

# Keeping house for the divine

Britain, in the late Georgian era, was on fire. There was a burning passion to extend the dominance of geography into a religious leadership.

For one young man the role of Britain in its imperial missionary was clear and unambiguous; at the start of the new millennium, Britain was not only to be a world leader in arts and arms, but also in the expansion of Christianity.

Thomas Raffles was just 26 when he gave his most challenging sermon<sup>1</sup> on the subject:

*“But Britain is awakening now to justice; the debt which she has been accumulating for ages, she is about to pay; she is preparing to balance with the world her vast account: and whilst she dispenses justice to those to whom the mighty sum is due, she stretched forth the liberal hand of her spontaneous bounty to millions who never heard her name.”*

According to writer William Barnhart<sup>2</sup> this “missionary awakening” expostulated by Raffles occupied a central position in millennial thought. It had been given shape, wrote Barnhart, during the revolutionary era and called for the conversion of the heathen, Jews and Catholics, that would usher in the second coming.

For Raffles, it was simple:

*“Who has not turned with*



## Emily Snell's devotion to the celebrated Congregational preacher, Thomas Raffles

*rapture to Great Britain, the missionary, the Bible society, the Instructress of the globe, the ark of freedom, the Asylum of liberty, the couch on which outcast monarchs may recline at ease? Who does not cherish the delightful hope that God is about to make Great Britain, by her Bibles and her missionaries, the herald to prepare the way for the second coming and universal reign of the Messiah?”<sup>3</sup>*

Raffles - who was the cousin of Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of the

city of Singapore - was born in 1788 in Spitalfields, London, and was educated at a boarding school in Peckham run by a Baptist minister. Thomas became a clerk in Doctors' Commons in 1803, but from 1805 he studied for the ministry at Homerton College and was ordained in 1809.

In the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Liverpool was a growing centre for Congregationalism and a charismatic young preacher, Thomas Spencer, was attracting a huge following. His sermons could attract a congregation of upwards of 2,000, a number which was impossible to accommodate in the original chapel (in Renshaw Street) where hundreds were turned away from almost every service. To mark this, a new chapel was begun for him in 1811 in Great George Street, even though Spencer was only 20 years old.

The foundation stone of this first Great George Street Chapel was laid by Spencer himself in April 1811, but he was not permitted to see its completion. His accidental death by drowning occurred just four months later and the building was not opened for worship until 27 May 1812. It cost about £13,000 and seated nearly 2,000 people. Its first minister was the Rev. Thomas Raffles, MA, an equally celebrated preacher who was invited to take Spencer's place in Liverpool. Thus began a career in the city

that lasted nearly 50 years - and all of it as pastor of the Great George Street Congregational Church.

From the beginning Great George Street Chapel had an active involvement in artistic and educational work. Raffles was also almost as evangelical in artistic and educational causes as he was in his religious beliefs, and used his literary associations to bring the church into close contact with some of the leading "men of letters" of his time.

The church went on to have a rich history in social work to meet the growing pressures of poverty and industrialisation in Liverpool. In more recent years many of the most distinguished of speakers of the day were attracted to the Great George Street Congregation Church Lecture Society (1929-1940), including Lady Baden-Powell, Tony Benn, Vera Brittain, Sir Malcolm Campbell, G K Chesterton, St John Ervine, A P Herbert, Jennie Lee, Bertrand Russell, Edward Shackleton, Edith Sitwell and Hugh Walpole.

The church still stands today. The last religious service took place in February 1967, and later that year the building was acquired by the Peter Moores Foundation and then launched in May 1968 as the home and base for the UK's first community arts project - the Black-E. Formerly known as The Blackie, the name was derived as a shortened version of "The Black Church" - a description of the Chapel in the 1960s when it was covered with decades of inner-city smoke and grime. Although the stone was cleaned in the 1980s the building still retains its name.

Raffles was a significant figure in

his field. He helped found the Lancashire Independent College. He received a law degree (LL.D) from the University of Aberdeen in December 1820, and became a doctor of divinity (DD) at Union



*Great George Street Chapel, Liverpool. Today it's a community arts centre.*

College, Connecticut, in July 1830. He was very well travelled and published several books, many sermons, letters of travel, poems, and hymns for the use of his congregation. His large collection of autographed letters and portraits is kept in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

As Raffles was setting out on his life's journey in the service of God, Emily Snell was growing up in the relative rural tranquillity of Ardleigh in Essex. The last child of John and Rebecca Snell, Emily's father died when she was 12 and her surviving siblings were all a good deal older.

