

William Gates

William Gates was born in Wakefield in 1825. He was, according to the Census returns, a leather cutter and currier and appeared on those for Bridgegate from 1861 until 1901. George Gummer, in his Reminiscences, recalled him as follows:

William built a 'Turkish Bath' behind his premises. I have always been a believer in the benefits to be derived from Turkish baths. My earliest recollection of these goes back to the days when William Gates, a shoemaker (or leather cutter and currier) by trade, owned some in Sales' Yard, Bridgegate. I never visited these for the purpose of taking a bath, but old bathers have often described to me the processes adopted by Gates, one of these being massaging the body with his feet. From Sales's Yard- he removed to Cundey's Yard - higher up the street, where he constructed some modern Turkish and slipper baths. He also opened a shoe shop in Bridgegate. It was at Cundey's Yard that I became a regular bather. I must have partaken of 3000 Turkish baths during the last 52 years.

Originally, he was at 35 Bridgegate (just below the Red Lion and Sale's Yard). By 1881 he had moved to 32 Bridgegate (just below the Turf Tavern and Cundey's Yard).

The demands of the shop occasionally obtruded on Gates's attention to the baths. On more than one occasion a bather has been left to grill in an atmosphere of 170 degrees, whilst the old man went to Sheffield to procure some little requisite for his boot-making business. On one occasion a local contractor, having done himself well, visited the baths, and was left for two hours, eventually being found in a state of collapse owing to burns he had sustained. The death-knell of Gates's Turkish baths was sounded when the Corporation decided to construct a more modern set at the public baths in Main Street.

What a wonderful old man Gates was a strong, wiry, little man, a bachelor and a misogynist, living alone on a diet largely consisting of nuts and raisins, he never tasted alcohol or meat. He was a strict vegetarian and a non-smoker. He would never wear stockings, believing these to be unhealthy and he would often leave the hot baths and traverse a distance of 30 yards on the snow-covered ground, in his bare feet, to serve a customer in the shop. Although not a Christian in the general acceptance of the term, it would have been difficult to find a better living man or one more anxious to do right than William Gates.

When Charles Bradlaugh first visited Rotherham, it was impossible to prevail on anyone to preside at his meetings. Although he knew how unpopular it would make him, Gates stepped into the breach, being a believer in free thought and free speech. When close on seventy years of age he would occasionally ride on his tricycle to Harrogate and back on Sunday, his meals during the journey consisting of biscuits and raisins, washed down by water from a mountain stream. The poor old man, when eighty years of age, left the town to reside in Lincolnshire. Eccentric and strange as he was, he had many admirers, who did what they could to help him in his declining years. He often said he should live to reach his 100th birthday. I believe he failed to do so by a few years.

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An advertisement in the Rotherham Advertiser October 1867.