



Keeping House II: Mr David Thom, Steward of the English Presbyterian College 1872-1900

Our archivist has been hunting down references to the domestic staff of the College across the first hundred years of its history, 1844-1944. Join us for Part II of a quest for information about everyone from the Stewards and Housekeepers to the bedmakers and boot-boys!



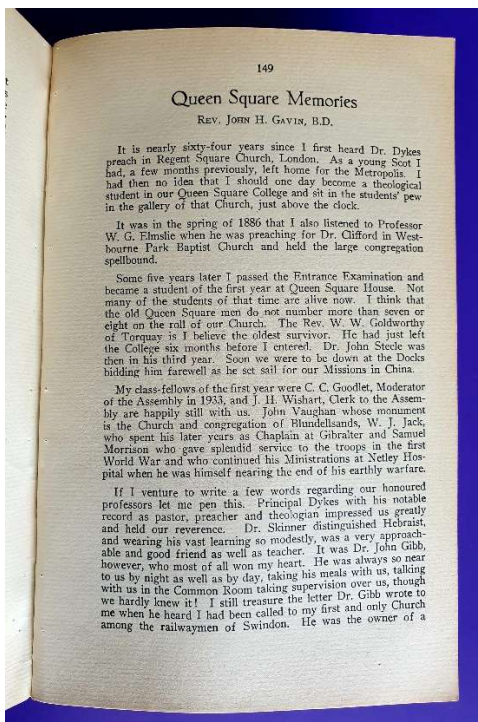
IWM Q 71617 Sergeant of the Royal Artillery with gun and standard captured in the Crimea (Imperial War Museum collections) ¹

After the departure of the Janitor, Mr John Middleton, and his wife Eliza, in summer 1872, the College appointed a new Janitor. He was Mr David Thom – who was described variously as the steward, cook, and ‘cook-caterer’ in the Reports of the College at Queen Square in the 1880s and 1890s² – and his wife Catherine.

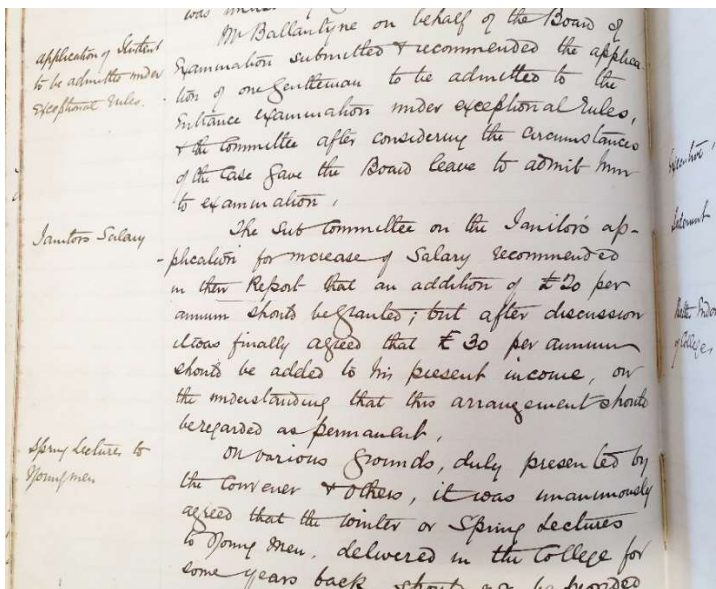
Reverend John Gavin, who was a student at the College in London in the mid-1890s, gives a wonderful thumbnail sketch of Mr Thom in an article entitled ‘Queen Square Memories’, written in 1950, saying: “We were also very well fed. Mr Thom the steward had been a young soldier in the Crimean War, [and] did marvels in the catering department. We had both porridge and bacon and eggs for breakfast, and excellent dinners and teas. I would like a few of these breakfasts again in these latter days of rationing.”³

We don’t know what David Thom was doing between his time as a soldier in the Crimean War (1853-1856), and the time when he started work at the College in London in 1872. He doesn’t appear on the 1861 or 1871 census, so perhaps he was serving with the Army overseas; perhaps he worked elsewhere. Perhaps he’s the David Thom who served with the Horse Guards in the 1850s, who occurs in the Household Cavalry records?⁴ Or maybe he’s David Thorn [sic], who enlisted with the Royal Artillery in 1848 and is recorded as marrying Catherine Coody in St Helier, Jersey, on August 21st 1858. It would be fascinating to do more research into the military records of both these Davids to find out which – if either! – is the correct one.⁵

