

# 1.

## Early Days

To be born in the middle of winter, in the inhospitable, cold and windswept conditions associated with the northern counties of England, may not be considered the most auspicious start in life. Fortunately for William Andrews Nesfield, who came into the world on 19 February 1794, the poverty and hard conditions associated with the coal-mining areas of industrialized County Durham were not to be his lot, for his parents were not humble cottagers; on the contrary. William was the eldest, much-loved son of the Revd William Nesfield (1758-1828) and Elizabeth (née Andrews, 1770-1808). They lived at the time of his birth on the idyllic Lumley Park estate, which had been the original deer park belonging to the Earls of Scarborough, and, as the eldest, he held a special position within the family, 'with every fault leniently judged.'<sup>1</sup>

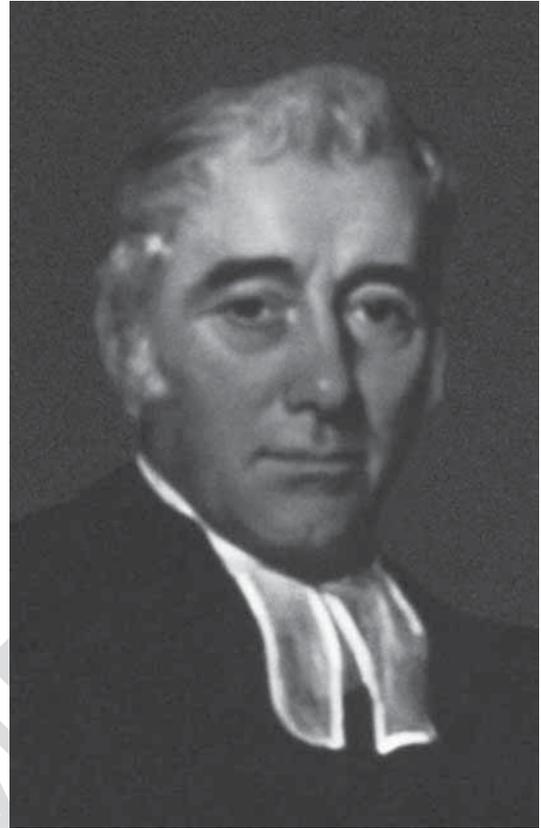
At the time of his birth his father was perpetual curate at the church of St Margaret and St Cuthbert in the ancient town of Chester-le-Street. The church was built in the eleventh century and contained fourteen effigies of members of the Lumley family, deposited there in 1594 by the family antiquarian John, Lord Lumley. Set on the River Wear, Chester-le-Street was once an important garrison town for the Roman legions, and it is where St Cuthbert is believed to have rested from 882 until 995 before being taken by the monks of Lindisfarne to Durham. The Revd Nesfield, after being educated at Caius College, Cambridge and ordained a priest in 1789, was also Rector of St Brandon's Church in Brancepeth and St Michael's, Witton Gilbert from 1800. He was one of the Prince Regent's chaplains, volunteer chaplain of the 68<sup>th</sup> Foot, and played a prominent role in local affairs as a trustee of a local charity and senior magistrate for the county.

Elizabeth Nesfield was the daughter of John and Elizabeth Andrews. Her father was a well-to-do landowner who owned Shotley Hall in Northumberland and a town house in Hallgarth Street, Durham. When her father died in 1792 he left Elizabeth, and each

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Anne Salvin, *Reminiscences & Notes of By-Gone Years*, Directorate of Education Services, London Borough of Barnet Libraries Department, Manuscript Accession Number 6787/7/.

of her four sisters, £7,000; a considerable sum in those days.<sup>1</sup> In 1800 her inheritance enabled Elizabeth's sister Anne (1773-1841) to marry Charles Ingoldsby Paulet, 13<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Winchester (1764-1843), thus moving the Nesfield family into the strata of the aristocracy.<sup>2</sup> Tradition and lineage were important to the Nesfields, who could trace their ancestry back over 800 years to Dagobert II, a member of the Ariano-Celtic church and a prince in line to the Merovingian throne. Dagobert had married Imagne de Nessfeld, the daughter of a Saxon landowner, and from these illustrious beginnings the Nesfields descended. Over the following centuries they were listed as minor landowners who, by the seventeenth century, were living in Yorkshire. Theophilus Nesfield owned 700 acres of land at Willerby and Staxton, near Scarborough. His son Samuel (1694-1774) was William's great-grandfather, and his grandfather, another William, was vicar of Wickhambrook, and Rector of Dalham in Suffolk.<sup>3</sup>



The Revd William Nesfield, oil by Ramsey of Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1813.

