

MATTHIAS SAUL: A LANCASTER MAN OF IDEAS AND INVENTIONS

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Abstract

Matthias Saul lived most of his life in Lancaster. It is unusual to be able to follow a working man's life but because he used newspapers and national magazines to communicate his opinions, inventions and ideas, he left a record of his life and character from 1814 to his death in 1860.

His biography and family

Matthias Saul was the son of John and Mary Saile (Saul) and was baptised on 18 March 1787 at the Priory Church of St Mary in Lancaster (Figure 1). The family's abode is registered as Stedding (Stodday).¹ The family's baptisms indicate that the Sauls had lived in Stodday from at least 1780 to 1791. Matthias Saul's sister, Betty, was baptised in 1791, again the address was Stodday.² Betty remained unmarried and appears to have been close to her brother. In 1828 a *Lancaster Gazette* advertisement describes a dwelling house in Skerton belonging to B Saul with the garden belonging to M Saul. They shared a house on Market Street Lancaster in 1841, Betty acting as his housekeeper. In 1851 Betty is listed as living alone, a housekeeper, at 5 Common Garden Street, Lancaster.³ She died on 24 February 1860 at Gillison's Hospital, Lancaster but was buried in the family grave at St Helen's Church, Churchtown, Garstang.⁴ Matthias Saul died the day after Betty on 25 February 1860 at Upper King Street in Lancaster.

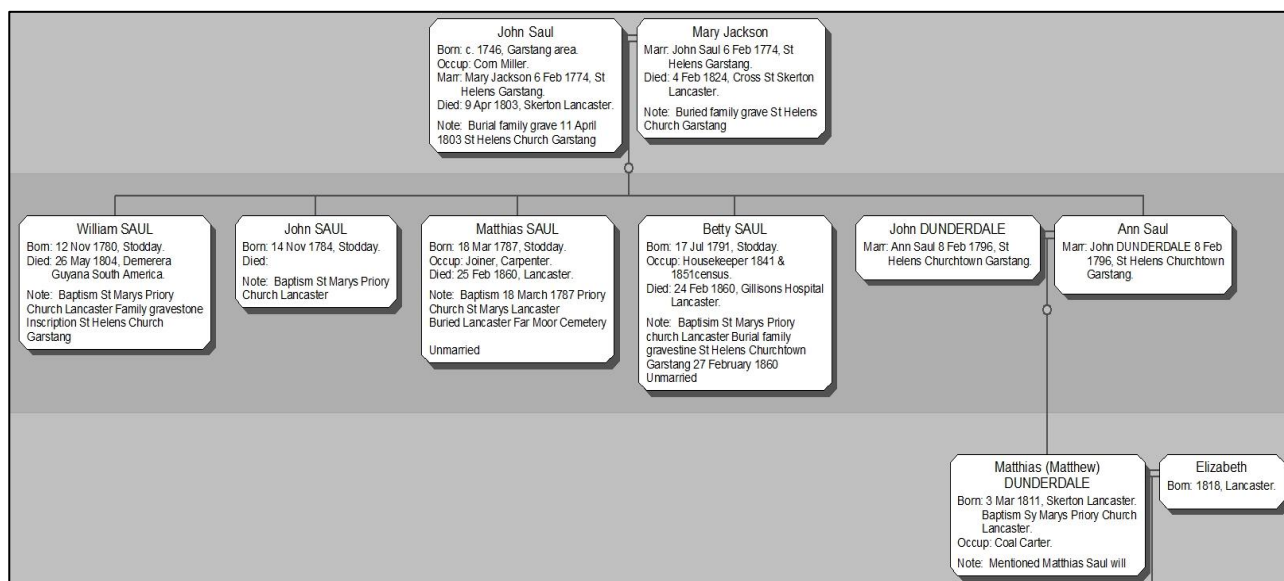


Fig. 1 Saul family tree

His early life

Matthias Saul's schooling and apprenticeship are unknown but his published work is legible with plans labelled and described clearly, which indicate a good schooling and training. Regular references in articles, magazines, newspapers and advertisements give clues to his addresses in Lancaster, Skerton, Garstang, Forton & Nateby. References to his pomological [fruit] garden at Skerton appear frequently before 1836.

