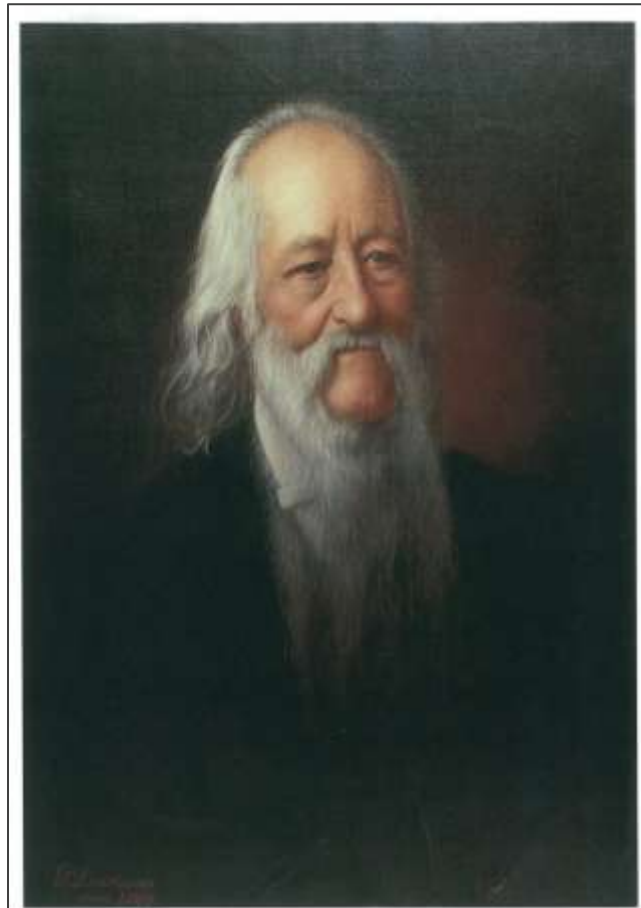




*William
Colenso*
his early influences
1811 - 1833



**Presented by Ann Collins
November 2011, Napier**

Introduction

After William Colenso died the Royal Society published an obituary that included the following comment:

“From the date of his arrival in New Zealand Mr. Colenso took an active interest in the history, folklore, habits, languages, &c., of the natives, and being gifted with the love of natural history and of travel, a cultivated mind, an iron constitution, and methodical habits as an observer, collector, and recorder, all of which he used to the best advantage during a long life, it is not surprising that he was regarded as the Nestor of science in a colony in which his arrival antedated its foundation.”

The listed attributes imply an educated man – a scientist. This is a contrast with his biographers’ accounts of his early life.

In his book “The Controversial Colensos”, the Cornish historian A L Rowse summed up William’s education as an apprenticeship as a printer and bookbinder for 7 years from the age of 15 (i.e. 5 September 1826 to 1833). During this time he developed his hobby of botany and became a youthful member of the Penzance Natural History and Antiquarian Society. Rowse described him as “as largely self-educated as a printer; he was intelligent and not ill-read”.

Rowse mentioned that the Cornish missionary Henry Martyn (1781-1812) may have had an influence on the aspirations of William and his cousin John William, the future Bishop of Natal, but he made no mention of the scientific influences in William’s home town of Penzance, particularly during his formative years between 1816 and 1833.

Bagnall and Petersen were slightly more informative “he had received a grounding in the “rudiments” and the classics under the wise tutorship of Mr Will Purchase at the latter’s private school, which left him with a thirst for further knowledge and a sound basis for self-education.”

“He had early been intended by his parents for the medical profession and had made some elementary studies in that direction under the kindly encouragement of his godfather, the family doctor.....” The most likely contender was Henry Penneck.

Godfather

Henry Penneck MD (1762-1834) was the son of the Vicar of Paul and a descendant of an old Cornish family. He was a surgeon, apothecary and man midwife. In those days his only remuneration came from the physic he supplied and he was sometimes accused of selling his patients more medicine than they required. He was recorded as an associate member of the Linnaean Society from 1805. A Society established in 1788 and dedicated to the cultivation of the Science of Natural History in all its branches. His 1804 correspondence with James Sowerby is recorded in “English Botany”. In 1814 he was a foundation member of the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall. In 1832 he published ‘An Essay on the Nature and Treatment of Cholera’ in which he advocated bleeding from the head, mercury fumigations and bandaging the abdomen. This was following the epidemic in Newlyn that took over 90 people – so probably not a successful cure.

He had previously, in 1802, in conjunction with Robert Dunkin, taken out a patent for "a method of improving the sailing and navigation of ships and vessels"; in 1821 he patented "an improvement of machinery for lessening the consumption of fuel in working steam-engines." He had instigated the beacon on Gear Rock. He served as mayor 1817-18, again in 1826 and died at Penzance on the 31 March 1834.

