

William James Davis (1857-1917) : Naturalist and Printer

William James Davis came from fairly humble origins but accomplished a lot in his life. He was a naturalist who wrote at least 11 published books, he owned and ran a successful printing business, he was elected to Dartford Borough Council and became its Chairman.

William was born in Dartford in 1857 and baptised at Holy Trinity Church, Dartford on October 11th 1857. His parents were John and Jane Davis, who both came from Strood in Kent. John was a baker, with premises in Waterside (now called Hythe St), Dartford. William was the second youngest of six children, five boys and one girl.

The 1861 census lists John G Davis aged 41, a baker living in Waterside with his wife Jane (38) and children John (17, a labourer), Emma (13), Henry (12), Joseph (8), William (3) and Frederick (2). William was educated at the Dartford National Schools¹ (at the foot of West Hill), which provided an elementary education in accordance with the teachings of the Church of England to the children of the poor. On leaving he was employed as a newspaper boy by Mr Tadhunter of Lowfield Street¹. In 1871 the family, living at 15 Waterside consisted of John G Davis (50, a baker), Jane (48), Joseph (18, a labourer at tan works), William (13, a news boy) and Frederick (12, an errand boy).

William then worked for Arthur Perry, a printer in Dartford, where he learned the printing trade¹. The 1881 census lists Jane Davis aged 58, a confectioner living at 13 Hythe St, Dartford with her sons Joseph (28, a labourer in tan works) and William (23, a naturalist) and her grand daughter Kate Davis (7). Jane's husband is not listed and may have died by then, although she is listed as married and not as a widow.

In 1885, William was one of the founding members of the Westgate House Club¹. This was an organisation for working men, which in 1890 purchased Westgate House, the former home of the Hall family². The building, which no longer exists, was in Spital Street, near its junction with Highfield Road. William later became chairman of the club, which had up to 900 members, organised concerts and had branches for activities such as gardening.

On June 14th 1890 William married Annie Sarah Hartridge at Holy Trinity Church, Dartford. He was a bachelor aged 32, a naturalist living at 33 Hythe Street. She was a spinster, aged 22, whose father was a baker (like William's). They had a daughter, Annie Jane Davis, who was born in March 1891.

Hourglass Tree of William James Davis



(a more detailed family tree may be found in the “davis42” database on RootsWeb’s WorldConnect Project website)

William ran a business with his elder brother Joseph. The 1891 Kelly’s Directory has an entry “Davis Joseph and William, bird and animal preservers & picture framers, bird’s eggs & insects, 31

& 33 Hythe Street.” Dartford Library local studies collection has an undated “Price List of Bird’s Eggs” issued by J & W Davis, Naturalists, 31-33 Hythe Street. Prices range from 1d for a robin’s egg to 18s 6d for the egg of a golden eagle. Times change – such trade is illegal now.

The building at 31-33 Hythe Street still exists, being in the parade of shops between Dartford Post Office and the Stage Door pub. It is now occupied by Connexions. There are some rooms above the shop where the Davis family lived. In 1891 Jane (68), Joseph (38, a picture frame maker) and Kate (17) were living at 31 Hythe Street and William (33, a naturalist), Annie Sarah (23) and Annie (under 1 month) at number 33. It looks like there isn’t much accommodation space above the shop, so it must have been crowded!

The 1901 census shows the same people at these addresses. William’s occupation is given as “printer, picture frame maker and naturalist.” In 1902 he wrote and published “An Illustrated Guide to Dartford”. It contains various adverts for businesses in the town including his own.

J. & W. DAVIS,
Printers, Bookbinders, Stationers,
ARTISTS’ COLOURMEN,
And *PICTURE FRAME MAKERS.*



WINSOR & NEWTON’S
AND REEVES’
Colours and . . .
Artists’ Materials.

*Every Requisite for Students at the Technical Classes kept
in Stock.*

PICTURE FRAMES
OF EVERY DESCRIPTION MADE TO ORDER.