There’s no record of Thom’s initial salary when he started working at the College, but he is given a £10 raise within six months of starting, in 1873, and a £20 ‘bonus’ for a year in October 1874. By 1876, it becomes apparent that actually, he’s asking for an increase to his wages because they are also his budget – because he is responsible for



“Queen Square Memories” by Revd John Gavin in the *JPHS*, 1950



WM2/4 College Committee minutes recording increase to the Janitor's salary, September 1881

employing other staff to help with the needs of running the College. In October 1875 Mr Thom asks for "an increase of salary & for additional help"; and in the next meeting, the Committee makes "an addition of £20 to the Janitor's salary & to allow additional aid in keeping the college House in a satisfactory state & to meet special demands, the annual cost of such aid not to exceed ten pounds per annum." Just over a year later, in May 1877, "It was agreed to add £25 to the salary of the Janitor Mr Thom (in lieu of £10 lately allowed him for casual help) in order to permit his employing an additional domestic for house work."⁶

There's no mention of the hiring of any

of the maids in the College Committee minutes, which might indicate that Mr Thom was responsible for their recruitment as well as their oversight; and the mention of 'an additional domestic' presumably explains why the two housemaids employed with Mr Middleton in the 1871 census had risen to three housemaids by the time of the 1881 census.

In 1878, Mr Thom resigned (perhaps in protest at this budget?); but the committee, hearing that he "was still acting as house keeper & might be willing to withdraw his resignation" persuaded him to return.⁷ His salary was raised again by £15 in March 1880, and by £30 a year from September 1881⁸; a few years later, in 1889, his annual salary stood at £195.⁹



Queen Square House in 1880, by Miss Trina Twining - as the College would have looked at the 1881 census.

By the time of the April 1881 census, having been in post nine years, David Thom (recorded in transcripts as David Thorn), age 49, born in Edinburgh, is listed as the House Steward, a servant in the household of John Gibb, Professor of Theology.¹⁰ He's married to Catherine Thorn [sic], aged 47, born in Jersey in the Channel Islands, who is a cook and domestic servant; and they are living with Janet Becten, Janet Stubbs, and Sarah Croot, housemaids.

Catherine Thom died early in 1885.¹¹ David Thom stayed on at the College, but resigned due to ill-health in July 1889, when his resignation was accepted "with much regret" and the committee decided that "in consideration of his long and faithful services to the College, a sum of £50 be presented to Mr Thom on his retirement."¹² His successor, a Mr L Smart, began work in August 1889, employed at £175 a year; but things clearly went awry with the new appointment, because only a couple of months later, the minutes record that "...circumstances had arisen which compelled them to dismiss the House Steward [as it had been decided to rename the Janitor's role] in August last." Having ascertained "the former House Steward Mr David Thom was in more robust health and willing

to return to the College”, they reappointed him.¹³ Mr Thom was reinstated (and within a year, awarded his former salary of £195), and was to remain at the College for another ten years.

In the 1891 census, under the Head of the Household (still John Gibb, Professor of Divinity, aged 55) are 13 boarding students, and David Thom, Steward and employee, a widower.¹⁴ Unlike the 1881 census, which says he was born in Edinburgh, the 1891 census records him as born in Plymouth, Devon. There are three housemaids (in 1891, they are Beatrice, Allize, and Helena Jackson) but the Housekeeper is Annie Thom, aged 26 and born in Westminster, in London - David Thom’s daughter.¹⁵



WA4/4 Annual Photograph at Queen Square House, 1893-4, Elliott & Fry
Professors seated centre, all students seated and standing.
Mr Thom far right, holding his hat



WA4/7 Annual Photograph at Queen Sq House, undated (1890s), Russell & Sons.
Back row: Mr Thom (l), Mr Gavin (r)

In the 1890s, we finally see our Steward. Mr Thom, with mutton chop whiskers, fob watch, and occasionally holding a bowler hat, appears in all the surviving annual College photos from 1890-1899, with the students and professors.¹⁶ In one photo, he is standing next to Revd Gavin, who enthusiastically recalled his cooking over half a century later! Mr Thom is the only one of the College servants at Queen Square to be included in the photographs.

