

William Lyons of Tenby (1766-1849)

William Lyons is mainly known for his collection of shells which were donated to the Tenby Museum by his daughters in 1878. This is an important and extensive collection and includes two species named after Lyons. They were collected in Pembrokeshire, South West England and South West Ireland.

Origins

William Lyons was the descendent of an Irish family. His great grandfather, John Lyons of Ledestown Hall, Westmeath was part of the local gentry. He made his career, however, in the army, serving in the West Indies where he married the only child of Henry Williams, the Lieutenant-Governor of Antigua. In addition to the Antiguan estates that he thus inherited, Major Lyons made considerable land purchases, building up a substantial property, which he left in the charge of his fourth son, Samuel when he returned to Ireland. William's grandfather, Henry, added to the family's interest in Antigua by marrying Sarah, the daughter of Samuel Winthrop, another, and later, Lieutenant Governor of Antigua. Henry's son, William's father, John of Sturtlow House, Huntingdon and Antigua married Jane, the daughter of Colonel Samuel Harman of Harman's Antigua, in 1753. His estates were left primarily to his eldest son, John who was a member of the Council of Antigua in 1782.

Thus, the Lyons family acquired substantial sugar producing estates in Antigua, but it was also a large family and it is quite difficult to establish just how prosperous any individual member was. William himself was one of ten. His eldest brother, John, had eighteen children by two marriages; some joined the armed forces and some travelled extensively, one became very prominent (Edmund was an admiral and subsequently first Baron Lyons of Christchurch). We know from his will that William's marriage settlement provided him with £2000 from the Antiguan estates but his circumstances otherwise suggest that he was of independent means but not particularly wealthy. William's estate was left in its entirety for the benefit of his wife and unmarried daughters, his sons appear to have had to make their own way in life. The family also led a very retiring life; there is virtually nothing about them in the newspaper archives, just the occasional announcement of a marriage or a birth.

Life in Tenby

William's family lived in a town house in Market Street (now Tudor Square) Tenby where he and his wife Sarah lived until her death in 1860. There is no record of them having owned the land, so we may assume that they rented. William himself was born in Tetworth, Huntingdonshire in 1766 and lived in Tenby from at least 1796 when their first child, Anthony, was born until the birth of his youngest in 1811. William and Sarah and their unmarried daughters: Jane, Sarah and Elizabeth, are recorded in the 1841 census for Tenby and William is known to have died there in 1849. The family is mentioned in the "gentry" section of Piggotts 1830 directory of Tenby but in 1844 the only reference is to a Miss Lyons - which may mean that William and Sarah were living somewhere else at the time (in 1837 they were in Bath but still describing themselves as being of Tenby). Sarah with Catherine and young Sarah are shown at no 5 Market Street in the 1851 census.

It is difficult to establish how well travelled William Lyons was, especially in the first 30 years of his life (given the occupations of his predecessors and descendants, it might be expected that he joined the armed forces but no record has been found). In addition to the Antiguan connection, his family could be found in all parts of the world including India and the United States as well as the West Indies. His wife, Sarah (Lyons?) had been born in Philadelphia in 1768. However, as noted above, virtually every historic reference to William's whereabouts is to Tenby. But why did he settle in Tenby in the first place? One intriguing possibility is because it was the home of Catherine and William Routh. William Routh was a Bristol printer who, in 1790, commissioned the Regency architect John Nash to design a house in Tenby. His wife, Catherine Davies, was the grand-daughter of Thomas Howell who had made his fortune in Antigua before buying Prinknash Park in Gloucestershire in 1776. Was there a connection, by blood, marriage or merely friendship between the Howell and the Lyons families?

Children

William and Sarah had thirteen children: Anthony, William, Catherine, John, Edmund, Mary, Charles, Henry, Jane, Sarah, Elizabeth, Frances and James. It has proved quite difficult to trace the family, in part because unless the full name is used, names such as "John Lyons" are quite common, but mainly because the sons appear to have travelled extensively, either on business or in the armed forces. For that reason the following account relies heavily upon family internet sources which it has not always been possible to verify.