**The Finest Selection of Choice Patterns of
Mouldings in the County.**

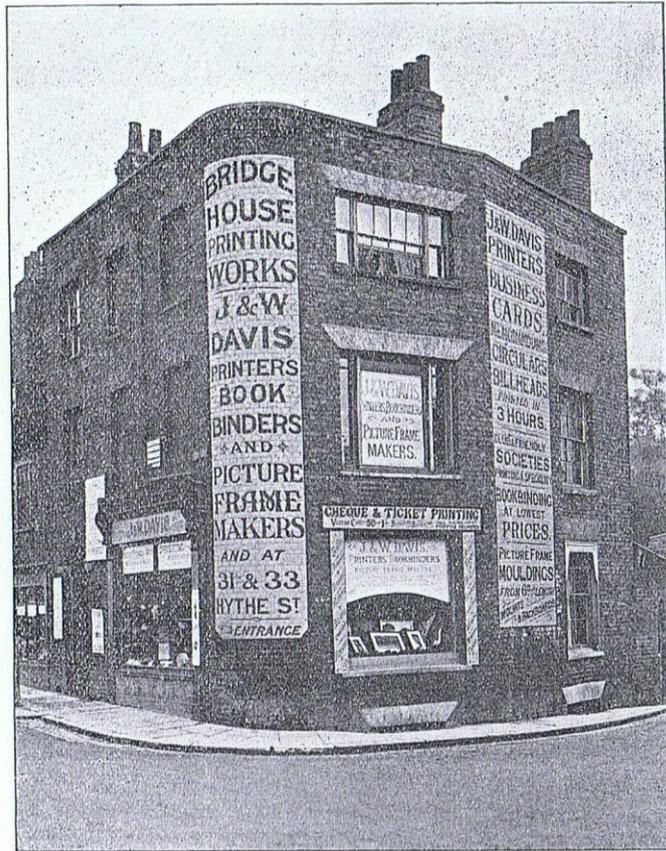
GLASS SHADES AND STANDS.

RUBBER STAMPS for all Trades to order.

NOTE THE ONLY ADDRESSES:

31-33, HYTHE ST. & THE BRIDGE,
DARTFORD.

The J&W Davis printing works were at Bridge House, 1 East Hill. This building no longer exists but was at the bottom of East Hill on the south side. Its site is where the Fastrack road now is. It doesn’t seem to have been occupied by the company for long as the 1913 Kelly’s directory entry for J&W Davis, printers, gives their addresses as 31 & 33 Hythe Street and Suffolk Road.



The Favour of a share of your Printing orders respectfully solicited.

"NOTHING TOO LARGE, NOTHING TOO SMALL."

J. & W. DAVIS, Printers,
The Bridge and 31 & 33, Hythe Street, Dartford.

Bridge House Printing Works (from "An Illustrated Guide to Dartford", 1902)

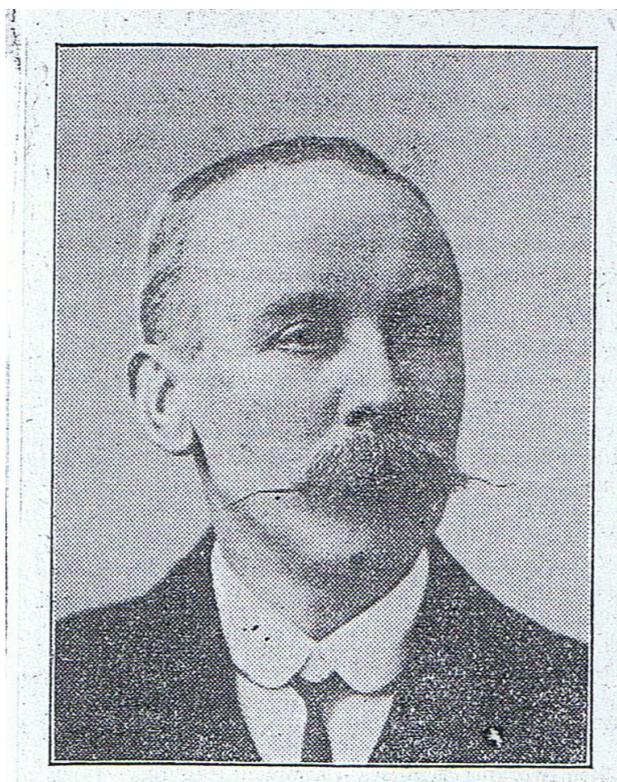
Jane Davis, William's mother, died in 1902, aged 79. His brother Joseph died of smallpox 2 weeks later, aged 49. In 1904, William and his wife had a son, William Joseph Davis. Sometime between 1902 and 1906, William and his family moved to 12 Junction Road, Dartford, which had been recently built (it is not on a map published in 1897). The semi-detached house still exists. He continued to run his business at 31-33 Hythe Street.