In 1899, the College moved from London to Cambridge, and Mr Thom moved with it. Indeed, the original plan for the College included the main building, which included the Principal’s Lodge, the houses for the academic staff, and, specifically, ‘the Steward’s Cottage’.¹⁷ In the earliest account books for the College in Cambridge, we can see reference to Mr Thom’s monthly salary: £4 6s 8d.

Date	Description	Amount	Total
May 2	Thom, D.		
	Monthly Wages as per small Ledger	4 6 8	
	Cambridge Gas Company	1 7 6	
4	Weekly Wages as per small Ledger	5 6	
	Manning, J. (Grocer)		1 2 6
	Marfleet, S. J. (Baker)		2 2 6
			29 10 5

WAC2/3 College Accounts showing Mr Thom’s wages May 1900 on the top line: Thom, D £4 6s 8d

However, David Thom was now in his seventies, and “In the opinion of medical men who had seen Mr Thom, the House-Steward, since he came to Cambridge, he was no longer equal to the

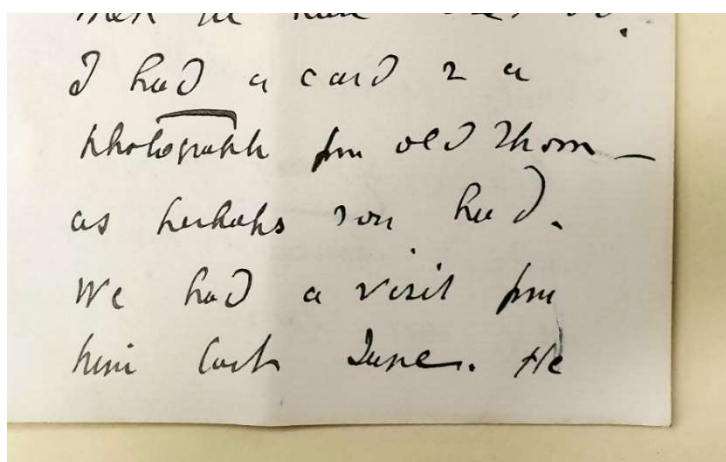
responsibilities resting on the head servant. The Bursar suggested the retirement of Mr Thom on a pension"; it was agreed he would retire after the Easter term,¹⁸ and then a final entry on 20th September 1900 records a last payment to "Thom, D, (Proportion of Wages)" £2 11s 6d.¹⁹

After seeing the College established in Cambridge, Mr Thom retired, and went to live with his daughter Annie, who had been Housekeeper at the College with him in London in the 1890s. Annie had married Robert William Jolly (or Jolley) of Brightlingsea, Essex, in 1897,²⁰ and by the 1901 census, they were living in Formby, Lancashire, with their son John D Jolley, age 3, born in Putney, and her father, David C Thim [sic], born in Plymouth, widowed, age 70.

However, despite living over 200 miles away, there are two archival records which show that David Thom stayed in touch with the college after nearly thirty years of service, and particularly with two of the academic staff who had been there about as long as he had: Dr John Smieton, the Bursar and Secretary to the College Committee, c.1874-1901; and Professor John Gibb, the Professor of New Testament Studies 1877-1907 and Professor of Church History, 1907-1913.



WA1/3 Album presented to Dr Smieton on his retirement, 1905



WT12/1 Letter from Dr Gibb to John Smieton, 1908 –
"I had a card & a photograph from old Thom..."

The first record is a decorated photograph album which was presented by the students to John Smieton when he retired in 1905. Each man seems to have contributed his own picture, and most have signed them; and at the end of the album – despite the fact he had left five years earlier – are two photographs of Mr Thom.²¹

The second is a letter dated January 6th 1908, from John Gibb to John Smieton, where Gibb says: "I had a card & a photograph from old Thom – as perhaps you had. We had a visit from him last June. He is a good deal older." – and which also describes him as "a faithful useful servant".²²

By the 1911 census, David Crawford Thom, aged 80, born in Plymouth and on an army pension, is in Reading, Berkshire. He's living with William Jolly, railway telegraph electrician for the Great Western railway, Annie and John Jolly, and they've been joined by a new baby Harold William Jolly, age 5. So for the last decade of his life, Mr Thom

lived – we hope happily – with his grandsons, and with the daughter with whom he once ran the College, and her husband, still in touch with his old colleagues from Queen Square. Mr David Thom died in 1913, in Reading, aged 82.²³

NOTES

¹ Image: IWM (Q 71617) Photo by Howlett & Cundall, from the collections of the Imperial War Museum. Reproduced under the terms and conditions of the IWM Non-Commercial Licence. View the original online at <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205018804>

² The published *Reports of Westminster College* as formally submitted to the annual Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, and published in the Synod records. Earlier Reports don't mention domestic staff at all.

