

Solving the mystery of Edwin Woodley, the First Pupil at Monkton Combe School (1868)

In January 1868 the Revd Francis Pocock of Monkton Combe (a small village in a quiet valley just south of Bath in Somerset) took fifteen-year-old **Edwin Woodley** into his house in the village as a pupil. It is believed to have been Francis's first known experience of taking in a resident scholar. He and his wife had returned from a posting to Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1857, suffering from yellow fever and malaria, and Francis had only recently recovered sufficiently to be appointed to the living of Monkton Combe.

Sadly, the arrangement didn't last long. Edwin had TB (phthisis) and died four months later on 21 April 1868. His death was registered on 23 April by one Hobart Hampden, who had been present when the boy died.¹ Edwin was buried in the parish churchyard of St Michael's, Monkton Combe on 25 April 1868.

Edwin's death certificate states only that he was the son of a deceased schoolmaster. Research undertaken in September 2021 by the Archivist at Monkton Combe School has revealed that Edwin was the son of Edwin Woodley Snr, the schoolmaster of Congresbury in Somerset, and his wife Susan. Young Edwin was their fourth child and was baptised in Congresbury on 12 June 1853.

Edwin Woodley Snr was born in Kenn, Devon in January 1816. He married **Susan Howse** from King's Langley, Herts in Burwash, East Sussex on 2 December 1846. Their first child, **Francis John Woodley**, was born in Catsfield, East Sussex in October 1848. By 1850 the family had moved to Paul's Causeway, Congresbury as Edwin had been appointed Master of Congresbury School. Their daughter **Maud(e)** was born in Congresbury in August 1850, followed by **Agnes** in December 1851, **Edwin** Jnr in June 1853, **Amy** in May 1856 and **Arthur** in July 1857.

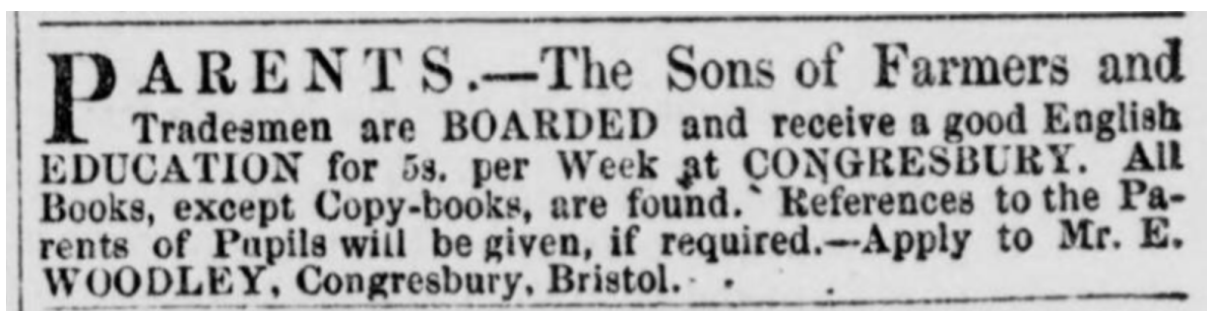
¹ Hobart Hampden is the family name of the Earls of Buckingham, but who this person was or why he was present at the death is as yet unknown. Was he perhaps a curate in Monkton Combe?

The first public school in Congresbury was held in the Court House, as identified on the 1840 Tithe map. The building remained a school throughout Mr Woodley's incumbency, until 1873 when new School Rooms were opened in Station Road (now the Old School Rooms).²

The relationship between the Vicar of Congresbury and its schoolmaster was an important one. The **Revd Joseph Haythorne** (MA, St Mary Hall, Oxford) of Hill-House, Gloucestershire (1796-1867) was appointed to the living of Congresbury in 1824 following the death of the incumbent.^{3 4} He ensured there was a school in the village by paying the rent of the Court House with its garden and orchard from 1838 onwards, thus providing the parish's school and its Headmasters (one of whom was Edwin Woodley) with a home.⁵

Edwin Snr seems to have been a conscientious and respected schoolmaster. The Wells Journal of 14 July 1855 reported that he had received the Bishop's Certificate (2nd Class) for Schoolmasters and Schoolmistresses of the Diocese.

