

A BIOGRAPHY OF

The Reverend Doctor John Griffith, BA., MA., LL.D.

Inter alia Vicar of Sandridge, 1872 – 1891

14th December 1817 – 30th July 1892

John Griffith was born at St Maurice, Winchester, Hampshire, the son of William Griffith, a Wesleyan minister of Ipswich and his wife Ann Cove of Seend, Wiltshire. According to Cambridge University Alumni records, he was schooled at Kingswood, Bath, matriculated in 1836 and entered St. John's College, Cambridge as a scholar in 1839. He obtained honours both in classics and mathematics, being 10th Wrangler in the Mathematical Tripos, and in the second class of the Classical Tripos in 1840, and an MA in 1843.

In 1843 he was ordained Deacon by the Bishop of Hereford and Priest in 1844 by the Bishop of Lichfield. He married Sarah Elizabeth Foster, daughter of Richard, a banker, and Sophia Foster of Trumpington, Cambridge, on 3rd June 1841 at St Michael's, Cambridge. According to the 1841 Census, on the night of 6th June the newly weds were at the Railway Hotel in St Peter's, Litchurch, Derbyshire.

At the invitation of Thomas W. Evans, a Cambridge friend, John Griffith became curate of St Matthew's at Darley Abbey, Derbyshire from 1843 to 1853, during which time the Griffiths had 4 sons and a daughter. Known there as 'Rumbustious John', the Rev. John Griffith was a muscular Christian in every sense: a very big man, with just the right blend of forcefulness and humour, organization and quirkiness. He had boundless energy, with an aim in life to be 'useful'. During his ten years there, Griffith was involved in a variety of good causes, especially improving the education of the working classes, and he helped set up the ancestor of what is now the Derby University.

Rev. John Griffith exhibited a barometer "designed to give observations accurately to within 1/1000th of an inch" at the **1851 Great Exhibition** at Crystal Palace: he was awarded a medal by the Jurors of *Philosophical, Musical, Horological and Surgical Instruments*, and a certificate signed by *Prince Albert*.

In 1853 he succeeded the Rev. F. W. Robertson as incumbent of Trinity Chapel, Brighton, and in 1856 succeeded Dr. Henry Cotterill as Principal of Brighton College. He is reported to be the first Headmaster to build school science labs; the College has famous alumni, not least some of his own children. He was admitted to Oxford 'comitatis causa' in 1867 and awarded an honorary Cambridge LL.D in 1869: he retired from Brighton College in 1871, having laid the groundwork for a University of Brighton.

In 1872 the fifth Earl Spencer invited Dr. John Griffith, his old tutor, to become vicar of St. Leonard's parish of Sandridge, Hertfordshire. Backed by the

Earl, he embarked on a large-scale programme of improvements – a new school, a village Institute (now the Village Hall), allotments, new cottages and a new vicarage for his large family.

To cater for the distant inhabitants of 'Sandridge New Town', springing up on Bernards Heath, Dr Griffith built a chapel, 'the tin trunk', in 1882, replaced in 1902 by the magnificent brick-built St Saviour's Church in Sandpit Lane, St Albans. He led a massive restoration of St Leonard's church which started in 1885 under leading architect William White: it cost £3800 (£650,000 today?), much of which was gifted by Griffith, and the Church re-opened June 1888.

He was elected a Member of the St Albans (later, and Herts) Architectural and Archæological Society in the late 1870s and for the 10 years before his retirement in 1891 took a lively interest in the Society, and promoted its works with characteristic energy. His active co-operation may be dated from 1880, when he was instrumental in bringing to light the long-lost ancient Register book of the Abbey parish.

His accession to the Committee in September, 1882, proved a stimulus to activity in exploring Hertfordshire: he was seldom induced to go beyond the county's limits. In these expeditions the part most congenial to him was the investigation of pre-historic antiquities – earthworks, tumuli, primitive road-ways, common field tillage: his SAAAS obituarist, the Rev. H Fowler, recalled "he thoroughly loved a bit of pre-historic mound or dyke-making."

His interesting contributions on various subjects (not always committed to print) are to be found in the SAHAAS Transactions 1903-4, among a list of papers published by the Society since its foundation in 1845. In particular, the Rev Dr Griffith's resurrected paper of 23rd January 1885 on the church of St Leonard documents the involvement of his sons in the December 1884 discovery of Saxon burials and finds at Wheathampstead.

In 1887 and again in 1890, he presented Egyptian antiquities to the SAAAS, excavated there by his youngest son, Frances (Frank) Llewellyn, who became a leading Egyptologist, and founded the world-famous Griffith Institute at Oxford University. Frank's sister, Agnes, was also a respected Egyptologist.

John Griffith's health declined in the late 1880s and he retired from both his parish and the SAAAS in 1891 to live at Selbourne Cottage, Hassocks, in Sussex, where he died 30th July 1892.

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The Rev. Dr. John Griffith and Family

Somewhere this writer has seen Sandridge dubbed the *Cradle of British Egyptology* because of the life-long activities of two of John Griffith's children!

His youngest (7th) son Francis (Frank) Llewellyn Griffith 1862–1934, was educated by his father at Sandridge Vicarage and after expeditions in Egypt with early archaeologist Flinders Petrie, became a leading Egyptologist and first Professor of Egyptology at the University of Oxford. The Griffith Institute there was founded and endowed by him, and by his second wife Nora Christina Cobban McDonald. His legacy of his 20,000 book collection is still among the most important Egyptian archive in the world.

Frank's sister, Agnes Sophia (1860–1949), also established herself as an Egyptologist, editing, translating and revising textbooks of Egyptology and publishing a catalogue of Egyptian sculpture, before turning to Assyriology. She married Claude H. W. Johns (1857–1920), a lecturer in Assyriology at Cambridge University and in Assyrian at King's College, London. (*Assyriology* is the archaeological, anthropological, historical, and linguistic study of the cultures that used cuneiform writing.)

The other siblings included 2 barristers – the eldest son John Richard (1843–1877) in whose memory his father built the Village Hall in Sandridge in 1878, and, of course, the 6th son Arthur Foster (1856–1933) who is a major figure in the Wheathampstead Ewer and

Palm-cup stories, whose biography is available elsewhere.

William (1845–1918) and Charles Herbert (1847–1916), the 2nd and 3rd sons, both took Holy orders; the former died a bachelor after a life combating mental health problems. Charles was a successful Grammar school master and sometime University lecturer, and a 2nd master at Brighton College; later he took a post at Highgate School.

Next was Henry Foster (1849-1904), a solicitor and an F.S.A.; he was the local Secretary for Sussex of the Society of Antiquaries, and – without foundation! – is this writer's favourite choice as the second of John's sons (with Arthur) who attended the Wheathampstead Saxon burial site in 1884. (Not Frank, above, who was then in Egypt for the first time.)

Henry was followed by John and Sarah's eldest daughter Mary Elizabeth (1853-1906) who died a spinster in Northampton, but was buried at Darley Abbey by brother Charles. She is missing from all Censuses after 1871: possibly she was another mentally disturbed Griffith?

Fifth son Walter Spencer Anderson (1854-1946) became a Harley Street physician and surgeon, after an MB at Cambridge.

Walter was followed by Arthur F. and then by the second daughter, Agnes Sophia mentioned above.

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