

Rescuer who saved six from drowning in the River Stour

Way We Were



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THREE descendants of the Canterbury hero William Callow (1816-1903), Tony Goodenough, Delia Wyers and Ron Pepper, have helped in compiling this article. Any readers who can provide further information on the Callow family are invited to get in touch via the CHAS website (details below).

William Callow was born in Canterbury in 1816 and baptised in All Saints church on June 23 that year. His father, also William Callow, came from Tenterden and worked as a fellmonger in works close to Friars Bridge – now the site of the Friends' Meeting House. William Callow senior (1781-1846) and his wife Sarah lived initially in Best Lane, where William junior was born, but later in King Street. In all, Sarah had eight children, of whom William was the first son.

William followed his father into the fellmongers trade. It was hard physical work, involving the preparation of skins from sheep, goats, lambs, even dogs;



DANGEROUS SPOT: The weir at Abbot's Mill where George Lacey nearly drowned in 1837

washing them in warm soapy water; processing with lime and sodium sulphate to ease the removal of hair; removal of wool etc in the pulling room; rubbing with Fuller's earth and warming to remove remaining fat; bleaching in chloride of lime and pickling in acid pits before sorting the resulting skins for use as pelts, parchments, vellums and chamois leathers.

Over a period of 20 years William junior saved no fewer than six individuals from drowning in the Canterbury section of the River Stour. The first occurred when he was just 13 years old, when he saved the

life of 11-year-old William Grace at Cold Harbour Bridge – an off-loading point just downstream of the city used by river craft.

Others included a blacksmith who suffered cramp while swimming off Bingley Island, a young woman who slipped into the Stour on horseback and ten-year-old George Lacey, who had fallen from Friars Bridge and floated downstream over the Abbot's Mill weir.

George had head lacerations and was unconscious when William pulled him from the river. His final feat, saving the five-year-old John Coppins near Friars Bridge, required a leap by William into the river from his workshop window.

These heroic feats did not go without recognition. William



LIVING LEGEND: An elderly William Callow in the 1890s at Harbledown

Photo courtesy of Tony Goodenough

Massive Furniture &

came. What men could not solve: the problem of sin, God could.

Jesus is the person we focus our thankfulness upon in this Advent season we are soon to embark upon, but you and I are the reason for it!

You can't put a price on God's wisdom but you can discover it in Jesus.

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These heroic feats did not go without recognition. William received the silver medal of the Royal Humane Society in 1837 and an inscribed silver watch from the city mayor, followed by a bronze medal in 1841 and £40 from the Royal Bounty Fund in 1866. The silver medal survives in the possession of one of his descendants.

Heroic

Alongside this life of heroic deeds and awards, William lived as a fellmonger, husband, father and family man. He married Eliza Stockwell, from Willesborough near Ashford, in November 1837, and together in their King Street home they had 12 children.

However, the earlier swimming exploits took their toll and William's health deteriorated until, in the late 1850s, this hindered his ability to work. By the 1860s he'd lost his hearing and was refused on health grounds when he applied for work as a hospital porter.

His Bounty Fund cash exhausted, William was close to destitution when, in 1867, a public appeal was raised in his support, including a letter to *The Times*. This raised more than £76 and enabled William to spend his final years in the almshouses at Harbledown. When William died in 1903, aged 88, local newspapers mentioned his death but not his lifesaving record.

■ To learn more about his life, consult the CHAS website at www.canterbury-archaeology.org.uk



■ Find more tales from the city's past online at

canterburytimes.co.uk/nostalgia



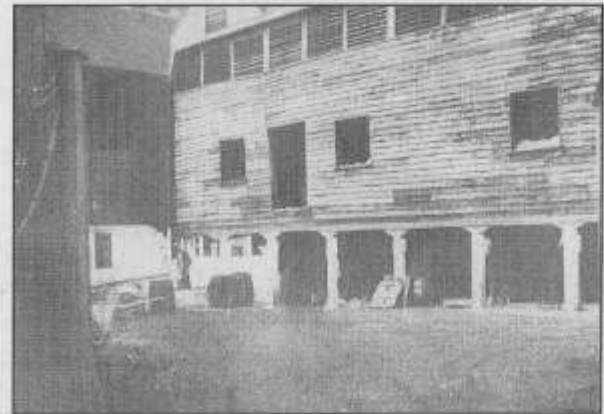
LIVING LEGEND: An elderly William Callow in the 1890s at Harbledown

Photo courtesy of Tony Goodenough



RECOGNITION: William Callow's Royal Humane Society silver medal

Photo courtesy of Tony Goodenough



TOUGH TRADE: The fellmongers works – site today of the Friends' Meeting House

Photo courtesy of Paul Crampston