Two of the sons, **Charles** (1803-1803) and **James Hamilton William** Lyons (1811-1812) died in infancy. This may also have been the fate of **Frances Harriet** (1809-?) since she soon disappears from the records. Four of the girls lived and died unmarried in Tenby; **Catherine Ann** (1798-1873), **Jane Sarah** (1805-1879), **Sarah Alicia** (1807-1885) and **Elizabeth William** (1808-1843). Was their failure to secure a husband because father could not afford a sufficient settlement?

The eldest son, **Anthony Munton Lyons**, born in 1796 joined the Royal Marines in 1812 but was put on half-pay in 1814. He does not appear to have returned to service but was still a 2nd lieutenant on half-pay in the 1842 Army Lists. He remained in Tenby and In the 1830 Piggott's Directory Anthony is described as "the master of the ceremonies"; Tenby had an assembly rooms by the harbour. Clearly, he had little income since in early versions of his will, William arranged to leave £500 to Anthony, but he revoked this in 1844 because his son had secured a position in Demerara, presumably a civilian appointment. Anthony had married Mary Ann Williams from Tenby in 1823. They had Elinor (1824), Mary Elizabeth Williams (1825), Sarah Emma (1826), Caroline Jane Williams (1828), Antonia Emily Williams (1830) and William Williams (1832). He died in Guiana in 1863. Of the children, we have not been able to trace young William, who does not appear to have returned to the UK although it is possible that one or more of the girls returned but is recorded under another name after marrying overseas.

William, born in 1797, is said (family internet sources) to have been a Royal Navy Captain. It has been impossible to verify this and since the plain name William Lyons is not uncommon it is difficult to follow him through the records with any certainty. However, he is likely to have been the William Lyons who became a

lieutenant in the Navy in 1825 but who did not receive subsequent promotion. Instead he was sent to run the coastguard station at Glenarm in County Antrim where he received the RNLi silver medal for gallantry in 1840. If this is the correct William Lyons, it helps to explain why he has not been traced in the UK census records, nor in marriage registrations, since most of the Irish records for the period have been lost. The title of captain may well have been acquired at a later stage in his career since a William Lyons served in the merchant marine from 1853 to 1857. He died in 1878 in Goole.

John William (1799-1846) does not appear under that name in any of the UK census and registration records which may suggest that he served overseas with the armed forces. The family internet sources suggest that he was a lieutenant and there is a possible entry in the Royal Marines lists showing a seniority of 1830. There is no record of **Edmund Walcott William** (1800) except his death in Headington, Oxfordshire, in 1864. Similarly, the census shows no record of **Henry Harcourt Lyons** (1804-1875) but it does include his wife, Anna Margaretta Griffies Williams, whom he married in 1833 in Marlborough, and his daughter Agnes Grace Sutton Lyons (1834-1911). It is interesting and may be significant that Anna is shown in the census as a "Landed Proprietor"; did she have her own income rather than depending upon that of her husband? The intriguing absence of the Lyons sons from the census suggests that they were frequently away from home, either with the armed services or acting as merchants in connection with the family business.

Mary Ellen William (1801-1870), married Edmund Scopoli Walcott of Limerick, probably her first cousin, in 1817. Not long after he added the name Sympson and the records are variously in the names of Walcott and Walcott-Sympson. Their children were: John Minchin 1818, Edmund Lyons 1819, Mary Dorothy 1821, William Lyons Enraght 1822, Henry Sympson 1826. They were all christened in Clifton or Bristol and William was christened at the age of four in 1826, which often happened when families went overseas for a spell. By 1861, Mary is a widow living in Bristol with her unmarried daughter, Mary. Most of the rest of the family, where it can be found, consists of people living modestly on private incomes. Henry lived for a while in The Norton, Tenby but by the time of the 1871 census he and his family lived in Laugharn. Edmund went to Australia in about 1850 and had eight children, one of which, Henry, himself had eighteen.

Conclusions

William Lyons and his family do not appear to have made a great mark. They lived quietly in Tenby, wealthy enough - for the most part - not to have to work but not sufficiently wealthy to live well. Possibly not sufficiently wealthy for the girls to make good marriages, with the exception of Mary who married a cousin when only sixteen. The males mostly joined the Armed Forces but do not appear to have made a great success of that, or they may have become involved with the family's West Indian trade. William Lyon's descendants all appear to have left Tenby by the end of the nineteenth century.

The memorial of this quiet man is to be found in his remarkable shell collection donated to Tenby Museum in 1878 by his daughters.