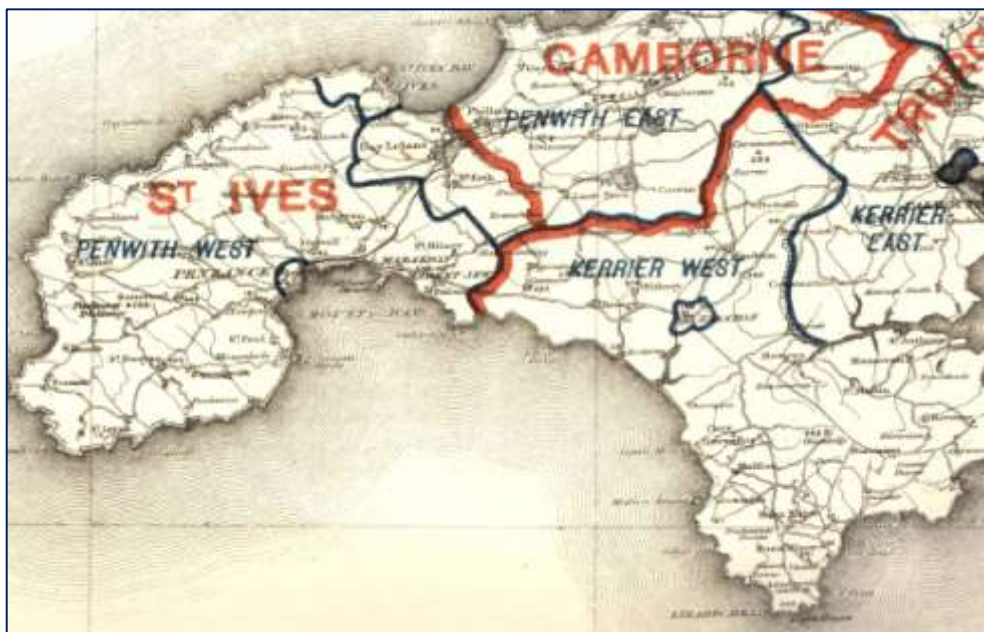
His son Henry Penneck (1801-1862), a clergyman, educated at Cambridge, was very interested in botany. He had a herbarium and was active member of the Penzance Natural History and Antiquarian Society. When he died he left his estate to the botanist John Ralfs (1807-1890), who had settled in Penzance, for his health, from 1837.

Ralfs aided in the botanical portions of the *Guide to Ilfracombe*, 1838; the *Guide to Penzance*, by J. S. Courtney, 1845; the *Week at the Land's End*, by John Thomas Blight, 1861; the *Official Guide to Penzance*, 1876, and he supplied the list of desmids to Jenner's *Flora of Tunbridge Wells*. He sent many plants for description in the second edition of *English Botany* by Sir James Edward Smith (founder of the Linnaean Society). Berkeley gave the name of Ralfsia to a genus of seaweeds, and Wilson named a *Jungermannia* in his honour. Charles Darwin in his *Insectivorous Plants* gracefully referred to those supplied to him by Ralfs from the neighbourhood of Penzance.

It is unlikely that William knew John Ralfs, but it would be natural for his godfather's interest in natural history, geology and botany to have had an influence.

Established Penzance Family

William is described as being one of a family who were long established in Penzance. The earliest proven direct link to this town is Thomas Colenso and his wife Philippa Lewarne. Thomas was mentioned in his brother's will, sea Captain Stephen Colenso of Stepney, as a cordwainer of Penzance. A cordwainer made shoes and other articles from fine soft leather – luxury goods. This brother left money to his nieces and nephews in 1760. One of these nephews was Robert Colenso – WC's grandfather.



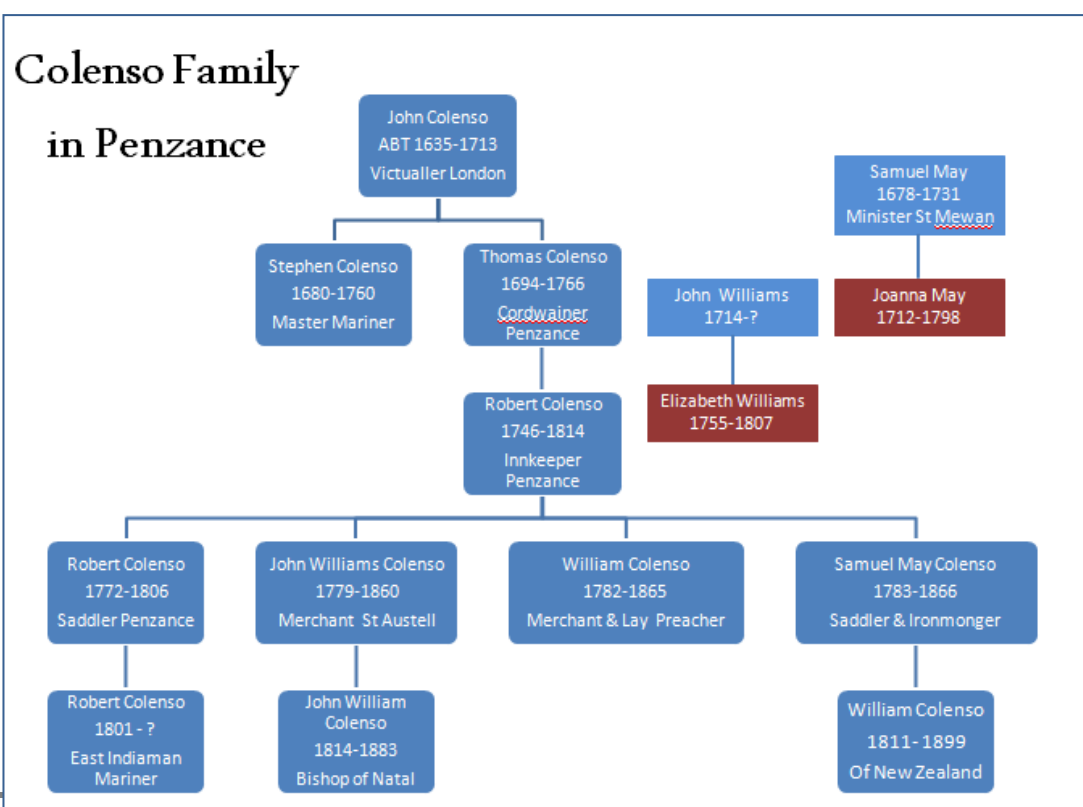
Thomas and possibly Stephen were born in Penzance, but their father John's birthplace is unknown. His father, also John, was probably born in Mawgan in Meneage. He and his brothers were "men of Trelowarren" and may have been displaced after supporting the Royalists with Sir Richard Vyvyan during the Civil War. There is still a house called Colenso on the Trelowarren estate.