In 1796 a second son, John, was born to the Nesfields, and in 1800 the Revd Nesfield moved the family to Durham. He had by that time been appointed as rector in the nearby village of Brancepeth, but as the rectory was not ready for them they moved into a house opposite Elizabeth's mother in Old Elvet, a prosperous area of Durham. The city, encircled on three sides by the River Wear, is set on a peninsula and dominated by its medieval cathedral and the castle, which was the residence of the Bishops of Durham. Both the cathedral and the castle are embraced by a single street, which is divided into the North and South Baileys. At No. 3 South Bailey, in one of the finest Georgian houses built in 1730, Sir John Eden lived. A friend of the Andrews family, he had been a witness to the signing of the Indenture drawn up at the time of the Revd Nesfield's marriage, and was ultimately to become godfather to William's eldest son.

1 Indenture drawn up 22.3.1793 at the time of the marriage of William and Elizabeth Nesfield, Durham University Library, Special Collections, SAL 66.

2 *Amport House: A Short History*, (Royal Air Force Chaplain's School, 1986) p. 12.

3 Information from the late Dr John Nesfield and Mr John Davis, both of whom were descended from William Nesfield's brother, Charles.



Framwellgate Bridge, Durham, watercolour by William Nesfield.

Once William had commenced his career in landscape gardening, he was to maintain that he had learnt more about trees during the visits he spent with his father on the Eden's country estate, Windlestone Hall, Rushyford, near Durham, than at any other time.<sup>1</sup>

During her short life, Elizabeth Nesfield gave birth to nine children, six of whom survived into adulthood: William, born in 1794; Sarah, in 1801; Frances, in 1802; Charles, in 1803; Anne, on 19 October 1805 and Elizabeth on 2 March 1808. Anne's birth was later recorded as being: 'in the old cathedral town of Durham . . . the baby just ushered into the world, when the autumn leaves were falling and every blast brought them rattling down from the trees, that lined the paths on the woody banks of the Wear.'<sup>2</sup> The birth of the final child, Elizabeth (Bessie) unfortunately resulted in the death of her mother on 2 March 1808, and she was buried in St Oswald's churchyard in Durham.<sup>3</sup> Her son John had already died in 1807, after catching a chill from bathing in cold water on a hot day.

On 17 June 1808 the Nesfields moved to the rectory in the unspoilt village of Brancepeth. It was situated a few miles from Durham, its cottages straddling the one main street that

<sup>1</sup> This was the birthplace of the former Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden.

<sup>2</sup> Eliza Anne Salvin, *op.cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Death Certificate of Elizabeth Nesfield, County Hall, Durham, EP/DuSO 157.

led not only to the rectory and church, but also to the imposing medieval castle, which had been the stronghold of the powerful Neville family. In 1809, the Revd Nesfield remarried. His new wife was Marianne Mills, daughter of Lt. Col. Mills, who lived at nearby Willington Hall. According to Anne Nesfield's daughter, one of Marianne's first acts after the marriage was to take Bessie from the cottage where she had been placed after her mother's death: 'as she could not bear to have the little motherless babe an exile from her home.'<sup>1</sup> Three more children were born of this union: Marianne, on 10 June 1810; Henry, on 30 June 1812; and Robert, on 8 August 1815. The children apparently led a happy, carefree life at the rectory. They were fond of running over the fields to Willington Hall, where they could play in the large garden, and where the housekeeper is reputed to have baked the best cakes the children ever tasted. Their maternal grandmother, the mother of the Revd Nesfield's first wife, was a most eccentric lady, who came visiting the rectory from Durham with her pockets filled with sweet-meats, which she invariably forgot to give to the children. It was said that their consternation was great when she started for home with this delicious treat still in her capacious pockets! Their summer holidays were spent at Seaton, a quiet seaside town on the east coast, the Revd Nesfield and Marianne going on first in a gig to secure lodgings and the children and Miss Caldecleugh, the girls' governess, arriving later in what was known as the 'Old Coach'. This coach was a battered affair that Marianne had acquired cheaply from a livery stable in Durham. It was said of Miss Caldecleugh that, 'though an excellent person and invaluable in the position she occupied, she was not accomplished, nor could she teach anything beyond the mere rudiments of common education.'<sup>2</sup> The Revd Nesfield, therefore, made arrangements with a French master from a school at Witton-le-Wear, a Monsieur Moens, to visit once a week.<sup>3</sup> He came to breakfast so that the rector could take the opportunity of speaking French with him. Miss Caldecleugh was, however, so well thought of by the family that when Anne Nesfield married and moved to London, the governess went with her as a companion, and was eventually left an annuity of £20 for life in the will of the Revd Nesfield.