William seems to have employed some of his nephews and nieces. The 1901 census lists Charles Davis aged 31, a picture frame maker and Alfred Davis aged 29, a printer's assistant. These were sons of William's brother John Davis (1843-99). Alice Bennett aged 21, a ledger clerk – stationery, the daughter of William's sister Emma was living at 1 East Hill (above the Davis printing works) with her parents and two siblings.

William wrote and published several books on natural history and taxidermy. Dartford Library has 10 of them in its local studies collection. They include "The Birds of the Dartford District" (1904), "Lepidoptera Collecting" (1906), "The Birds of Kent" (1907), "Bird Stuffing and Mounting" and "Animal, Fish and Reptile Stuffing and Mounting." In 1904 he reprinted "The History &

Antiquities of Dartford” by John Dunkin. This made the book more widely available, as copies of the original 1844 edition were becoming scarce.

William took an active role in Dartford civic life. The Dartford Chronicle published this photo and text on April 27th 1909.



To Mr William James Davis belongs the honour of being the first working man in Dartford to secure the title of Justice of the Peace, a distinction which follows his election to the position of Chairman of the Urban Council. No member of the local authority has more worthily won his way to the chair than Mr Davis. A native of Dartford, he has gained his present position as a tradesman in the town by sheer hard work, and there could be no more striking testimony of his popularity amongst his fellow townsmen than the high position he always holds at the polls. His life is one of great activity, for there is scarcely an organisation in the town in which he does not hold an honoured position.

William was a Councillor for over twenty years and was Chairman of the Dartford Urban District Council from 1909 to 1911. He was a member of the Liberal party.

The 1911 census shows William (aged 53, a naturalist and printer), his wife Annie Sarah (43), daughter Annie Jane (18, a shop assistant) and son William (6) living at 12 Junction Road, a house with six rooms. The census return says that William and Annie Sarah had three children, but that one had died by 1911. William’s daughter Annie Jane married John Summers in 1912. They had three daughters, all born in Dartford, Joan (in 1913), Marjorie (in 1916) and Betty (in 1919).

A poster in 1916 read as follows

*Dartford Public Library
The Davis Collection of British Birds
mounted in their natural surroundings and loaned by Councillor W. J. Davis
will be opened to the public on Saturday next, Mar 18, 1916 at 3pm by
Everard Hesketh, Esq. The chair will be taken by councillor A.W. Smale JP.*

Admission free. The public are cordially invited. The collection will remain on view during the ordinary Library hours.

There were 100 stuffed birds in the Davis collection. It was on display at Dartford museum until the 1950s.

William died in 1917 aged 59 at 12 Junction Road and was buried in East Hill Cemetery in the same grave as his mother Jane and brother Joseph. The stonework is inscribed

In loving memory of / JANE DAVIS / who died Feb 19th 1902 / aged 79 years. / Also JOSEPH ALFRED DAVIS, / the beloved son of the above / who died March 4th 1902 / aged 49 years / Also WILLIAM JAMES DAVIS / who died April 26th 1917 aged 59 years / At rest / Also / ANNIE SARAH / wife of / WILLIAM JAMES DAVIS / fell asleep Dec 2nd 1948 / in her 81st year.

The Dartford Chronicle published an obituary of William, a description of his funeral and an account of a meeting of Dartford Council, which passed a vote of condolence to his widow. Tributes included “Mr Davis was a born worker and spared no pains or effort to gain any object on which he set his mind” and that he “was a man who considered his bounden duty to do all he could for his fellow men”.

Probate on William’s estate was issued to Annie Sarah Davis, his widow and Alfred William Davis (a son of his brother John), a manager. The value of the estate was £3,375, which is equivalent to about £750,000 now (calculated in relation to average earnings).

Annie Sarah remarried in 1923, to George Breading. She continued to live at 12 Junction Road (with her daughter Annie and son-in-law John Summers) until her death in 1948. The shop at 31-33 Hythe Street traded under the name J & W Davis until 1992. In 1952, the business was described as “Picture framers and art dealers” and by 1975 as “Gifts and cards”.



31-33 Hythe Street (connexions) in 2011

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References

1. *Death of Councillor W. J. Davis*, Dartford Chronicle May 4th 1917
2. S. K. Keyes (1938) *Dartford Further Historical Notes* pp 579-582.