There are three farms called Colenso (upper, middle and lower) near Goldsithney. They may have been in the family once, but the name is the only proven connection. During William's time they were owned by the Buller family. One of whom was the losing general at the Battle of Colenso in 1899 during the Boer War.

Another Colenso family lived in Penzance in the 1600s, but no sons appeared to survived childhood.

Robert Colenso was the landlord of the King's Head in Penzance for thirty years – from 1778. He died in 1814. Prior to the King's Head he ran the Queen's Head in Marazion. His choice of occupation may have been influenced by his mother's family, the Lewarnes, which included brewers and maltsters. The King's Head was an old Penzance house at which many of the borough celebrations were given. A tradesman's Friendly Society was formed there as early as 1768. This had 101 members all living within three miles of the town. The land was sold for development in 1812 and the Inn subsequently demolished.

Adverse family circumstances are mentioned as having an impact on William's future and the responsibility he took for his younger siblings. There is also mention of him seeing, when in London, his father's old shop. There is no mention of his father in the 1823 Pigot's Directory for Penzance, even though sister Helen is christened in Penzance in that year. The next sibling, my ancestor Edwin, was born in 1827 in Cornwall, so the time away from Penzance would be limited to a couple of years.



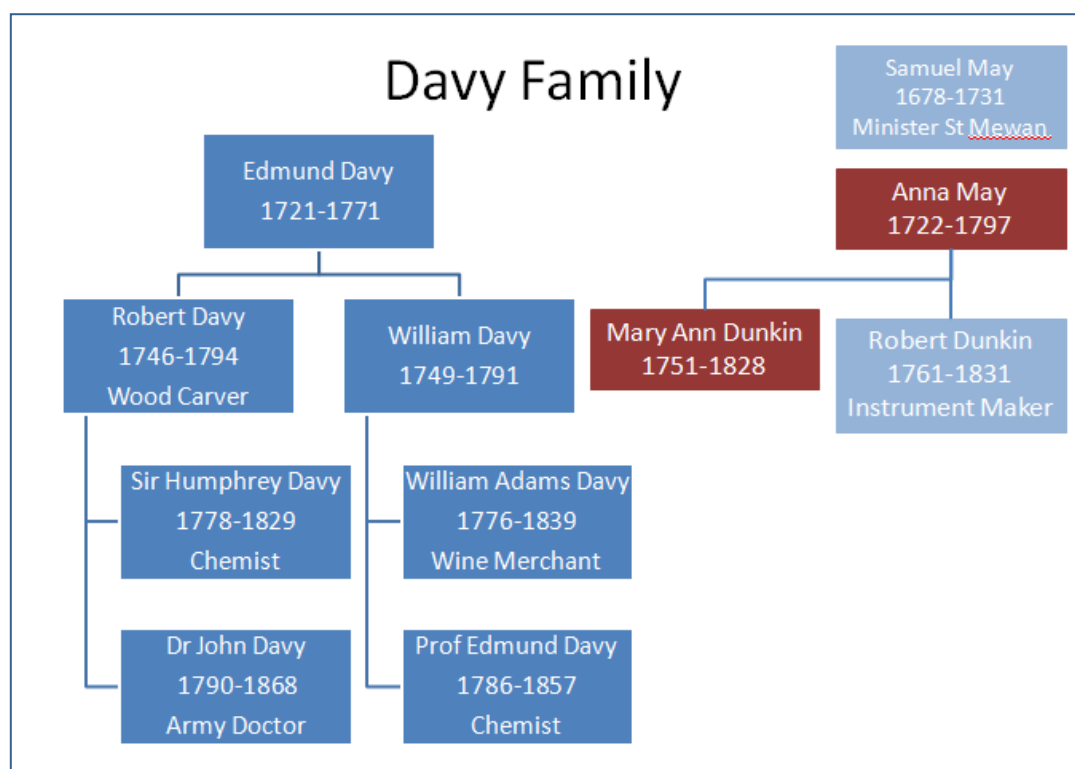
Robert Dunkin

In 1771 Robert married Elizabeth Williams in Madron, Penzance's mother parish. She was the daughter of John Williams and Johanna May. Witnesses at the wedding were Mary Ann Dunkin and Deborah Oliver –probably Elizabeth's cousins, both having a mother whose maiden name was May. Three years later Mary Ann married William Davy (1749-1791), an uncle of Humphry Davy (1778-1829). Her brother was Robert Dunkin (1761-1831), who was a Quaker, saddler, ironmonger, instrument maker and an early mentor to Humphry Davy.

June Z. Fullmer, a recent biographer of the young Humphrey Davy wrote: "Instruction of Davy did not arise solely from his schooling and his apprenticeship. As important as anyone for his training was Robert Dunkin Dunkin has been variously referred to as saddler, ironmonger, patentee and mathematical instrument maker. These changing titles reflect his versatility and technological expertise."... "Perhaps the best testimony to Dunkin's ability derives from his activities. He received two patents, the first, in 1802, with Henry Penneck, MD, as already described the second, in 1813, for 'Methods of lessening the consumption of steam and fuel in working fire engines, and also methods for the improvement of certain instruments useful for mining and other purposes' ".

Humphry Davy "would steal time from school to spend it in the company of a Quaker saddler in the town, a clever mechanic, who, it is said, gave Davy his first taste of experimental science." Robert Hunt in the Dictionary of National Biography in 1888 wrote that "Dunkin constructed for himself an electrical machine, voltaic piles, and Leyden jars and made models illustrative of the principles of mechanics. By the aid of these appliances he instructed Davy in the rudiments of science."

Robert was William's first cousin twice removed and died in 1831, aged 70. Surely he had an influence on William's life and education.