His earliest advertisements in newspapers in Bristol and Bath offer an education for "the sons of farmers and tradesmen" at a rate of 5 shillings a week, including books (except copy-books).



PARENTS.—The Sons of Farmers and Tradesmen are BOARDED and receive a good English EDUCATION for 5s. per Week at CONGRESBURY. All Books, except Copy-books, are found. References to the Parents of Pupils will be given, if required.—Apply to Mr. E. WOODLEY, Congresbury, Bristol.

Bristol Mercury, 13 January 1855

² <http://congresburyhistorygroup.co.uk>: Charity in Congresbury, Bedingfield, G et al

³ England & Wales Ecclesiastical Dignitaries 1800-1840

⁴ Oxford University & City Herald 1 January 1825

⁵ <http://congresburyhistorygroup.co.uk>: Charity in Congresbury, Bedingfield, G et al

By 1857, he had refined his advertisements, identifying his pupils as boys aged between six and ten. However, by 1858 he was advertising to educate “children”, and not specifically for boys.

LITTLE BOYS, between Six and Ten years of age, are **BOARDED** and **EDUCATED** for 5s. a week, at **Congresbury**. References to Parents will be given. For particulars apply to **Mr. E. WOODLEY**, **Congresbury, Bristol**.

Bristol Mercury, 1 August 1857 and Bristol Times, 5 July 1862

TO PARENTS. — **CHILDREN**, from Six to Ten Years of age, are **BOARDED** and **EDUCATED** for 5s. a Week, at **CONGRESBURY**.—For particulars apply to **Mr. E. WOODLEY**, **Congresbury, near Bristol**. [618]

Bristol Mercury, 2 January 1858

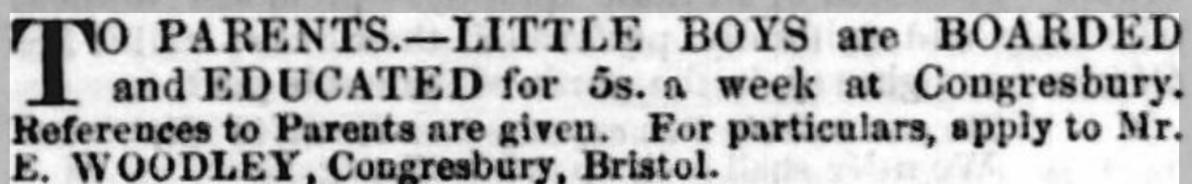
In September 1859, Edwin Snr attended the Revd Stephenson’s annual tea-meeting at Lymsham for the schoolmasters and schoolmistresses of the Deanery of Axbridge. He was chosen to present an engraved inkstand to the Revd Stephenson on behalf of the assembled company and did so, making a “neat and appropriate address”.⁶

The schoolmaster’s wife, Susan Woodley, died in March 1861 aged 42. When the 1861 census was taken in April, Edwin Snr (widowed) and five of his children were living in Congresbury village, together with Edwin’s married sister-in-law Alice Porter (36) and six boarding scholars, aged between 9 and 12, each paying 5 shillings a week. His sister-in-law may have come for her sister Susan’s funeral the previous month, and stayed on for a while.

⁶ Bath Chronicle, 15 September 1859

Seven-year-old Edwin Jnr is lodging just a few houses away, in the household of William Vicarage, a farmer of 17 acres, and his wife Ann.⁷ Edwin Jnr is listed as a scholar, and there is another scholar from Mr Woodley's school also lodging in the same household. This is George Mayo, aged 12, from Piercefield near Chepstow, Monmouthshire.⁸ Meanwhile, George's nine-year-old sister Fanny, also born in Piercefield, is one of the boarders lodging with Mr Edwin Woodley. With Edwin Snr taking in boarding scholars, he probably needed to find extra rooms in the village and Mr & Mrs Vicarage obliged. Perhaps the combination of girls and boys required two of the boys to be lodged outside, and young Edwin and George were chosen.