An early advertisement dated 15 January 1814 in the *Lancaster Gazette* states that Matthias Saul had opened a shop in Gage Street, Friarage, Lancaster (Figure 2). He describes himself as a joiner, builder, undertaker and carpenter. It also states that he had undertaken "three years of study in two eminent Architectural Academies in London". A later published account mentions him seeing an air

stove in Percy Chapel, Rathbone Place London in 1812.⁵ He mentions new methods of constructing staircases, founded upon the principles of geometry, cut and drawn under the direction of the celebrated and ingenious author, Mr Nicholson, architect.⁶ He donated two volumes of Nicholson's Architectural Dictionary to the Mechanics and Apprentices Library in Lancaster in 1823.⁷



Fig. 2 Advertisement, *Lancaster Gazette* 15 January 1814, p3

A news item in 1817 mentions a fire at Mr Saul's workshop in Gage Street but by the "timely arrival of one of the fire engines it was got under without doing any material damage".⁸ Tracking his home and shop/workshop addresses led to a reference of Matthias Saul in a book giving the history of the Poulton and Hardhorn Free School in Poulton-le-Fylde.⁹ The first school building was re-built in 1828. A crude plan of a building with measurements on a scrap of paper with torn edges was found in the school archives and is said to be a plan of the 1828 building. It was signed "Matt^s Saul, street behind Dalton Sq Lancaster". A painting depicts the re-built school of 1828. I have not found any other links between the school and Saul but he did have ancestors in the Wyre district.

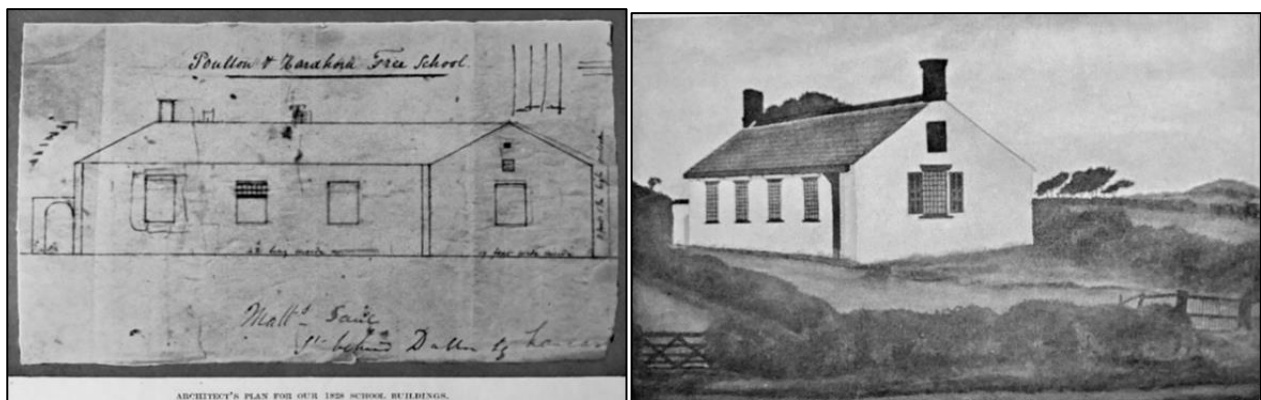


Fig. 3 Poulton and Hardhorn School with Saul's signature

A letter written by Saul in 1838 to the Editor of the *Lancaster Gazette* relates to a fire in the floor at the Oven house, "just situated behind M Saul's house in Market St". When he attended the Police Office in Market Square to report the fire, only one officer was on duty in the evenings therefore no one was available to send for the men and the fire appliance. He was asked to stay in the Police Office so that the officer could go in search of Mr Wright; the Police Superintendent, but he refused

due to his concern about his property. His letter was a public complaint about only one officer on duty at the Police Station in the evenings.¹⁰

The Revision Barristers Court allowed challenges to a person's eligibility to vote.¹¹ To be a voter you had to own property rated at £10 minimum annually. A report in the *Lancaster Guardian* in 1835 records Saul's objection to the low value of his house, land and hot house in Skerton given by the Overseer, Mr Pye. The records said he was the joint owner with his sister. He objected, saying he was the owner: the deed of conveyance was in his name alone, his sister living with him as housekeeper. During the questioning of why his property was not registered correctly, he said it was due to "the blundering of Overseers". The court decided that the problem was the entry in the Overseers book, not the Claimant. He was allowed the vote.