Penzance

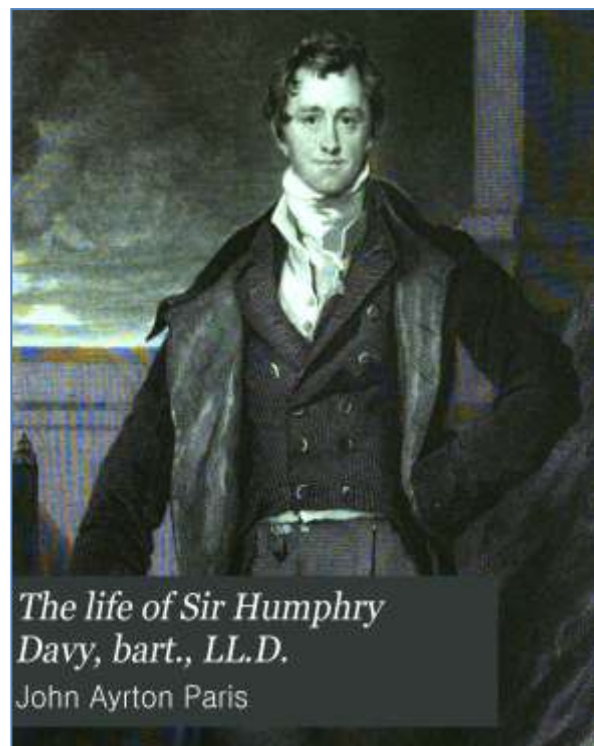
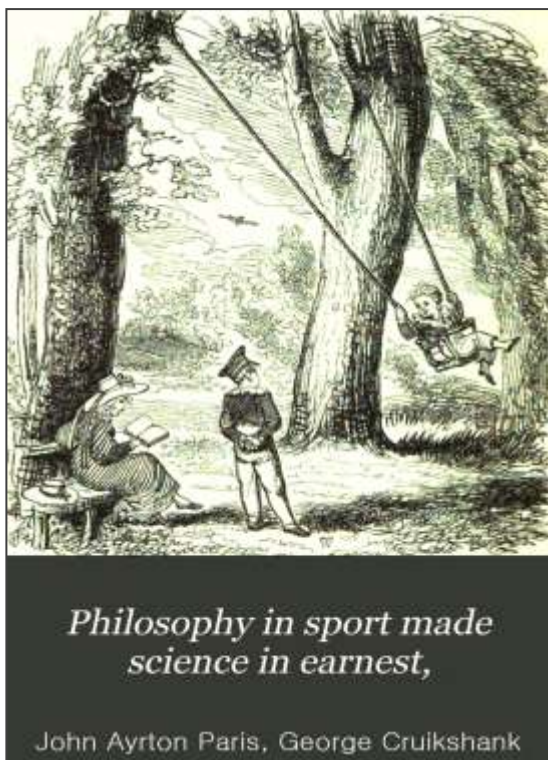
When William Colenso was born in 1811 the population of Penzance was between 4000 and 6000. It was the most western market town in England. Penzance had been incorporated by King James I in 1614. It was governed by a mayor, recorder, eight aldermen and twelve common-council men. William's father was reported to be one of the council men. In 1663 it became a town where the miners brought their tin to be assayed and licensed, or "coined" by Duchy of Cornwall agents.

I have relied on three books of the day to form a picture of Penzance of the 1820s. The first of these was "A Guide to the Mount's Bay & Land's End" by a physician later identified as John Ayrton Paris. It was first published in 1816 and then re-issued in 1824.



John Ayrton Paris (1785-1856) was a physician, educated at Cambridge, who took a medical degree after a course of study in Edinburgh. He was practising in Westminster Hospital when he was invited to take over Dr John Bingham Borlase's Penzance practice after his death in 1813. He pursued the study of natural history and founded the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall in 1814. In later life he was the President of the College of Physicians. He lived in Penzance for 4 years. He wrote three books that had an impact on Penzance, one I have mentioned. Another was "A philosophy in sport made science in earnest", published in 1827 and a "Life of Sir Humphry Davy" in 1831. Both of these caused offence to the locals.

"A philosophy in sport" was a children's book that attempted to illustrate the principles of natural philosophy using toys and sport. In this book he caricatured many of the residents of Penzance, including Henry Penneck and Robert Dunkin.

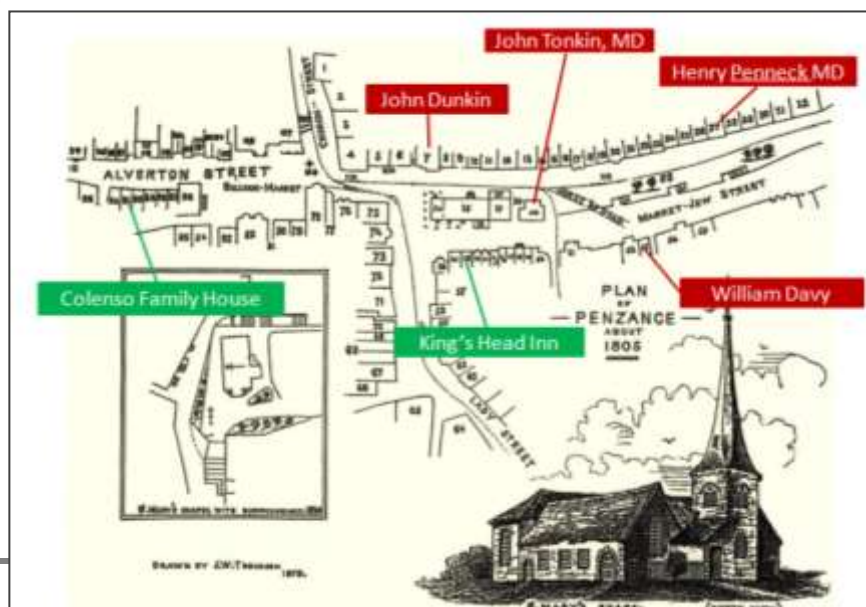


The Life of Sir Humphry Davy was described as “a rather malicious life” of the subject and prompted John Davy to write his account of his brother’s life. John Davy’s wife reported that “Sir Walter Scott did not think it (Paris’s book) had done justice to the character of his friend.”

