



The Hundred Parishes

Introduction to a famous local person . . .

GEORGE STACEY GIBSON (1818 - 1883)

The Gibson family had a long and distinguished presence in Saffron Walden. The most noted member of this Quaker family was George Stacey Gibson, whose lifetime of public service and generous philanthropy earned him the nickname Mr Saffron Walden.



This painting of George Stacey Gibson by G Foster is reproduced by kind permission of Saffron Walden Museum, where the original is on display.

The Quaker philosophy of hard work and integrity guided Gibson throughout his life. Although he was regarded as meek and of a retiring disposition, he rose to prominence in a number of spheres - as a banker, a naturalist and as mayor of Saffron Walden. Within the Quaker movement (more correctly called the Society of Friends), he served in senior administrative roles at local and national level and paid for the extension of Saffron Walden's meeting house in 1879.

George Stacey Gibson came from a line of successful Saffron Walden businessmen, all of whom married wives from well-to-do families, so that he grew up within a close-knit family that

owned a brewery, an extensive chain of public houses, a bank and a number of substantial residential properties in the town. His father, Wyatt Gibson, was active in the community and, on his death in 1862, left £5,000 for the building of the hospital (now the offices of Uttlesford District Council). Wyatt's brother, Francis, laid out Bridge End Gardens and his other brother, Jabez, sank a very deep well in 1835 that ensured Saffron Walden had a clean water supply. The provision of a reliable alternative to beer for drinking purposes enabled the Gibsons to leave the brewing and pub industry whose operations conflicted with their temperance principles.

The Sun Inn in Church Street was one of their public houses and they converted it to domestic premises, ensuring its preservation. It was subsequently transferred by the family to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the National Trust. The historic importance of this 14th-century building, numbers 25 and 27 Church Street, was formally recognised in 1951 by being listed as Grade I.

George Stacey Gibson was born at the northern end of Saffron Walden High Street in what is now numbers 4 and 6. George was a long-established family name, whilst Stacey was his mother's maiden name. In this brief summary, George Stacey Gibson is generally referred to as Gibson.

When Gibson married Elizabeth Tuke in 1845, they moved to Hill House, at the southern end of the High Street.

From his childhood, Gibson was fascinated by botany and at the age of 25 he produced a detailed listing of flora in the Saffron Walden area. He identified six plants in Essex that had not previously been recorded in the British Isles. In 1862 he published *Flora of Essex*. This identified over 1,000 species of flowering plants and ferns, including four that were found only in Essex. *Flora of Essex* sealed Gibson's reputation as a botanist and for the next century it was regarded as the definitive work on Essex botany.

A family partnership had started Saffron Walden & North Essex Bank in 1824. Gibson entered the partnership in 1839 and in 1862, following the death of his father, he became senior partner. The increased business responsibilities curtailed Gibson's scientific interests, but his love of botany continued to find expression through his extensive and varied gardens which covered more than 10 acres behind Hill House.

Gibson brought his brother-in-law, William Murray Tuke, into the banking partnership, a move that was to have long-lasting consequences. The bank was renamed Gibson, Tuke & Gibson and was also referred to as Gibsons & Co, although it lost its separate identity when it became part of Barclays in 1896. Over the succeeding 60 years, three direct descendants of William Murray Tuke served as chairmen of Barclays Bank. Gibson oversaw the construction of new banking premises in Saffron Walden's Market Place, a building that retains much of its external and some of its internal decoration as a branch of Barclays.

As the town's leading banker, Gibson was instrumental in bringing the railway to Saffron Walden in 1865, conscious of the economic benefits it could bring. He chaired the Saffron Walden Railway Company from the period of construction until it was sold to the Great Eastern Railway in 1877. The line from Audley End to Bartlow operated until 1964.

Gibson followed in the footsteps of his father Wyatt and uncle Jabez by serving on Saffron Walden Town Council from 1859 until his death in 1883. He served as mayor for two years from 1875 to 1877. He was also a Justice of the Peace, vice chairman of the Board of Guardians that administered the Poor Law and the workhouse, and was personally involved in the reorganisation of Saffron Walden Museum; its collections include many items donated by him including fossils and his herbarium, an extensive collection of preserved plant specimens that was the basis for his *Flora of Essex*.

Gibson was a regular benefactor to Saffron Walden and the surrounding parishes. His generosity is especially visible in the town's Market Place. He and his mother paid for the drinking fountain in 1863, whilst the extended and updated Town Hall, opened in 1879, was funded by Gibson, who also oversaw its construction. He followed family tradition by supporting and expanding the almshouses and by founding a small orphanage.

When Saffron Walden's Boys British School was built by Wyatt Gibson in 1838, George Stacey Gibson became its treasurer, a position he held until his death. The building of Saffron Walden Hospital was made possible by a Wyatt Gibson bequest, and George Stacey Gibson served as treasurer and chairman of its management board from the opening in 1866.

Gibson actively supported education in many ways. He donated funds and many books to the Saffron Walden Literary and Scientific Institution which effectively became the Town Library. On his death, the library inherited a further 4,000 volumes, together with his mahogany bookcases which are still in use. He was influential in the relocation of the Friends School from Croydon to Saffron Walden in 1879, having donated some of the land on which it was built; Friends School closed in 2017. Saffron Walden Training College opened in 1884 on land donated by him and largely funded by him. The premises served as a teacher training college until 1977.

George Stacey Gibson died in 1883 whilst attending a Quaker conference. His body was returned to Saffron Walden for a funeral that was attended by around 5,000 people. He was buried in the graveyard behind the Friends Meeting House where he had worshipped all his life. Despite his generosity during his lifetime, Gibson died a very wealthy man, one of the major landowners in and around Saffron Walden. His estate was valued at over £300,000 equivalent to around £100 million today. His beneficiaries included the hospital, museum, library, schools, almshouses, orphanage and Society of Friends.

Gibson's wife, Elizabeth, died in 1890. Their only child, Mary, who had learning difficulties, continued to live at Hill House until her death in 1934. Most of the grounds were then developed into a residential area which preserves the family name as Gibson Gardens, Gibson Way and Gibson Close.

The main source for this article has been Jeremy Collingwood's excellent book: *Mr Saffron Walden: The Life and Times of George Stacey Gibson*, published in 2008 by Phillimore & Co Ltd.

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