Saul and politics

During the questioning Saul was described as "being a leader of the Radical party". "The mention of his name excited more than ordinary interest and no little merriment" in the court. The Radical party was a political movement based on left-wing liberal ideology inspired by the political views of the French Revolution. The members sought political support for a radical reform of the electoral system, to widen suffrage, abolition of titles, redistribution of property and freedom of the press.¹² Other examples of Saul's political views and activities relate to several petitions he sent to the House of Commons. In 1838 Lord Brougham presented to the House of Commons a petition from Matthias Saul of Lancaster, house carpenter and joiner, for the abolition of imprisonment for debt.¹³ The following year, 1839, another petition was presented for the repeal of the Borough and Market tolls in Lancaster.¹⁴ In the same year he "prayed that the Sale of Beer Act may not be repealed".¹⁵ The 1830 Beer Act liberated the regulations governing the sale of beer. The Temperance Movement was gaining popularity and by 1839 Hansard recorded debates on restrictions on beer houses, beer shops and public houses, whose sale was confined to beer, from selling without a Magistrates licence.¹⁶ An advertisement appeared in 1838 for masons and plasterers for the building and finishing of a house for a retail Beer Shop at the top of Back Lane (Upper King Street) and Penny Street.¹⁷ Plans and specifications could be seen by applying to Mr Saul, Lancaster. In 1858 there was an advertisement in the *Lancaster Gazette* for the letting of a Beer House on Upper King Street with "brewing vessels and gas fixtures". A small rent would be accepted by the owner, M Saul.¹⁸ This house was decorated with two carved wooden figures on the eaves of the roof, the stones below each figure carved with the initials 'MS 18 & MS 38.'¹⁹ Carved heads decorate the four corners of the house sign over the front lower window. Could they be portraits of Matthias Saul?

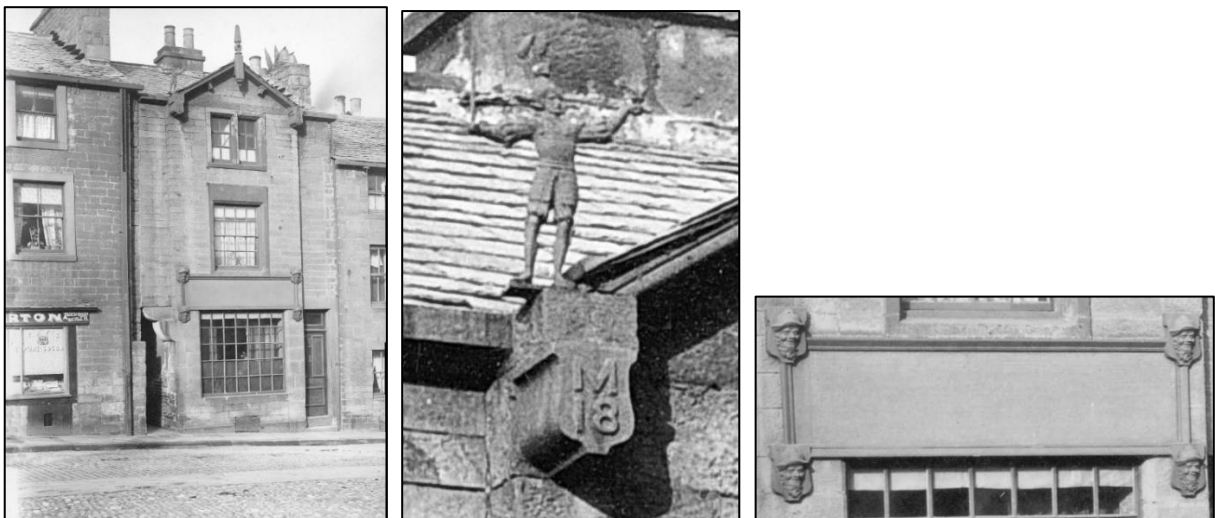


Fig. 4 Matthias Saul's beer house, Upper King Street, Lancaster (Red Rose Collection, LCC)