As the children grew older they attended balls and concerts in Seaton where, whenever possible, they were joined by the Hustler brothers, the sons of the Revd Nesfield's sister, who lived in Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, and who were being tutored by him before going to Cambridge University. Anthony Salvin (1799-1881), Marianne's nephew, was also a member of the party. Salvin ultimately became William's brother-in-law and without his friendship and support William would probably never have taken up landscape gardening. Life at Brancepeth was a happy one: Anne Nesfield's daughter wrote that her mother, after marrying Anthony Salvin in 1826 and moving to London, 'did not like her new way of life at first, clearly missing the busy country rectory full of family and friends.'<sup>4</sup>

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1 Eliza Anne Salvin, *Ibid.*

2 *Ibid.*

3 Sarah, his eldest pupil, was nine years old when Monsieur Moens first came to give lessons to the Miss Nesfields at the Rectory. Eliza Anne Salvin, *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

While the rest of the family grew up in Brancepeth, William was, at six years old, sent as a day boy to the grammar school (now the University Music School) on the Green opposite the cathedral in Durham. The headmaster at the time was the Revd Dr Brittan, the husband of Jane Mills, Marianne Nesfield's sister. In later life William was to recall that he had been 'a very surly old fellow and a desperate flogger.' His time at the grammar school proved to be short-lived, as it had always been assumed that he would follow in the footsteps of his father and paternal grandfather and enter the Church. In 1801 the Bishop of St David's, who was a Prebendary of Durham and a friend of his father's, suggested that he be placed at Winchester College as a scholarship boy. However, as a Latin examination was required to enter the main school, for which he was not prepared, he was sent instead to a preparatory school in Hyde Abbey, a suburb of Winchester, under the Revd Mr Richards. The journey from County Durham to Winchester was later described by him as follows:

The journey to Winchester was in those days most dreary and fatiguing. First the journey to London from Durham in the 'Highflyer' stage coach occupied continuously 2 days and 1 night. On arrival in London my Father went to his old quarters 'Ibbotson's Hotel', Vere Street, now the district Post Office. He remained there a few days to show me London, tho not old enough to appreciate it. Our journey to Winchester 63 miles occupied 10 hours in a long coach. Like the modern buss, neither steam nor telegraph dreamt of in those days.

For a 7-year-old boy, plucked from a privileged position within a close and loving family, this was a traumatic experience, as he later confirmed: 'This parting with my dear good father was most painful and rendered me very sad for many days, which caused me to be quizzed by the other boys.' Indeed, so unhappy was he that he and another boy were persuaded by their room-mate to run away. They made for Andover, but, whilst taking refreshment at an inn, the Head Usher appeared and took them back to school. William sadly reported that: 'We were packed into a post chaise and delivered into Old Richards' relentless hands for a very severe flogging and confinement for several days indoors.' During the time he was at his preparatory school, which was nearly two years, he reflected that he was a stranger to his parents, the journey back to County Durham being too long and expensive to undertake. During the holidays he boarded with the Revd Chapman of Micheldever, near Winchester, and spent two vacations with his maternal aunt, Lady Winchester, at Amport House near Andover, which he enjoyed.

In 1803, after what he described as 'a sharp examination, particularly in Horace which I was best up to rather than Ovid or Virgil', he was admitted to Winchester College. However, after one year his father decided that there was little to be gained for his remaining so far from home and decided to remove him. He was far from sorry, having no regrets that he would no longer have to suffer 'the fagging, bullying, bad food on wooden trenchers (not plates) chapel twice every day and on Sundays 3 times, besides going to the Cathedral twice.'

