

Reading the Runes: The Armitage Family Grave No. 3500 & 3433



The inscriptions on the grave, from left to right read:

Here resteth the ashes of Sarah Ann the beloved wife of George Faulkner Armitage of Stamford House Altrincham who died June 12 1933 aged 79 years

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God

Here also rest the ashes of the before named George Faulkner Armitage who died Nov 10 1937 aged 88 years

Photo: Gill Fitzpatrick

He lived to love and serve

Here resteth the body of Mary the beloved wife of William Armitage of Townfield House Altrincham who died April 9 1886 at Llanfairfechan aged 70 years

Her children rise up and call her blessed her husband also he praiseth her

Also that of William Armitage before named of Altrincham and Llanfairfechan who died Jany 11 1893 aged 77 years

Having served his generation according to the will of God he fell on sleep and was gathered to his fathers

Here rest the ashes of Ziba Armitage of Newton Bank Preston Brook who died March 19 1918 aged 75 years Eldest son of William Armitage

More than conqueror through Him that loved us

Here rest also the ashes of Helen wife of Ziba Armitage who died at Newton Bank on Feb. 24 1936 aged 88 years

She also served.

William Armitage (1815-93), cotton manufacturer, with mills in Manchester and Warrington, moved his family from Manchester to Altrincham in 1854. The family were prominent Congregationalists and on their removal to Altrincham worshipped at Bowdon Downs Congregational Church. William himself never actually became a member of Bowdon Downs, but retained his allegiance to the Grosvenor Street Chapel in Manchester, where so many of the family had worshipped.

William married Mary Rigby (1815-86) in 1837, thus cementing both a business and personal partnership and the mills were eventually run under the name of Armitage & Rigby.



William and Mary Armitage, probably 1860s.

Source of image: private collection with permission

William and Mary had 13 children, 11 of whom survived to full adulthood. One of their sons was George Faulkner Armitage (1849-1937), known as Faulkner, who became an architect and designer and he played a major part in this Grave Tale. By the beginning of 1886 Mary had been unwell for some time and was being treated by the family's homeopathic doctor, Dr Thomas Rayner of Manchester. She had gone to the family's holiday home, Bryn Celyn in Llanfairfechan in the hope that the air and rest would be beneficial but she died on 9th April 1886 at Bryn Celyn and her body was brought home for burial. The minister of the Congregational chapel in Llanfairfechan was very helpful and made some of the travel arrangements and ensured a temporary coffin was made. At least three of their grown up children were in Italy on

holiday and telegrams were sent for them to come home. William wrote up the events of that week in his diary, possibly a little later, rather than at the time, but there are some details of events before the funeral. It was decided that the funeral would be on the 15th so as to allow time for everyone to return home. On the 13th April he wrote that Mary was in the Drawing Room with a piece of glass over her face. The marriage had been a happy one and in his diary at least, William could commit his feelings to paper. On the same day he wrote:

"I see her as sweet as ever only cold and numb".

The following day he wrote that he feared it would be wet for the funeral and had an awning put over the grave. He was also touched by a wreath which had been sent by their old gardener, Parker.

As things turned out the weather was fine on the 15th April and his entry for that day reads:

"Today we have buried my Darling in a new vault in Bowdon Church Yard. The day was fine but to guard against chance of it being wet a canopy was built over it, which acted well in fine weather assisting the power of the Voice in open air, this part of the service was performed by our loving Son Elkanah in a way which was comforting and cheering to all of us as I have heard him in an engagement of this kind. My heart responds in thanks to God for this goodness in our Boy as I am sure his mother would have done under similar circumstances. The affectionate regard in which she was held has been shown in a way I could not have expected. We had about 30 wreaths of most splendid flowers, one sent by the choir and one by Teachers of Sunday Schools and we had also 30 carriages private sent us we had not occasion to hire one and we had our own large carriage out for the occasion. We had 2 hymns printed, one sung at the house where Messrs Mackennal and Willis read spoke and prayed, the other was used at the graveside, Elkanah read, spoke and prayed."

Rev. Alexander Mackennal was the minister at Bowdon Downs Chapel and Rev. Dr. J. Willis, the minister at Grosvenor Street Chapel. His son, Elkanah, was also a Congregational minister but by this time was a tutor at the Rotherham Independent College.

William had presumably bought the plot prior to her death, but no work had been done on it. The day after the funeral, William and his son, Ziba, went to see how the workmen were

progressing and found that the vault was almost finished and the trellis work which had been in the grave would be put on top with the wreaths placed around it.

On Sunday, the 18th April, Rev. Mackennal preached a funeral sermon at Bowdon Downs after which William wrote:

"... and appropriate hymns to the Requiem of the Dead were sung, my heart was too big to be self-contained and I had difficulty with my tears which would continue to flow".

