



*Glasshampton, the Seat of Sambrook Freeman Esq & Miss Winford,
to whom this plate is inscribed by their most obedient & obliged humble Servant.*

T.N.

THE STORY OF GLASSHAMPTON

In the nave of St Peter's Church, Astley, can be seen a flat stone with the name:

JOHN DAWSON
(Architect of Glasshampton)
1707

Glasshampton is the house depicted in an engraving by Thomas Nash in his *History of Worcestershire* (1781), and has been described as resembling a French chateau, with high ornamental palisading along its front, and approach by a long avenue of trees

At the time of the Civil War, Astley belonged to Sir John Winford who resided at Astley Manor. In the early 1700's John Winsford's grandson Thomas, inherited the manor, and other estates from a Sir Thomas Cookes whose family had earlier intermarried with the Winfords. As this was on condition that he adopted the Cookes name he styled himself Sir T Cookes Winford.

In 1707 with his new found wealth he built the first recorded manor house of Glasshampton. Leaving no children, the Cookes inheritance reverted to another branch of that family. Astley was left to a Thomas Geers, whose family had earlier intermarried with the Winfords. To inherit, he too had to change his name to Winford.

Thomas now Winford's daughter and heir Sarah, married Sambrooke Freeman and moved with him to his Wren house, Fawley Court in Buckinghamshire. Sarah survived her husband and left Astley and the Manor house to the Rev. D. J. J. Cookes.

Now this property belonged to the Revd. D.J. J. Cookes, Curate of Astley, he decided, having ample means, to renovate or rebuild it entirely. It has been suggested that the stables were added at this time, in 1809. The following year, it has been written, the house was burned to the ground, and was not rebuilt, the reverend squire fearing that the fire was a judgement on his extravagance. By 1815 he had sold the Cookes estates and lived in the more modest house of Woodhampton.

The date 1810 for the fire is given in J. L. Wedley's *Twixt Severn and Teme* (1928). However, the stable clock, still in place, has a brass plate declaring that it was built for the Revd. J. J. Cookes by Samuel Thorpe of Abberley in 1813. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the house can have been completely destroyed or abandoned in 1810.

The fact remains that at present there is no trace of the house above ground, and its actual site cannot be told with certainty. The stable remained intact, and it was this building that eventually became a monastery;

The Revd. William Sirr was a member of an Anglican religious community, the Society of the Divine Compassion, at Plaistow, in East London. In 1906 his picture appeared in the *Daily Mirror* under a headline, "Clergy join the Procession of London's Unemployed." The caption went on to say, "Father William led the West Ham and Plaistow men with a banner bearing the words, 'In the name of Christ we claim that all men should have the right to live. He had that year been elected Superior of the Society, which office he held for six years.

About 1911 he began to feel that he was being called to a life of prayer rather than that of active work.

He was allowed a period of retirement, but his community was reluctant to release him. His time of testing was extended in 1915, at which time he went to live with the Cowley Fathers at Oxford. In 1918 he again requested permission to take up a life of monastic enclosure. Approval was still withheld at first. But by that time Father William had heard that the stables at Glasshampton would be available to him, and a new Superior allowed his release.

He was now 57 years old, and may have hoped that the community he wished to found would grow quickly, while he was still active and vigorous. This was not to be.

In 1922 he was writing, "We stand for something no other Community stands for ... quietness, hiddenness and simplicity. It is a difficult time ... there have been so many disappointments. But, thank God, we are getting a few years of tradition behind us, and after a few years of slow and steady progress we shall have won the confidence of a few. It is always difficult to go on with nothing to show ...

Men came to try the life, but none stayed. The stern self-discipline of the ageing monk could be admired but not easily imitated. The diet was said to be atrocious, the chapel worship conducted at a painfully slow pace, and the life proved to be beyond surviving.

For eighteen years, Father William lived the life. Hundreds of men found him and drew strength to follow their own different vocations, but what he most eagerly waited and prayed for never came to pass. In the end he accepted this. "It is God's will, therefore it was the best thing that could have happened."

Among his visitors was Stanley Baldwin, then Prime Minister, through whose offices permission was given for Father William's body to be buried at Glasshampton. His last days were spent at the home of St Barnabas at Dormans, Surrey, where he died on Easter Day, 1937. His body was buried first at Lingfield, then re-interred at Glasshampton on 15th September (the feast of St Mary at the Cross) in 1939.

In the meantime the premises had been purchased after an appeal and in 1938 placed in the hands of trustees. In the early part of the Second World War, Sisters of the Community of the Holy Cross, Haywards Heath, came to occupy the house for a time. For the remainder of the war it was used by the Society of Friends (Quakers).

In 1946, the Society of St Francis was able to occupy it in a caretaker capacity. The Society, of which the original and largest house is at Hilfield in Dorset, had an interest in the poor and unwanted and in preaching. Its other houses were quite unlike Glasshampton. It was perceived that this house with its tradition of prayer and quiet might make a distinctive contribution to the life of the Society.

Later, in 1962, as the original trustees grew older, the premises were handed to the Fidelity Trust for use of the Society of St Francis as a house of prayer. It has been used most particularly for novices in the Society. After their first introduction to community life in a large Friary, they come to Glasshampton for a time of quiet reflection for some months: This is an opportunity for the deepening of prayer, for considerable reading, and for the chance of self-confrontation.

The house is able to accommodate a few guests who are in search of quiet and seclusion. Such persons frequently express an interest in the background of the house and for their benefit this short account has been compiled.

During the Evensong of Easter Day each year, the friars process to Fr William's grave, with hymns and prayers of thanksgiving, and some of his writings are read.

The hymn opposite is sung on this occasion.

HYMN FOR FATHER WILLIAM OF GLASSHAMPTON

Tune: Ave Virgo Virginum EH 131

1 For the saints in days gone by
Full of zeal and fervour,
For the witness of their faith
And their high endeavour,
Father, now we praise your name,
For you made them holy,
As we now remember them
Make us pure and lowly.

2 On this day and in this place
Well may we adore you
For your servant given to prayer
Father, we implore you;
His the vision of your love,
Prayer and consecration,
Making this a House of Prayer
And of dedication.

3 Well he bore his loneliness
Hope mixed with privation.
Faithful in the path of truth.
Joy and desolation;
Full persistent in the way,
Never did he waver,
Sending down the roots of prayer
Looking to the Saviour.

4 He lived out the life of prayer
And as seed was planted
In this consecrated ground,
And to him was granted
To behold the face of God
In eternal glory
So we bear the yoke of prayer
Sharing in the story.

5 Father, Son and Spirit blest
Now to you be given,
Praise within this House of Prayer
And in highest heaven;
May we follow in the steps
Of this man who loved you,
And at last with him to praise
Worship and adore you.

Brother Alban SSF
Brother Ramon SSF
Mary at the Cross,
Glasshampton,
Shrawley,
WORCESTER.