Saul and the Corn Laws

A public address in 1841 promoted by the Lancaster Corn Law Leaguers was made in Market Place [Square] in Lancaster by a Preston supporter, Mr Livesey, who drew a crowd to explain the abomination of the corn laws. “A rival arose on the Town Hall steps in the person of Mr Matthias Saul who by the tinkle of a small bell contrived to draw off all Mr Livesey’s auditory”. “This gave rise to a good deal of fun and most effectually put a stop to the mediated bread tax lecture”. The report stated, “We are very much obliged to Mr Saul and we trust the next time the Lancaster Leaguers call in spouting quacks from other places to their assistance they will be doomed to a similar disaster”.²⁰ A public meeting against the corn laws had been held in Lancaster Town Hall on 4 February 1839 when a petition to Parliament was agreed to and was supported by the Town Council two days later.²¹ In 1841 “A numerous meeting of the friends of agriculture took place at the Kings Arms Inn where petitions in favour of the Corn Laws were unanimously agreed too”.²² A report in the *Lancaster Gazette* in 1839 named 33 villages in the surrounding district in support of the Corn Laws.²³ Saul’s sympathies lay with the agriculturalists. After 1815 the Corn Laws kept the price of grain, and hence bread, high, by taxing imports. Farmers feared the abolition would greatly reduce their incomes.²⁴

Saul and the Mechanics Institute in Lancaster

On 11 December 1823 a meeting was held at the Royal Oak Inn under the chairmanship of Lawson Whalley to propose the establishment of a Mechanics’ & Apprentices’ Library in Lancaster.²⁵ The Mayor then chaired a public meeting in the Town Hall held on 2 March 1824. Dr Whalley and Mr B Dockray, the town clerk, and other gentlemen addressed the meeting and it was unanimously resolved to adopt the library as a public institution for the use of the journeyman, mechanics and apprentices of the Lancaster district.²⁶ Saul had a respect for learning and had an active involvement in the establishment of the library.²⁷ He volunteered to teach geometry and perspective drawing on two nights each week during the winter months.²⁸ He was a member of the Committee between 1831 and 1833 and was described as a “warm supporter and a liberal contributor from the first”.²⁹ The library was established on Mary Street, and moved to different addresses in Lancaster as it grew and subscribers increased. It thrived and was the forerunner of the Storey Institute.

Saul the gardener

His passion for gardening led him to publish numerous articles relating to horticulture, fruit trees, vegetables, flowers and garden structures. These include: a water dispatcher; fruit picking appliances; turnip cutting machine; cleansing hot house flues; frameworks for supporting plants; advice on heating greenhouses and dwellings by hot water; a garden foot scraper; advice on planting potatoes & an improved potato planter (Figure 5). In 1831 J C Loudon’s *Gardener’s Magazine* described him as, “our correspondent, Mr Saul is a man of strong and original intellect and of great patriotism and disinterestedness”. He concentrates on the growth of “new fruits and has established his pomological gardens in Skerton entering into correspondence with the first nurseries in Britain and America”.³⁰ In 1832 Saul was in correspondence with the editor of the *New York Farmers’ Journal* on horticultural matters. A letter from New York sent by the editor comments on the cholera epidemic in New York and throughout America.³¹ Saul was an enthusiastic horticulturalist and florist, winning prizes at the annual Lancaster Horticultural Shows, as reported in the *Lancaster Gazette* between 1832 and 1835. He exhibited many different apples and pears: in 1833 he displayed forty different sorts of apples grown in his own orchard at Skerton. But in 1836 a notice stated, “Having disposed of his pomological garden he has a reserve of his apple & pear plants, also a few vines in pots all for a modest price”.³²