There was also a court case in 1816, where Henry Penneck was found guilty of verbally assaulting Dr Paris because his name was listed in the membership list of the Royal Geological Society as Dr Henry Penneck rather than Henry Penneck MD. In his testimony Paris questioned Penneck’s credentials as a doctor. He implied that the Scotch Universities were indiscriminate about who they gave diplomas to.

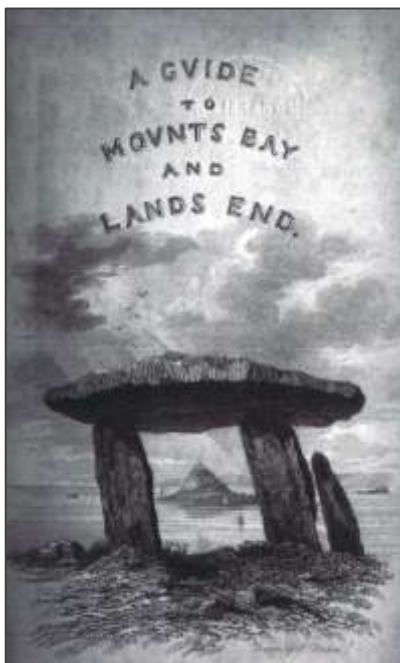
But getting back to his “Guide to the Mount’s Bay” it had three treasures in it. One was a depiction of the centre of Penzance, showing

- John Tonkin’s house where Humphry Davy grew up.
- The Royal Geological Society of Cornwall
- The King’s Head Inn that had been run by Robert Colenso until 1808



The other treasures were two sketches by James Tonkin, showing views of St Michael's Mount, one with Penzance in the distance. James Tonkin was listed as a draftsman for the Royal Geological Society and was also a miniaturist of whom William wrote to his nephew:

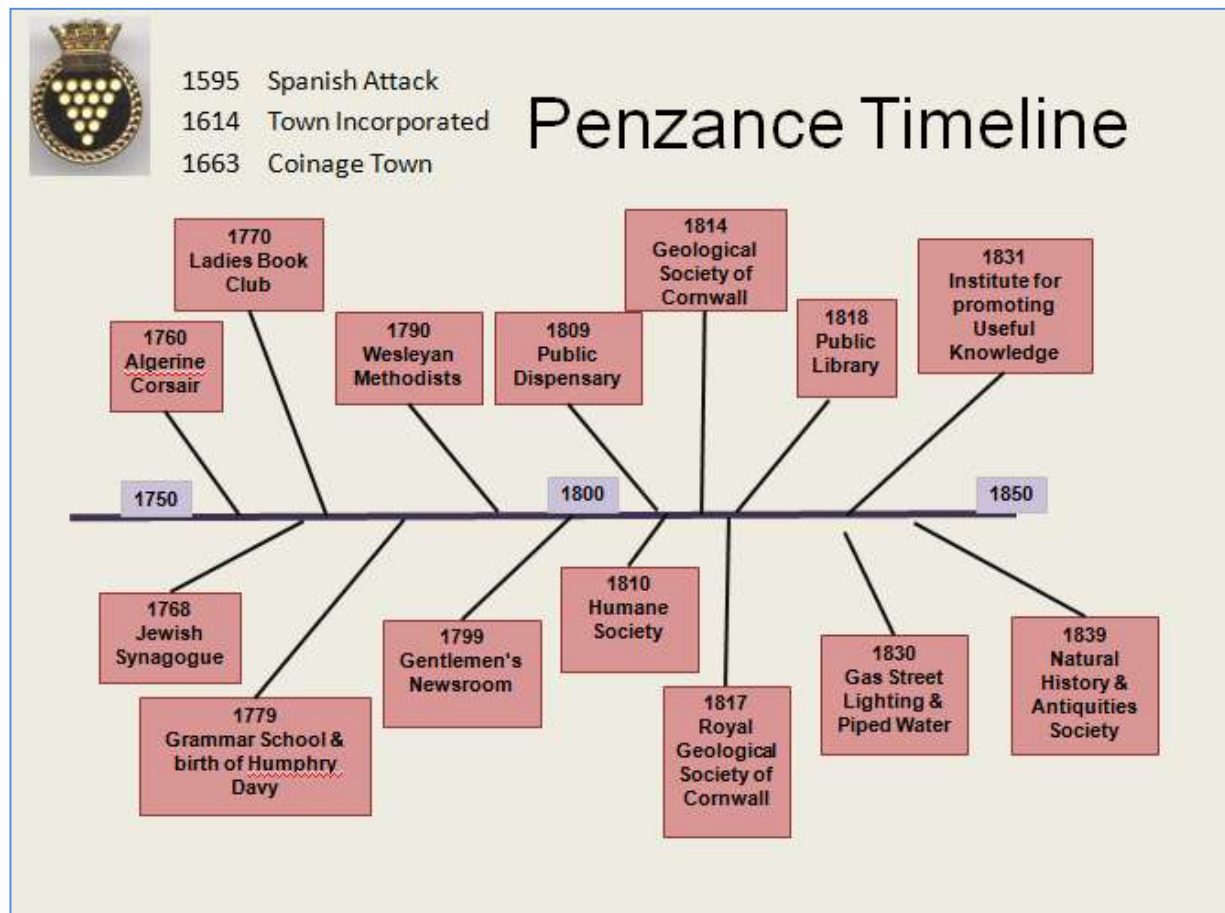
"I have frequently thought of offering you 2 painted miniatures I have of my father and mother. They were taken expressly for me some 60 years ago by Tonkin whom I knew well. I give them to you, to have and preserve and hand down to your own family. Perhaps you may remember your grandparents."