[For Rev. Dr. Mackennal see also the story of his son in "Perils of a Hand Pulled River Ferry" Grave 4304]

As is often the case with the women of the family, it is hard to come by anything other than pure facts in national records. William had obviously referred to her frequently in his diary, but mainly in a day to day way. Mary had been loved and respected by all her children and much later, in 1936, Faulkner Armitage wrote about her influence on them as children. This was in a small book he drew up for the family for one their famous New Year parties:

"Mary Armitage was a woman of unusual character. The mother of a large family, she studied the needs of each individual member and made each one a subject of special prayer, for it was there that her chief strength lay, one of her children writes – "One reads of the old fellows in the Bible commencing with God, I believe she did so as truly". Her ideals for her children were the highest a mother can hold, she trained each for the service of God and man, she strove to interest them in lofty causes and inspire them with lofty thoughts that would prevent life from becoming – common place and dull. At the same time the family circle was one of the merriest that was ever known it seemed to be the very home of laughter – although she herself had been brought up with strict evangelical views about amusement, her wide reading and her sympathy led her to form just views, Dancing, Acting, Cards and Billiards were all allowed in her home where they came under her restricting influence. She made close friends with her children, though she never failed to expect the respect and deference that in those days marked the relationship of parent and child. ... One of her children writes – "I think our confidence in our Mother's wisdom grew with every year that made us better able to appreciate its quality". She impressed on all her children the value of family unity and it is due to this upbringing that the family has remained so closely united."

No record has been found as to whether Faulkner was asked, or offered, to design the grave, but there is no doubt he would have felt it was an honour. By July 1886 he had drawn up two or three ideas, wanting to find something "new and nice", according to William. When it was erected around the beginning of February 1887, William initially did not like it, writing on the 6th:

"Ethel [a daughter] and I went to Parish Burial Ground to look at the erection Faulk had put over the grave. I don't think I like it, has the appearance of a book head and the Runic insides face wrong way being at sides and head of the grave. I must reserve my opinion until the iron work now in house is finished and put on"

In fairness to William, the gravestone, being designed for six people, the one inscription would have looked quite lost in the width of this monument. However, by the following week, after he had seen it on the 12th February:

"Have been with Ethel to see Mother's grave it is nearly finished and looks much better now the Iron Railings are round it. I think when quite finished we shall like it."

The “Runic signs” were of course the rather stylised Celtic knotwork of the shafts along with what is generally known as the Greek Key pattern on the top and sides of the cross.



*The Greek Key pattern on the top and sides of the cross.
Photo: Gill Fitzpatrick*



The shaft and cross seen from the side. At bottom left is one of the holes for the original iron railings placed around the grave. Photo: Gill Fitzpatrick

Both of these were favourite motifs of Faulkner’s work and his Celtic design work can readily be seen on Altrincham’s war memorial opposite St Margaret’s Church.

This is the first known instance of Faulkner’s use, and in the circumstances, presumably love of, Celtic artwork in stone. One of his known influences was *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, first published in 1856, and still in print. This work brought together ornamental design motifs from all periods and cultures. It has to be said though that the carving on his mother’s grave does not conform to the traditional patterns of carving. There are stops and joins which should flow through the design and be traceable by eye or hand, but in this instance this is not always the case. It is not known who actually carved the stone as there is no record of Faulkner himself carving in any medium other than wood.

A later memorial stone to Jesse and Marianne Haworth which lies on the ground in front of the main headstone has been described in another Grave Tale, [Jesse Haworth Grave No: 3433]. Although there is no indication as to who designed it, it is possible it was also by Faulkner. Sadly, the stone is in a poor state but the decorative detail of lotus leaves can still be made out. The lotus motif was also much used by Faulkner and he owned and used a copy of the American curator and architectural historian, William H Goodyear’s book *The Grammar of the Lotus* of 1891. Goodyear dedicated this book to ‘JH Esq’ who he also referred to in the text, in acknowledging his thanks to an unnamed gentleman. Given that a number of items of correspondence between Goodyear and Jesse Haworth exist in the Brooklyn Museum, including some in relation to Jesse’s funding for publication, ‘JH Esq’ must surely be Jesse Haworth.

William and his family were not the first of the Armitages to be buried in Bowdon Churchyard. That place goes to William’s Uncle Elijah Armitage, but he is a whole other Grave Tale.

Sources

- William Armitage’s diaries are held by Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives Ref. M 731
- Armitage, George Faulkner The Clan. Typescript 1936. (Compiled for private circulation but transcript available)

Gill Fitzpatrick 2026