Saul’s designs, ideas, opinions and inventions

Matthias Saul was a prolific designer of new or improved items. He had many varied articles published that have survived in national journals and newspapers, including journals in America,

Germany and France. These reflect his working life and are associated with buildings and wood, the local environment of Lancaster and Wyre districts and his keen interest in horticulture. Here are some examples:

1827 A self-acting shower bath design.³³ 1828 Description of an apparatus to enable persons to escape from a top room in a house in case of fire.³⁴ 1830 Improvement in the River Lune; plan & description of the flow of the River Lune, with replies in later magazines.³⁵ 1831 An improved design of a Reform mangle.³⁶ 1842 A burglar alarm system designed after the robbery at Mr Tongues home, Forton Cottage, near Lancaster.³⁷ 1843 Discussion & design of turf drains.³⁸ 1846 A more efficient design for opening & closing a Turnpike or other gates without leaving the house, using the Scotforth Turnpike gate as an example.³⁹



Fig. 5 Saul's potato planter

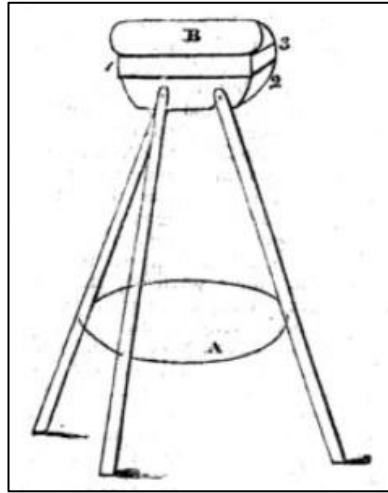


Fig. 6 His portable seat

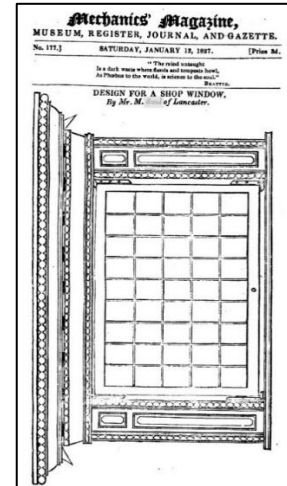


Fig. 7 A new shop window

A Portable Seat for Public Places 1827 (Figure 6)

Saul said, "This seat will be of interest to those who attend the Public Courts where, as in the case of our Crown and Shire Halls at Lancaster, there is generally a very limited accommodation for the public". "At the recent trial at Lancaster, respecting the Mersey and Irwell Navigation Company, which took up two days, the Court was crowded almost to suffocation; and the seat I have described I had prepared especially for the occasion". "Instead of standing the whole time, as hundreds of others did, I was nearly as much at my ease as if I had been sat at my own fire-side".⁴⁰

Design of a Shop Window 1827 (Figure 7)

Matthias Saul wrote that "the Lancaster Police Commissioners have lately compelled the removal of bow windows from the new street and to cause them to be replaced by straight ones". "The present design was executed by myself in the centre of that street".⁴¹ He added a labelled diagram of the shutter system each side of the window with a detailed description of the workings.

A Revolving Window 1823 (Figure 8)

Saul said, "Gentlemen: I beg leave to send you a description of a new invention of mine for a revolving window". The outside of the sliding sashes is made to turn into the inside of the room so that cleaning, painting & glazing is done with ease. He gives a detailed account of the construction, saying that he had put six of these improved windows into his own house twelve months previously, adding that the slides also prevented the rain from beating through. He concluded by quoting an accident in Stratford Place, London in July 1823 when a footman, George Robinson⁴² aged 15, stood on the outside, first-floor window ledge, cleaning the drawing room window when he slipped and fell to his death. Saul hoped that the adoption of his new window would prevent this type of accident occurring in the future. He signed off with his name, Matthias Saul.⁴³