The other books about Penzance were “Ancient & Modern History of Mount’s Bay”, printed by John Thomas. There were three editions, the second in 1820 and the third in 1831. The last was reputed to have been compiled by William, who was then Thomas’ apprentice.

“The Parochial History of Cornwall” was based on the manuscripts Mr Hals and Mr Tonkin, edited by Davies Gilbert and published in 1838. In 1974 when the Borough of Penzance was being merged with other local authorities the Corporation published its history. There was also an interesting account of Penzance in the 1838 Journal of the Statistical Society of London.

This timeline is a snapshot of what was considered the highlights of the town’s history.



Royal Geological Society of Cornwall

In 1807 thirteen men met for dinner at the Freemasons Tavern in Convent Garden to establish the first Geological Society. The foundation members included Humphry Davy.

This meeting resolved 'that there be forthwith instituted a Geological Society for the purpose of making geologists acquainted with each other, of stimulating their zeal, of inducing them to adopt one nomenclature, of facilitating the communications of new facts and of ascertaining what is known in their science and what remains to be discovered.'

In 1814 John Ayrton Paris was the driving force behind the establishment of the first Geological Society outside London. Not surprising that it was established in Cornwall, as with the mining industry it was possible to "combine rational theory with the routine of practice". The purpose of the Society was to combine "the discovery of new facts to enrich science, and the application of science, to improve art." In 1817, after the invention, by Paris, of the safety bar to replace the tamping stick, the Prince Regent took an interest and the Society became the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall.

The Foundation President was Davies Gilbert, and the members included some of the most eminent geologists and miners in the United Kingdom. Some of the ordinary members were John Davy, William Davy, Robert Dunkin, Henry Penneck MD, Rev William Veale, and James Tonkin as draftsman. In 1828 William's uncle John Williams Colenso was listed as an associate member and gave a paper in October 1829 called "A Description of Happy-Union Tin Streamwork at Pentuan". I have read a description of this paper "as the first study of climate change". He also donated the fossils he found to the Society. They are on loan to the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro. William's nephew was president of the society in 1905.



Davies Giddy Gilbert (1767-1839), was a native of Penzance and educated at the Penzance Grammar School. He was a technocrat, inventor, reformer, antiquarian, patron of arts and sciences, member of parliament, fellow and president of the Royal Society and encourager of the likes of Humphry Davy. He was known as the "Cornish Philosopher".

Humphry Davy (1778-1829) was considered the leading Cornishman of his age. He was born and educated, except for one year in Truro, in Penzance. He was the father of electrochemistry and discovered sodium, chlorine, iodine and laughing gas. He is famous for inventing the miner's safety

lamp, which he did not patent - so that its use was never restricted. He left Penzance around 1798, but his mother and sisters spent the rest of their lives in Penzance.

Humphry's cousin William Adams Davy (1776-1839) was a witness at William's parents wedding. He was also mayor of Penzance in 1836. Edmund Davy (1785-1857), his brother, was an assistant to Humphry and became a Professor of Chemistry in Dublin and Cork. He discovered spongy platinum, cathodic protection, acetylene and had an interest in applying chemistry to agriculture.

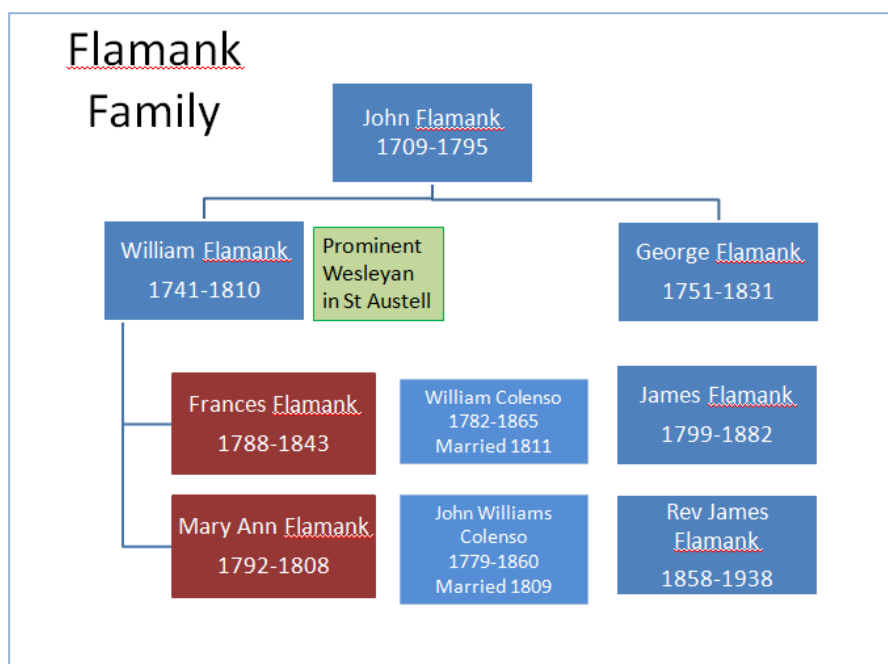
In the decade from 1820 to 1830 the President of the Royal Society was a native of Penzance – from 1820 to 1827 Sir Humphry Davy and then Davies Gilbert from 1827 to 1830.

