



Benjamin Franklin and David Williams  
By Lady Reid

One of our most recent acquisitions for the Franklin House is an etching of a portrait of David Williams, given by a good friend of 36 Craven Street, Susan Williams, one of David's direct descendents. Who was David Williams, and why was he supposed to be a friend of Franklin? All these legends are shrouded in doubt, but also throw up fascinating sidelights on Franklin's years in London.

Williams was a really eccentric, one-off character, whose fame now is as the Founder of the Royal Literary Fund 1790, which recently received part share of the sale of the Winnie-the Pooh name to the Disney Corporation. The Fund's origins were not quite so prestigious, and Williams is a character mostly absent from the writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dissenting Movement, so it was interesting digging up some facts about him.

He was born in Wales, and sent to train as a minister at the Dissenting Academy at Camarthen. He promised his father he would become a minister of religion, but his natural disposition was otherwise. He was "gay, ardent and sprightly, with a bosom languishing for pleasure." He soon left the West Country and came up to London (1769), somewhat under a cloud for un-orthodoxy, and proceeded to found his own church on Deist, individualist principles, and a school, propagating student based, experiential learning, which was very radical for the times. He was passionate about the Theatre, became a critic, and dared to take on David Garrick as an opponent. He wrote voluminously about all the issues of the times; he took up causes with little caution – especially promoting the concepts of the French Revolution, and, somewhere along the way he met Benjamin Franklin, who was always game for a verbal tussle.

Apparently they founded a Club of 13 to discuss philosophical matters. The members included Thomas Bentley from Wedgwood, John Whitehurst a clockmaker, and James Stuart architect and painter. Williams was promulgating his idea for a Literary Fund for indigent writers with little success, and probably irritating his companions with his outspokenness. Ben Franklin is supposed to have said to him "I see you will not give up a noble idea. I do not say that you will not succeed, but it must be by much anxiety and trouble, and I hope the Anvil will not wear out the Hammer."

The story reaches a climax when Wedderburn famously castigated Franklin as a liar and a traitor in the Cockpit Hall on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1774. David Williams claims that

Franklin “apprehensive that his papers should be seized, packed a trunk under his arm, and, unknown to the family where he lodged, conveyed it by boat from Hungerford Stairs to my house in Chelsea where he remained for several weeks in perfect privacy....until in a condition to prepare for his departure.”

In truth this story is mostly nonsense. Franklin did not leave London until the end of March 1775. Many letters were written from Craven Street in the weeks following the Cockpit event. Franklin also claims that his house was filled with well wishers, and his damnation by the Government had in no way dented his popularity. But, like most stories, maybe there is some truth in it, and Franklin did perhaps keep some of his papers in a trunk at David William’s house. In 1775, Williams was still only 37, and had a great many indiscretions still to commit. Sadly he ended very poor and pathetic as a tenant in the first Literary Fund premises, whilst Franklin’s life continued to climb the heights, but, without Williams we would be one eccentric character less, and probably without the Royal Literary Fund.