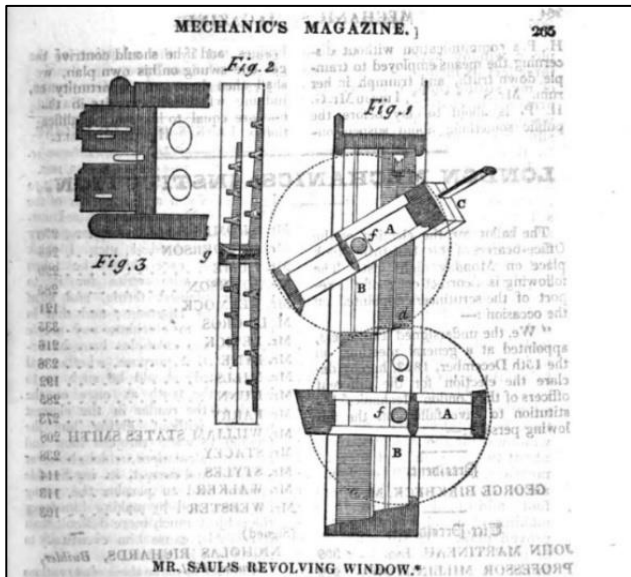


Fig. 8 Saul's revolving window design

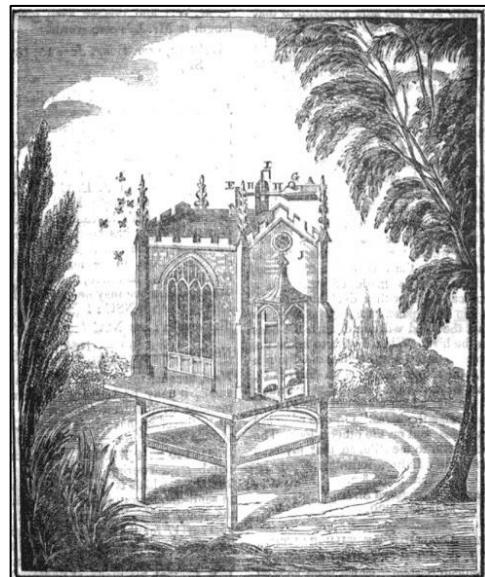


Fig. 9 Saul's new beehive

Design for a Beehive 1829 (Figure 9)

This elaborate beehive was constructed and used by Saul and would probably have stood in his garden in Skerton, the bees essential for pollinating his fruit trees, vegetables and flowers. A vane on the top turns the bee house on a stage so that the entrance is always opposite the side from which the wind blows: this allows the hive to be weighed *in situ*. The hive was made from straw in a conical shape with a deal [wooden] bottom and lockable “so that his bees are safe from intruders”.⁴⁴

Saul's bookcase 1846 (Figure 10)

Saul's seven-foot high “bookcase and writing desk clock” is described as a “curious and useful piece of furniture” in a Loudon encyclopedia.⁴⁵ He used the twelve letters of his name as hour markers on the dial. He was proud of this design and in his Last Will and Testament he left this piece of furniture to “Robert Hall, the son of his esteemed friend, John Hall solicitor”.