Edwin Snr continued to place advertisements for boarding scholars up until his death.



NO PARENTS.—LITTLE BOYS are BOARDED and EDUCATED for 5s. a week at Congresbury. References to Parents are given. For particulars, apply to Mr. E. WOODLEY, Congresbury, Bristol.

Bristol Times 28 December 1861

Bath Chronicle 9 January 1862

Edwin Snr died aged 47 on 28 December 1862 and was buried in Congresbury on 2 January 1863. His executor was the Revd Haythorne, who also officiated at his burial and had baptised all the Woodley children born in Congresbury.

So by the New Year of 1863, the six siblings were orphans (possibly five, as there is no trace of Maud Woodley (born 1850) after the 1861 census and no record of her marriage or death).

⁷ For correct spelling of name, see Kelly's Directory of Somerset, 1861, which gives William Vicarage as a farmer.

⁸ Piercefield is an important 18th century house at St Arvans, Chepstow, now in ruins and surrounded by Chepstow Racecourse. George and Fanny were born on the estate because their father was the gardener there, but by 1861, when the two children were at school in Congresbury, the Mayos had moved to Church Cottage, Portishead. 10 shillings a week must have been a considerable sum for a gardener to find to educate two of his children. It is interesting however that Edwin's youngest sister Amy later moved to Chepstow, where she remained for the rest of her life.

Edwin Jnr's older brother Francis died four years later in 1866, aged 18, and was buried in Congresbury. At some point following Edwin Snr's death, or possibly after Francis's death, it seems that the family was split up with the children going to various schools in Bath and Bristol. How were they funded? Were there one or more well wishers? The Revd Haythorne died in 1867 after a long illness: he may have been involved somehow as a sponsor?

In January 1868 young Edwin (15) arrived at Revd Francis Pocock's house in Monkton Combe, dying there four months later in April 1868. It is possible he was accompanied to Monkton Combe/Combe Down by his younger sister Agnes and his younger brother Arthur. The evidence for this is twofold. Agnes died in Monkton Combe (which included Combe Down) in January 1870, aged 18 and was buried in St Michael's churchyard on 22 January 1870, just over a year after Edwin's burial there. In the 1871 census, 13-year-old Arthur Woodley is a boarder at Charles Harril's established private school in Park House, Combe Down, just up the hill from Monkton Combe. Arthur may have arrived at Mr Harril's establishment at the same time as Edwin joined Revd Pocock and sister Agnes also came to Monkton Combe or Combe Down.

Later in 1871, 14-year-old Arthur was indentured in the Merchant Navy as an apprentice for four years, bound to J H Allen of London. He achieved his Second Mate's certificate in 1876 and his Master's certificate in 1892. A newspaper report from Penang of an action in the Laroot River in October 1873, when HM Ships Thalia and Midge engaged and defeated pirates, mentions an Arthur Woodley, navigating midshipman, who is in charge of the Captain's galley from HMS Thalia.⁹ No further information about him has been traced, and no death date is known.

As to Amy, by 1871, when her older siblings Francis, Edwin and Agnes had all died and her remaining brother Arthur was at school in Combe Down, she was a scholar at a dame school on Ashley Hill, Bristol. Some time before the 1881 census she became a stationer's assistant in Chepstow. In 1881, she was listed as a visitor in the household of a Mr and Mrs Whitefield in Newport, and already being described

⁹ Hampshire Telegraph, 15 November 1873

as a stationer's assistant, presumably working for Mrs Hannah Griffiths at 4 Beaufort Square in Chepstow, where she remained for the rest of her life.¹⁰ Mrs Griffiths died in 1898, and her niece took over the business but Amy carried on, working in the stationer's shop. She never married and died in Chepstow in 1940, aged 83.

Jacqueline Burrows

Archivist, Monkton Combe School

burrowsj@monkton.org.uk

<https://www.monktoncombeschool.com/>

¹⁰ Jane Whitefield is originally from Congresbury, so was most likely a family friend or contact