Sadly, there is no recorded stimulus for Emily's move from rural Essex to Liverpool, but by the spring of 1841 Emily - now 35 years old - is recorded in the census of that year as part of the household of Thomas Raffles and

his wife, Mary. She is already keeping house for the Raffles family, with three other servants. Just a few years later Mary Raffles died and Emily became the effective matriarch of the home, dealing with all of the practical aspects of running Thomas Raffles' increasingly hectic life.

The housekeeper was a pivotal position in the mid Victorian household.

Always referred to as "Mrs." by the other servants, whether she was married or not, the housekeeper was effectively second in command and represented her mistress. The latter aspect of Emily's work would have transferred to Thomas Raffles when Mary died.

It was necessary for a housekeeper to have an understanding of accounts. She would have kept an account book where she would accurately and precisely note all sums paid for any and every purpose, the current expenses of the house and tradesmen's bills.

## Emily was responsible for hiring, firing and discipline

These accounts would undoubtedly have been balanced and examined by Raffles.

The housekeeper was usually partnered with a butler, although there is no record of Raffles ever having employed one. So Emily would have been responsible for hiring, firing, training, and disciplining the female staff. The housekeeper was expected to be a

"steady middle-aged woman . . . morally exemplary and assiduous to the harmony, comfort, and economy of the family".<sup>4</sup>

In addition to overseeing the female staff, the housekeeper was also in charge of the household linens. She kept an inventory, and made sure that the family and staff always had a clean supply of linens and bedding. The housekeeper was responsible for the inventory of other household necessities, such as soap and candles, sugar, flour and spices. Emily would also supervise the china closet and the stillroom department, where cordials and preserves were made and stored.

In addition, she was to see that all the furniture in the house was cleaned and polished, and she attended to all the necessary marketing details, and ordering goods from tradesmen.

For most of his time in Liverpool Raffles had a substantial household in Mason Street, West Derby. The 1851 census shows him living with two of his sons, James (aged 25) and William (20), together with his older sister Mary, now a widow. There was a substantial team of servants led by housekeeper Emily, including: Mary Hughes (45) the cook, Louisa Woodhouse (32) and Elizabeth Woolcott (18),

housemaids, Ruth Moore (16), the kitchenmaid, James Looney (24), the footman and Benjamin Roberts (34), the coachman.

It was not uncommon for a housekeeper to stay on for years and form a close relationship with the family she served. Emily Snell made it her life's work to run the household of Thomas Raffles and she never married.

Indeed, in time her relationship with Raffles transferred from that of servant to one of constant friend. This is emphasised in the biography of Raffles that was written by his son Thomas and published shortly after his death. In recording the final hours of his father's life, Thomas writes: "*It would be ungrateful in the editor not to record the ever kind and unwearied attentions which his father received from every member of his household, and especially from his old and kind friend and housekeeper, Miss Snell, who scarcely ever left him, and now tended him with unremitting care.*"<sup>5</sup>

Raffles died early in the morning of 18 August 1863. Thomas records: "*About five in the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> he looked towards the bed on which Robinson, his faithful coachman, was sleeping, and his*

*ever-watchful attendant, Miss Snell, asked him if he wanted him. 'No', he said, 'I want Christ'.*"<sup>6</sup> Raffles was buried in Liverpool's Necropolis following a funeral service at Great George Street Chapel. Thomas reported: "*It was estimated that 5,000 people lined the route of the procession.*"<sup>7</sup>

Emily retired with an annuity

## 5,000 people lined the funeral procession

earned from her many years of devoted service to the Raffles household. She moved across the River Mersey to 9 Victoria Mount (known originally as Victoria Road), Oxton - then a small village on the outskirts of Birkenhead. She was clearly comfortably off; her neighbours in what appeared to be genteel lodgings included retired ships' brokers, master mariners, civil engineers and estate agents. Indeed, over the next 20 years Emily had her own servant to care for her - first 21-year-old Mary Williams from Ruabon in North Wales, and later Fanny Paddock, a 60-year-old spinster from Hampshire. It was Fanny who was with Emily when she died on 10 July 1883 in Birkenhead at the age of 81.

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## References

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3 *Ibid.*

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5 *Memoirs of the Life and Ministry of Rev Thomas Raffles.* Thomas Stamford Raffles. Jackson, Walford and Hodder, 1865. Page 504.

6 *Ibid.* Page 508.

7 *Ibid.* Page 513.