William was nominated for the Royal Society by Hooker, von Haast, Buller and many others in 1866. He was accepted first nomination and described as "FLS, Hon Sec to the Hawkes Bay Philosophical Ins., author of numerous Memoirs on the Botany and Zoology of New Zealand and of the history, Language, manners and customs of the native race published in the London Journal of Botany, Tasmanian Journal of Science and the transactions of the New Zealand Institute. Mr Colenso's labours as a Naturalist, Philologist and Ethnologist in New Zealand commenced half a century ago and have continued ever since"

Penzance Natural History and Antiquarian Society

In Bagnall and Petersen there is an anecdote about William attempting to attend a meeting of the Penzance Natural History Society and being refused entry because he had let his subscription lapse. He apparently forwarded a letter to the secretary expressing indignation and reproach but "promising to send specimens of the geology, ornithology, ichthyology, entomology, conchology and botany from that interesting portion of the globe." He did send specimens and make contributions to its proceedings. This is a good story, but this society was not established until 1839. William was listed as a member in 1883.

James Flamank, the secretary he complained to, was connected to the Colenso family by a couple of marriages, so William would have known him quite well.



Bagnall & Petersen also describe William as giving a paper to the Society, aged 18, on the trade of the Phoenecians with West Cornwall. It is possible that he gave this paper, aged 19, to the Penzance Institution for promoting Useful Knowledge. This was established in 1831, for the purpose of holding weekly lectures followed by discussions.

Politics in Cornwall

The Cornish see themselves as separate from England. This view is partly due to its remoteness from England. There is only one border, the Tamar River, which had no bridge until the 1850s. The economy of West Cornwall is based on farming, fishing and mining. Even with farming the organisation of the land was such that the relationship between the landowner and farmer was less dependent than other parts of England. The fisherman owned their boats and worked as cooperatives. In the mines the miners sold their skills and judgement.

The Duchy of Cornwall weakened the influence of the local aristocracy, but also maintained the over-representation of the Cornish in parliament. Cornwall was reputed to have the “most rotten” of the rotten boroughs. The weakness of the established church contributed to the growth of the nonconformist religions which also broke down the old social structures. The Wesleyans and other preachers restored “heart religion” in Cornwall.

In the late 17th century the Cornish innovators and mining saw Cornwall become a self-confident vibrant society at the forefront of the industrial revolution. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the response to fears of reform or even revolution led to a period of repression. Habeas Corpus was suspended in 1817 and in 1819 the Six Acts introduced a series of draconian measures ranging from the banning of seditious assemblies to restrictions of the Press.

Reformers in Cornwall questioned the old institutions like the Duchy of Cornwall. Establishment of Royal Geological Society of Cornwall and, the Cornwall Polytechnic Society and the Royal Institution of Cornwall were a signal of the reformist movement of Cornwall.

The reformers, between 1815 and 1822, ran public meetings at every opportunity on property tax, government economy and retrenchment, economic distress, the assassination attempt on the Prince Regent, Peterloo, the Queen Caroline Affair, and for reductions in tithes and rents. Later the two major issues became the abolition of slavery and Roman Catholic Emancipation.

From the 1832 election, West Cornwall had become a stronghold of liberalism. One of William’s uncles was an agent for the Duchy of Cornwall. His father was a member of Penzance Council, his godfather was a mayor of the Town. It is hard to see William not being caught up in the mood of reform and not developing a belief in fighting to change what is “not right”.

The life of his nephew may have been the culmination of the changes going on in Cornwall. He was a business man, president of the RGSC in 1905, mayor of Penzance 1901, active in the School of Mines and the School of Arts.

However the other trend in Cornwall was emigration. Of William's generation the family had the following emigrants:

- Robert an East Indiaman officer circa 1825
- William to New Zealand 1834
- Jane Emily to London before 1841 and possibly France and Spain
- Edwin to Australia 1848
- John William to Natal in 1853
- Mary Ann to Walsall Foreign in 1854
- Samuel to Canada circa 1855
- Helen to London before 1861

