

Medina Sarah Griffiths

[These notes about Medina Sarah Griffiths were written by Peter Lewis, late of Milford Hall, Newtown and were part of a series that he put together for his daughter, Sarah Medina Rackham, nee Lewis, (known as Sally) about various members of their family. (Sally was named after MS Griffiths, and has always felt a strong connection with her).

Sally writes: They are obviously personal memories of her and the generations are one further removed from me. I have not edited them. I thought by leaving it as it was written, it might give a little context to the family connections.

Sally lives in Australia and got in touch with Saltaire Village website www.saltairevillage.info to share this information with us on 13 November 2006. These notes can also be found in the Powys County Archives. We thank and gratefully acknowledge Sally and Powys County Archives.]

Aunt Medina

Notes by Peter Lewis, c 1984, late of Milford Hall, Newton

Reverend James Griffiths (1782 - 1858) married in 1811 Sarah Phillips. He was Congregational minister with churches at Machynlleth, Towyn and St Davids. The oldest son of the marriage, Henry (1812 - 1891), was both minister and scholar. He went to University College London.

He became a Fellow of the Geographical Society and first principal of Brecon Theological College, following pastorates in the Isle of Wight and at Stroud. He married Mary Blake, whose father had a boat-building business on the river Medina in the Isle of Wight. There were two children, Medina Sarah, born 1840, named after the river, and Ernest Howard, born 1851. Both were of outstanding character and intellect. They were first cousins of our grandmother Martha (1834 - 1926), whose mother married Peter Perkins, she being Margaret Griffiths, sister of Henry Griffiths. These Griffiths' were no relation of Thomas Griffiths our grandfather.

We do not know how Medina was educated. Both were very musical. Long before Medina could read, she was taught Tonic Sol-fa by Curwen, who invented it and was a friend of the family. Later she became an accomplished organist, and composed some attractive hymns for the use of her school. Ernest played the violin, which I will refer to later.

As a young woman, Medina formed a life-long friendship with Miss Tullis, whose family were connected with Newtown. They were colleagues teaching in a school near Cardiff, of which Miss Tullis became the head; while Medina was appointed first Headmistress of the Salt High School for Girls in the model town of Saltaire in Yorkshire.

The Salt family were woollen manufacturers, who had made a fortune from the handling of alpaca, a material which had defeated others where first introduced into Britain. Sir Titus Salt invented machinery to produce alpaca cloth, which became very fashionable, and he

Medina Sarah Griffiths

was able to establish a model town around his mills on the river Aire. As well as giving his workpeople improved housing and other amenities, he set up a High School for Boys and a High School for Girls which flourished under its young Headmistress.



She (Medina) was in advance of her day in her methods; she introduced a wide curriculum including Latin, Greek, French, English, Esperanto, maths, drama, art and music. There were no forms and no marks, everyone was put in a class for each subject to which they were suited. Girls were encouraged to stay on until they were ready to take a degree, which at that time could only be obtained at London University. [Photo: Medina Sarah Griffiths]

Medina took a personal interest in the teaching; she would pounce down upon a lesson she though was being taught in a dull way and enliven it at once. She read marvellous books to the girls while they ate their supper. She was witty and musical, and though at times caustic and frightening, she was adored by a vast number of her pupils. Although not tall, she was commanding in appearance with dark brown eyes. As a young woman she had had lovely auburn hair, but as she suffered from headaches she had it cut short in an Eton crop. At a time when all other women were very corseted with small waists she wore dresses specially made in what was later known as a "Princess" style of straight garment, usually of a becoming shade of brown and often of Liberty velvet.

It was to Saltaire school that Eveline Griffiths was sent at the age of 12; starting with a 16-mile drive to Haverfordwest, the train journey took two days with a night en route, usually with the family of a minister. The Yorkshire climate was terribly bleak and cold, and life at the school was spartan - no heat in the bedrooms or corridors, washing in cold water every morning. No hot water bottles, but a kindly Yorkshire cook took a fancy to Eveline and used to heat a brick in the oven, wrap it in a piece of flannel, and put it in the bed. Yet Eveline loved the lessons, so different from her first school at Birkenhead where she was always liable to lose marks. When Medina decided that the climate was too severe, she (Eveline) followed her south to the new school, Spring Grove, Isleworth, where Medina was appointed Headmistress. This however did not last long, and while Eveline was still with her, Medina bought a large house at Bushey, Caldecote Towers, where she ran a successful school for some years. It was in fact from Caldecote Towers that Eveline Griffiths married Hugh Lewis in 1895.

In due course Medina moved to Bristol and bought a house at Clifton where she took girls to live. Finally she took Leigh Court, Bristol, a huge Georgian house where she could take many boarders. This move was crippled by a covenant given when Caldecote Towers was sold and in the outcome Medina lost a fortune.

Medina Sarah Griffiths

She retired to a small house in Penner where she lived with one of her old pupils, Marion Blenkinsop. As well as a great Headmistress, she was a charming person, kindly, loving, a musician and a poet. We remembered her daily by her 'Diary of Golden Thoughts' - a printed publication with illuminating quotations for every day of the year; a copy of this hung in our upstairs bathroom and downstairs loo, and provided us with memorable food for thought.

Written by Peter Lewis c 1984