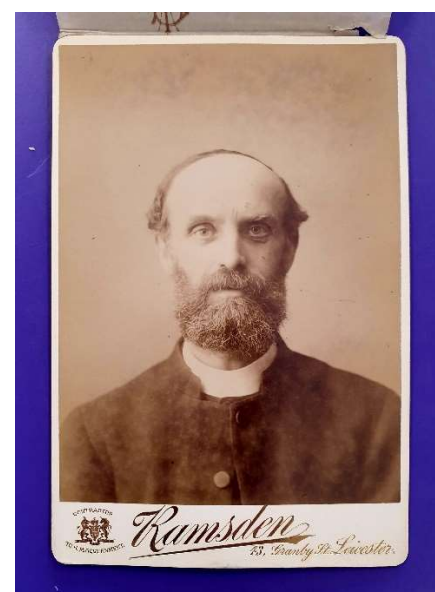
At the time of the census on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1871, John Middleton was still in post. Queen Square House, in the district of St Pancras, is listed with John Gibb, minister, as the head of a household, together with a houseful of ‘Presbyterian theological students’; and then the listing continues: John J Middleton, born in Dundee, and his wife Eliza Middleton, born in Ipswich, both of whose professions are given as ‘housekeeper’; and they are helped by two servants, Esther M Shelley and Elizabeth Exell.

Just over a year later, in June 1872, after eleven years’ service, Middleton was dismissed – and in what seem to the modern reader to be frustratingly vague terms. The Minutes say “Dr. Dykes as convener of the Sub-Committee on Discipline reported that the committee believes it to be for the good of the college that his [Middleton’s] connection with it should cease & had given notice to Mr. Middleton the janitor that his service would no longer be required.”<sup>17</sup> Documentation from the early days of the College is scanty, and the minutes of the ‘Sub-Committee on Discipline’ do not survive; we have no further information about why Mr Middleton and the College parted ways. And at this point in time, it seems unlikely that we will be able to find out any more details.

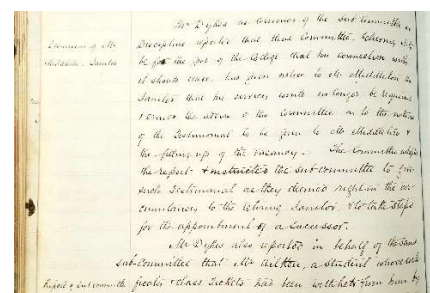
The committee advertised again for a new janitor, and in November 1872, they appointed Mr David Thom, and his wife Catherine.<sup>18</sup> Mr Thom was to remain at the College as Janitor and Steward for thirty years – join us for the next installment of our blog to find out more!



WB4/3/25 Revd. Miller’s article in *The Presbyterian*, Nov 29<sup>th</sup> 1894



Revd James Miller, photographed by J Ramsden of Leicester, c.1900



WM2/3 College Committee minutes of Mr Middleton’s dismissal, 1872

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> WM2/2 College Committee Minutes, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1859

<sup>2</sup> *Report of the College Committee*, 1877, to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of England

<sup>3</sup> Dr Andrew Hann and Eleanor Matthews, "Jobs in a Victorian Country House", English Heritage, online at <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/jobs-in-a-victorian-country-house/>; J Field, "Service, Gender and Wages in England, c.1700-1860", paper on behalf of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, at the Economic History Society Conference 2010. Online at <https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/occupations/outputs/preliminary/paper17.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Civil registration records of births, marriages and deaths are available to check for free at FreeBMD website. James Shrimpton is at [https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?r=30352460:5895&d=bmd\\_1745469582](https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?r=30352460:5895&d=bmd_1745469582)

<sup>5</sup> WM2/2 College Committee Minutes, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1860

<sup>6</sup> WM2/2 College Committee Minutes, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1860

<sup>7</sup> WM2/2 College Committee minute of 10<sup>th</sup> July 1860 reports an advert would be placed in in The Presbyterian Messenger (the monthly magazine of the Presbyterian Church of England) and the position would be advertised at local churches. No record of the advertisement in the Messenger has been found.

<sup>8</sup> WM2/2 College Committee Minutes, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1860

<sup>9</sup> Dr Andrew Hann and Eleanor Matthews, "Jobs in a Victorian Country House", English Heritage, online at <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/inspire-me/jobs-in-a-victorian-country-house/>; J Field, "Service, Gender and Wages in England, c.1700-1860", paper on behalf of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, at the Economic History Society Conference 2010. Online at <https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/occupations/outputs/preliminary/paper17.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Annual salary of £58 is based on calculations by Baxter and Levi, p.65, in Arthur Bowley, *Wages In The United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, University Press:1900). See also a comparison of different salaries in London in the 1860s by James Skipper and Prof. George Landow, "Wages and Cost of Living in the Victorian Era", on *The Victorian Web*, online at <https://victorianweb.org/economics/wages2.html>

<sup>11</sup> WM2/3 College Committee Minutes p15, April 1863

<sup>12</sup> Photograph by Mike Quinn, reproduced under CC-SA licence <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/1308298>

<sup>13</sup> The Ladies' Charity School moved again, to Notting Hill, in 1883. For a brief history of the Ladies' Charity School, see UCL's Bloomsbury Project (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project/institutions/>) and Peter Higginbotham's Children's Homes website (<https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/LondonLadiesCharity/>).

<sup>14</sup> This description, from 1853, quoted by Peter Higginbotham on the Children's Homes website, online at <https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/LondonLadiesCharity/>

<sup>15</sup> WM2/3 College Committee Minutes p112, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1869

<sup>16</sup> WB4/3/25 'Jubilee Supplement of the College', in *The Presbyterian*, Nov 29<sup>th</sup> 1894, p.17; URCHS Fasti file on Revd James William Miller (1848-1822), including photograph; WSR1/1 Student Roll 1844-1899

<sup>17</sup> WM2/3 College Committee Minutes p142, June 19<sup>th</sup> 1872

<sup>18</sup> WM2/3 College Committee Minutes p143-4, November 20<sup>th</sup> 1872