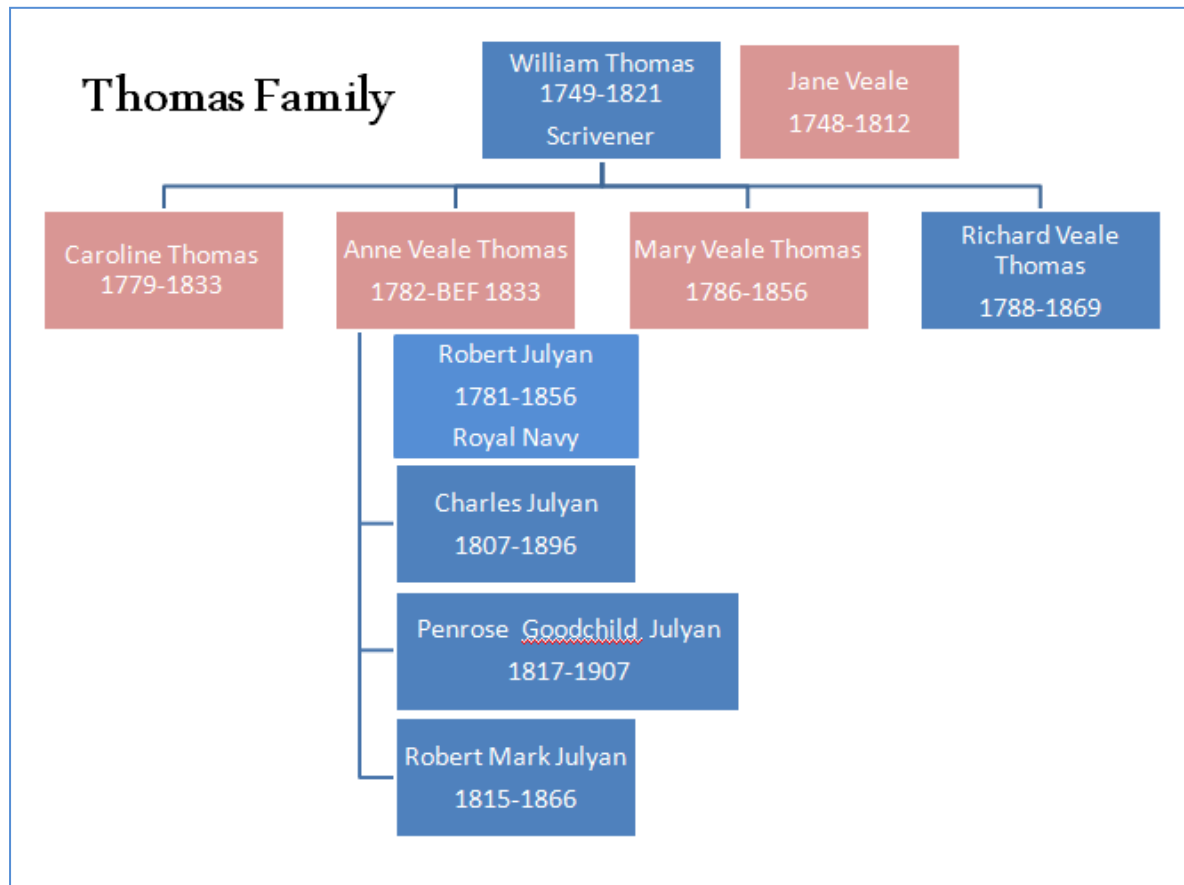
Exploration

After he completed his apprenticeship William worked in St Ives and walked there each Monday and back to Penzance at the end of each week. He is reported to have often sat and enjoyed the view of Penzance from the old fort at Castle-an-Dinas. As you can see it was a beautiful one.



William's view of the world was also expanded by the people he met visiting his mother's sisters in Truro. Caroline Thomas never married and died in 1833. William mentioned her passing. His other maternal aunt, Anne Veale Thomas, married a naval officer, Robert Julyan, in 1804. He had a distinguished career during the Napoleonic Wars. After leaving the navy he was a gentleman farmer in Kea, with an active interest in the Port of Padstow and for the welfare of sailors. I imagine it was while visiting this family he met the Lauder brothers, natives of Truro, and heard tales of their adventures in Africa with Clapperton.

Around 1830, possibly after his wife's death, Robert became the assistant harbor master in Quebec, taking three sons and 2 daughters. One of the sons became a farmer in Sarawak, Ontario, another a clerk with the Post Office and the other an adventurous "public servant", engineer and inventor. This was Sir Penrose Goodchild Julyan, who ultimately was a Crown Agent for the Colonies, including New Zealand.



Enough atmosphere to excite a sense of adventure in any young man, who had been well grounded in his trade and was ready to see the world.

Religion

On the 1st of May 1833 William resolved to "live more godly". He intends to pray mornings and evenings, to read the morning and evening service of the Church daily, and a portion of the Scripture every night.

Like his native town William's religious influences were broad. The Colenso family in Penzance were worshippers at the Anglican Church when William was young. But his mother's family were non-conformist. Two of his father's brothers married in to a Wesleyan family in St Austell. One of these brothers was a lay preacher. The other was the father of the future Bishop of Natal. William's parents were remembered in the Heamoor Wesleyan Chapel.

When William was preparing for his future life in the 1830s he counted a number of clergy as his friends. He was particularly attracted to the Bible Christians and counted John Rodda as a valued friend.

Another was Thomas Hutton Vyvyan (1803-1844), born at Trelowarren, and the curate of St Mary's Penzance and also John Hobson (1811-1863). In his last week in Penzance before leaving for the new world he "dined with the Rev J Hobson, the superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist Society in West Cornwall.....and on the last Sunday with the minister of the Church of England, my very dear Christian friend the Rev T H Vyvyan (brother of Sir Richard Rawlinson Vyvyan of Trelowarren) with whom (until his premature death) I also subsequently corresponded from NZ."

During his religious searching he may have been influenced by Benjamin Carvosso, a Cornish born Wesleyan Methodist (1789-1854) who returned to Cornwall after spending some years in Australia. The first circuit he worked in was at Penzance, where a revival occurred. The revival in Penzance is described by George Blencowe in lengthy quotations from Carvosso's journal.

"It commenced slowly in 1831, when a new superintendent minister (Hobson) arrived to work with Carvosso, and with the third colleague. They were one in heart and mind, meeting in band together (where inner spiritual secrets were shared). Their unity and brotherly love was remarked upon by many of the people."

Another Penzance clergyman was George Charles Smith (1782-1863), pastor of the Octagon Baptist Chapel from 1807 to 1825. He was a former naval sailor – pressed from an American vessel. He worked his way up to being a master's mate at the battle of Copenhagen in 1801. William's uncle Robert Julyan served there as a lieutenant on HMS Glatton. He was called Bos'un Smith because he devoted his energies to providing soldiers and sailors with religious teaching and forming philanthropic institutions for their welfare. These included:

- Home Missionary Society in 1819
- Floating chapels for sailors in 1819 on the Thames, Liverpool, Bristol and Hull
- Thames Watermen's Friend Society 1822
- Merchant Seaman's Orphan Asylum for Boys in 1823
- Shipwrecked and Distressed Sailors' Family Fund in 1824

When he died in Penzance in 1863 the coastguard, the naval reserve and two thousand people attended his funeral.

His son Theophilus Ahijah Smith (1809-1879) was born in Penzance, apprenticed to the printer Thomas Vigurs and continued his father's work with philanthropy for sailors. He was William's contemporary. In his will William left money to support distressed sailors and strangers in Napier.

Conclusion

William's life was marked by his interest in the world around him and his methodical habits as an observer, collector and recorder. He lived in an age where the study of geology, science and natural history was leading to Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the questioning of religious dogma (his cousin was a leading light in this). William's small part in a changing world was not just an accident of birth. He was born into a family and town that were participating in the change, which nurtured his curiosity and prepared him for a new world where he could make his own mark. This celebration of his 200th birthday is a testament that he made his mark.

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