His journey back to County Durham was not lacking in incident as the coach he was travelling in was upset near Leeds, in fog:

. . . fortunately the coach was proceeding at a walking pace, the Coachman sang out to the guard but he could not see the ground beyond the leaders I was an outsider in the rear with the guard and tho much bruised was less hurt than other passengers the Coach fell over a raised road which had no fence, and the coachman fell among the horses and was seriously injured. Thus I managed to get home gradually viz. in about 2 days as my bruises were too painful to proceed faster.

His time at home, however, was to be short-lived as he needed to complete his education. His father decided to send him to the grammar school in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk so that he could board with his paternal aunt, Mrs Hustler. Occasionally during the holidays William would visit his grandfather at his vicarage in the nearby village of Wickhambrook, recalling how he was once given a flogging by him for '*blowing his hen's eggs, which were set for hatching* – thus I plead to mischief like many other boys. My grandfather however was very indulgent and so reasoned me out of mischief so that I never felt inclined to repeat the same foolish trick.'

He remained in Bury for two years, and during this time met his cousin, Captain Hustler, an officer in the Engineers, and decided that he too wanted to embark upon a military career. The Peninsular Wars were at their height and the glamour associated with the uniform and these events must have appealed to him. His father, ever indulgent, gave his consent, and it was agreed that he should finish his education at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. In order to be received as a gentleman cadet, he needed to become proficient in mathematics. Fortunately his eldest cousin, James Hustler, was at hand to help. James, after being tutored by the Revd Nesfield, had become a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and he offered William tutorial assistance and free board in his rooms in the Library Court of the College. William 'felt in clover particularly as I dined at the Fellows table, not with the under-graduates – in fact I had a very jolly time at Cam for 2 terms.'

In 1809 he was enrolled as a candidate for a cadetship at the lower barracks in the Arsenal at Woolwich, and, having no difficulty passing his examination, he was immediately rigged out in uniform. He then moved to Great Marlow for six months' infantry drill. He complained that having to obtain two uniforms was a foolish custom and he was pleased that it was later abolished. The one for Great Marlowe was red with silver lace, whilst at Woolwich it was blue with red facings, as in the Artillery. William was in the second company at Marlowe under Captain Otter. The Commandant was Colonel Butler who, according to William, was 'a very strict old boy'. He enjoyed his time there but after only six months, as he had been so well taught at Cambridge, he was considered eligible for Woolwich much sooner than his contemporaries and was included in the next batch of intakes for training. Accompanied by a master he travelled

to London, where he went into the lower cadet barracks, 'a miserable quarter compared to Marlow.' After a year he was advanced to the second Academy at the Upper Barracks, on the Common, where the quarters were much more comfortable, although there were four Cadets to a room: 'thus the change was a happy one and the officers very kind.' They had occasional holidays and in the winter would ramble over Shooter's Hill with guns for sparrow shooting:

On one occasion, my chums, Richards and Stewart tempted me to poach over a preserved manor for *game* in their Company – this was near Eltham but we had not trespassed above ½ hour when a covey of partridge rose which of course caused all three guns to fire without a hit thus alarming a keeper who soon overtook us and demanded names. Richards answered first as Bill Brown, then Stewart as Harry Stokes, I was John Brown brother of Bill, all of Greenwich – thus the keeper *booked us* and *saw us off* the manor, but we never heard more of this exploit tho we shot an old hen near a farm without discovery and had a roast at midnight – taking good care to fix blankets against the windows for fear of lights being discovered – In fact 'boys will be boys' and so we were as tricky as those at other Schools.

He soon realised that promotion in both the Engineers and the Artillery was very slow: there was no purchase as in the lines. There was also a strict examination required for a commission in either corps in mathematics, fortification, or French and German. These difficulties he overcame by asking Lady Winchester if she would intercede on his behalf. She obligingly wrote to the Duke of York, whom apparently she knew well, and the result was that on the 10 July 1812 William was gazetted as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the 95<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade. He wrote: 'Thus I took my leave of many friends at Woolwich who now are old Generals or dead.'

Like most boys of William's social background he appears, after his initial period of homesickness at Winchester, to have taken for granted that he would be subjected to years of strict discipline and would spend a considerable amount of time away from home. The result of this deprivation, however, was that he gained a resourcefulness, self-confidence and self-reliance, which were all attributes that would stand him in good stead later in life.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The above quotations are taken from William Nesfield's *Reminiscences*.