³ Revd. JH Gavin, "Queen Square Memories", in *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 1950, pp149-152. Revd Gavin was ordained into ministry in the Presbyterian Church of England in 1897, and died in 1953.

⁴ WO 400/226/406 The Household Cavalry, Royal Horse Guards Series Two, 1856-1886 "Tait, James – Tolmie, John" includes listing for "David THOM, regimental number 406". It's possible that this David Thom joined the army too late to see action in the Crimean War, which ended in 1856.

⁵ WO 69/165/56 Statements of Service, Royal Artillery 11 Battalion Numbers 708 to 1176, 1848 opening 65 includes "Soldier's Number 763: David THORN. Born West Church, Edinburgh, Midlothian. Enlisted 1848 aged 18 years. Note: Transferred to 4 Battalion 1855"; WO 69/553/5 Register of Marriages and Baptisms, 3 Brigade Royal Artillery, 1850-1858 folio 16r shows "Entry 13: David THORN, of 3 Brigade Royal Artillery, and Catherine COODY married on 21 August 1858 at St Helier, Jersey." This David Thorn was born in around 1830-1831 in Edinburgh, which matches the details given for David Thom in the 1881 census; but in subsequent censuses, David Thom gives his birthplace as Plymouth. It would seem probable that this is the correct David Thom, because of the information given on the 1881 Census which lists his wife Catherine as being born at St Helier, Jersey.

⁶ WM2/3 Minutes of the College Committee Vol 3: £10 raise, June 1873, p.153; £20 bonus, Nov 1874 p.168; request for extra help, Oct 1875, p.177; additional £20 March 1876, p.178; £25 increase May 1877, p.195.

⁷ WM2/3 Minutes of the College Committee Vol 3, p.203 March 20th 1878

⁸ WM2/4 Minutes of the College Committee Vol 4, p15 March 24th 1880; p49 September 21st 1881

⁹ WM2/4 Minutes of the College Committee Vol 4, 17th July 1889, page 211-212

¹⁰ Although Gibb is resident, there is no mention of the students: perhaps they had already returned home for the Easter holidays, as Easter fell exceptionally early that year.

¹¹ Transcripts of register indexes via FreeBMD. Online at

https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?r=74331595:1035&d=bmd_1745469582

¹² WM2/4 Minutes of the College Committee Vol 4, 17th July 1889, page 211-212

¹³ Nov 20th 1889, page 220; March 19th 1890, page 225-6

¹⁴ In 1891, the College is – slightly oddly – given as 'Grenville College', Queens Sq. 1891 Census records online at https://www.freecen.org.uk/search_records/5903bc19e9379091b1c3f8c2/david-thom-1891-london-city-pancras-1832-?locale=en

¹⁵ Annie isn't listed as living at the College in the 1881 census, when she would have been 16: perhaps she was in domestic service, gaining the experience which would have enabled her to be Housekeeper by 1891.

¹⁶ WA4/2, WA4/2-8 Queen Square Annual College photographs

¹⁷ We can see this in WB4/14 Correspondence with Henry Hare, 1898-1903, which discusses building works to the Steward's House was rebuilt in 1902.

¹⁸ WM3/1 Minutes of the Council of Westminster College, March 1st 1900

¹⁹ WAC2/3 Account Book

²⁰ Transcripts of register indexes for district of St Pancras, September quarter of 1897, via FreeBMD. Online at

https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?r=98549443:5182&d=bmd_1745469582

²¹ WA1/3 album by Edward G Brewer, Photographer, of Bridge St, Newcastle upon Tyne: some pages are illustrated with watercolours of flowers, and all are adorned with gold ink. Photographers unknown.

²² WT12/1 Correspondence of John G Smieton 1853-1913. See also "John Gibb and Westminster", by R Buick Knox, in *JURCHS* vol 3 p331.

²³ Transcripts of register indexes via FreeBMD. Online at

https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?r=129966136:9360&d=bmd_1745469582