



JAMES ALLEN

SHEPTON MALLET'S 'SNOWDROP KING'

James Allen (1832 – 1906), son of Shepton Mallet and renowned horticulturalist

Born in the mid-nineteenth century to a local milling family James spent his early years at the Mill House in Windsor Hill Lane. He had two brothers, John and Joseph, and all three worked in the family business as Corn and Cheese Factors. In 1853 he married Ellen, with whom he had four sons and three daughters.

1 Married life and children: James and Ellen lived at Park House, on Park Road near the corner with the High Street, and it was here that he bred most of his snowdrops. Please note that this is a private house.

2 Later years: After his brother John died, James and Ellen moved into his house, Highfield House, and spent the rest of his life there. Now part of Mendip District Council offices.

James Allen was an active member of the Shepton Mallet community and held several public offices in the town as well as being a staunch supporter of the Liberal cause.

3 Position and profile: James would have seen the spire of the Market Cross rebuilt when he was a nine-year-old boy. A centrepiece for the town for centuries, and the location for its Friday Market, its origins go back to the 1500s.

He was High Constable of Shepton Mallet in 1863 and arranged the local celebrations for the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark on 10th March 1863.

Bands accompanied a procession through the town, bell-ringers pealed the bells and each child received a penny bun. Ceremonial oak trees were planted on Waterloo Road; James Allen performed the tree-planting ceremony himself with a spade specially inscribed for the event.

4 Can you see any oak trees that he ceremonially planted on Waterloo Road?

The Victorian obsession with the snowdrop plant reflected the start of James Allen's lifelong passion for snowdrop too, along with all the other spring blooming flowers. Soldiers returning from the Crimean War brought back bulbs to the delight of horticulturalists. Allen planted many different varieties and they grew well in the light soil at Park House. He was quick to notice any different forms and shapes among them and became the first person to breed new varieties from the wild plants. Among them are varieties named 'Magnet' and 'Merlin' that survive to this day and have been awarded the RHS Award of Garden Merit.

In his garden in Shepton Mallet he was growing all the known species of the time, raising others from his own seed and selecting the best for naming. So great was his collection that he became known as the Snowdrop King. Bulbs from his collection were distributed to friends and acquaintances and some made it to Kew. Sadly, his own collection was finally destroyed by insects and disease.

5 Death of James Allen: James died in 1906 and is buried in his family plot at Shepton Mallet Cemetery.

His grave was lined with moss, daffodils and hellebores and on his coffin were placed wreaths of spring flowers in great profusion. The obelisk that stood on the grave became unsafe and was finally taken down; its pieces can still be seen behind the chapel.

It is the aim of the Snowdrop Festival Project to restore the Allen family memorial



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