

Matilda Sharpe (1830 – 1916)

was born on 4 April 1830 at 38 Canonbury Place, the second of six children of Samuel Sharpe (1799–1881), Sarah Sharpe (1796–1851). Samuel Sharpe was a successful banker, Egyptologist and biblical scholar, translator of the bible, who actively supported the Unitarian movement along with many other notable people. Sarah was an artist apparently with some talent.

In 1840 the family moved to nearby 32 Highbury Place (along the side of Highbury Fields) (though we are not sure whether the current no 32 is the same house). The family home seems to have been frequented by scholars, scientists and leaders in the Unitarian church. Samuel had particularly strong links with Newington Green Unitarian Church (NGUC) one of England's oldest Unitarian churches (protestant non-conformist) and is remembered on a memorial stone there. The church has had strong ties to political radicalism for over 300 years, and is London's oldest Nonconformist place of worship still in use.

Matilda devoted much of her life to teaching, starting at Newington Green Chapel Sunday school, then teaching painting, Latin, and French to working-class students in night schools and at day schools, some attached to Unitarian chapels.

In 1885, with support from a Unitarian minister, Robert Spears, Matilda and Emily established Channing School in Highgate as a school for the daughters of Unitarian ministers and other Unitarians. Their aim for the school: to provide the best education possible at the lowest possible cost, enabling its pupils to go on to university or any of the professions open to women if they wished.

Matilda was a gifted painter, a talent perhaps inherited from her mother. She exhibited at the Royal Academy; two paintings including one of Samuel are in National Portrait Gallery. She painted views from her house, her back garden and Highbury Fields (the latter perhaps suggests that the current no 32 is not the same house).

She was interested in poetry, perhaps one of her eccentricities as indicated in her composition of 'little books' of comments on everyday life. She wrote four such books of moral maxims and poetical comments on modern times, emphasizing her love of learning and travel, her dislike of smoking, alcohol, and fripperies, and her support for education for all, 'unselfish' free trade, Liberalism, Asquith's 'Great Reform' of 1911, and any government which would 'treble tax the rich'. Two books are *'The Soul's journey to Paradise – a heavenly day dream'* and *'Never Forget – Life is expecting much of thee and me'* (the 32nd edition was published posthumously).

Census data indicates a bit about her home in Highbury Place:

- In 1861 census, aged 31, she was living with her father, her sisters Emily aged 32 and Mary aged 27 and brother Frederick aged 25 and a banker, with 2 servants (a cook and a housemaid.); in 1871 another sister was registered as living there
- In 1881, aged 51, she was with her father and older sister Emily, and two servants
- Samuel died on 28 July 1881, leaving an estate of £63,244 7s 5d, and is buried at Abney Park cemetery
- The 1891 census shows Emily and Matilda with two visitors, a Unitarian minister and daughter, as well as a cook and housemaid

Matilda died aged 86 on 30 April 1916, leaving £19,488. 7s 9d to William Arthur Sharpe solicitor and Loetitia Sharpe spinster (Emily having predeceased Matilda).