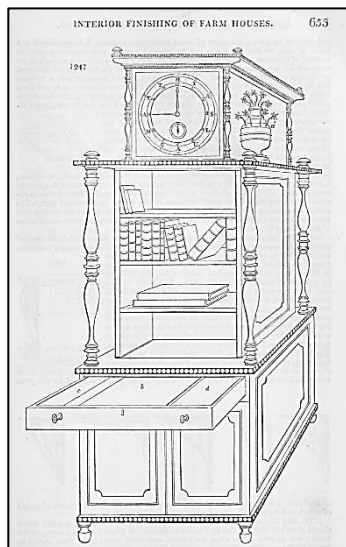


Fig. 10 Saul's writing desk and bookcase

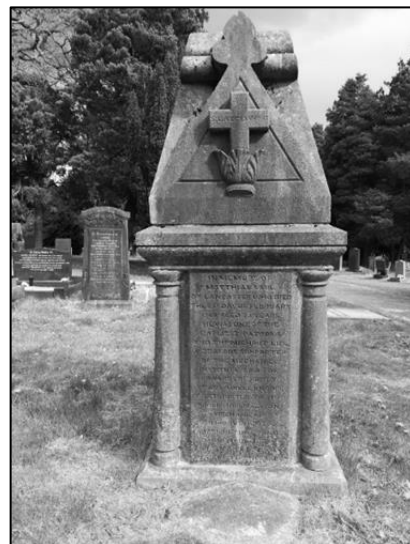


Fig. 11 Saul's tombstone, Lancaster Cemetery

Saul's retirement and death

In 1842 Saul said “I have given up all my business due to illness and retired to the country to spend the remainder of my days where my forefathers lived in the neighbourhood of Garstang”.⁴⁶ In the Population Census of 1851 he was recorded as living at cottage number 50 in Garstang, aged 63 and

living alone and unmarried. He continued his communications to the *Lancaster Gazette* on various subjects. In 1850 he wrote that Garstang needed to re-design their funeral car. Also in 1850 he commented on the defects in leases and a proposal to remedy the letting of land and property. Again in 1850 a letter supported the establishment of a cemetery in the vicinity of Lancaster east of the Workhouse on the site of one of the worked-out stone quarries. He suggested paths and gardens could be laid out to provide a beautiful cemetery.⁴⁷ In 1854 there was a letter to J Wilson Patten Esq MP suggesting that this gentleman send down a “Mark Lane Express” to his tenantry in Winmarleigh so the farmers could see information on the latest markets. He returned to Lancaster in the mid-1850s. His death was reported in 1860 in the *Lancaster Gazette*: “Mr Matthias Saul, aged 73, joiner of Upper King Street, Lancaster died on the 25th February 1860”.⁴⁸

My impression is of a hard-working man who did not worry about his appearance and clothing; he was said to be a blunt speaker probably with a broad Lancaster dialect. He was a bachelor, likely to be a familiar character in Lancaster known by many of his townsfolk. He was not afraid to speak up for what he believed in and was not afraid to challenge authority or anyone of a higher status. An instance of how he might be seen by others was at a Mechanics’ Institute annual meeting when he was laughed at when using the expression, “I say that’s no go”.⁴⁹

His obituary says, “a rough exterior with rough, uncouth and eccentric manners but he laboured diligently for his fellow men”. He was also described as, “well-meaning and of having an ingenious turn of mind and planned many things, but we are not aware that in this line he ever reaped any pecuniary benefits from his designs and ideas”.⁵⁰ He left less than £20 assets in his will. He was unmarried and his nephew, Matthias (Matthew) Dunderdale, a coal carter, is mentioned in his will. The 1861 census lists his nephew as living at Upper King Street with his wife and child.

His monumental gravestone – a designer to the end

A letter Saul sent to the editor of the *Lancaster Gazette* in 1857 recommended the good qualities and cheapness of limestone as a gravestone. He stated that he had personally seen the stone being planed by steam power at the marble works of Mr Fawcett of Lancaster.⁵¹ His instructions, design and plan for his limestone monument in Lancaster Cemetery are mentioned in his will with a codicil stating the increased amended sum of £65 was to be paid for the construction and maintenance of his monument forever (Figure 11).⁵² He fixed on his burial place in the newly-opened cemetery and left a diagram of his coffin stating the dimensions, wood, size of nails and screws, and the manner of how his body was to be placed in it, with his head supported on a cushion he had sat on for many years. He ordered that no name be attached to the coffin but a brass plate to be fixed to the coffin decorated with an engraving of an apple and the motto, “*The ruling passion is strong in death*” (from Alexander Pope *Moral Essays* 1735) The inscription on the monument reads:

In memory of Matthias Saul of Lancaster who died the 25th day of February 1860. Aged 73 years. He was one of the earliest patrons and throughout life a zealous supporter of the Mechanics Institute and for upwards of forty years a well-known contributor to the public journals on mechanical improvements, agriculture, and horticulture. This monument was designed by himself.

Author profile

I have spent most of my life in the Lancaster district, my working life in nursing. The search to unravel Matthias Saul’s life has taught me many new and interesting facts and ways to research a person or subject. I will continue with my enjoyment in local history. I appreciate all the help and advice given to me by Gordon Clark. Email@mizzypj@gmail.com

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