

The Life of Thomas Keates and How This Re-dedication Service Came About

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'A Liverpool Personality. Mr. Tom Keates, who has just died at West Derby, was seventy-eight, and had just completed a history of Everton Football Club, of which he was an original director. There was a law case between Mr. Keates and the club concerning this Jubilee Book. Mr. Keates was well known by his works. Although in coal as a business affair, he concentrated upon sports, opera, sea lore, and writing for the newspapers. He had a fine flow of language, and a happy aptitude for gossip-cum-news.'

This short obituary appeared in the Liverpool Echo of 15 October 1928, two days after the passing of Thomas Keates. I like the closing line, where it mentions his having had 'a happy aptitude for gossip-cum-news'. A huge part of the charm of the Golden Jubilee history of Everton F.C. is its conversational tone. Reading it, you are transported on a stroll through Stanley Park with old Tom himself. It is unashamedly crafted in his voice, from his perspective.

Details as to the nature of the legal suit he served the club with over payment for the book are scant. Fittingly, I was talking to a fellow Everton history buff outside Goodison Park a fortnight ago about today's service, the subject arose and we speculated that the conflict may have arisen over the club censoring the original manuscript. If only it had survived somewhere. Thomas Keates' the Director's Cut. I am intrigued by the fact it is unclear as to whether the football club commissioned Keates to write the book, or whether he took it upon himself and handed it to the incumbent board of directors in 1928 with a demand for payment. I can imagine Keates saying "well, somebody had to do it!"

A penchant for a gentle economy with the truth does seem to pervade throughout the Thomas Keates' story. As though he willed things to happen, imagined his own reality and strove for it in a sense. He arrived in Liverpool as a boy, in 1857, his parents John and Sarah having relocated the family from Cheddleton in Staffordshire, where young Tom was born on 15 May 1850. John Keates, who lies here with Sarah, was a railway porter. By the time of the 1871 census, the 21-year-old Thomas had joined his father on the railways as a clerk. The family were living in cramped, court-house conditions in Vauxhall, close to the Liverpool docks.

At this point we see a meteoric rise in Keates' fortunes, as, by the time of his first marriage, a little over three years later, on Christmas Eve of 1874, Thomas is a self-made man, working as a coal merchant and residing in Kirkdale. Notably, on his marriage certificate, Thomas lists his father John, a working-class man employed as a labourer his entire working life, as a 'Gentleman'. Thomas clearly had aspirations. His bride Annie Williams was the daughter of a Master Mariner. Things were looking up for the Keates family.

Annie gave birth to two daughters, Jane Edith, who is also buried here with her father, stepmother, and paternal grandparents, and Annie Elsie, both of whom grew up to become school mistresses. Thomas served on the local school board in the 1890s, having earlier chaired a movement which campaigned successfully for free schooling to be provided for children from poverty-stricken families across Liverpool mandatorily, rather than by the erratic means-testing system of the day.

Tragedy struck when Annie Keates passed away suddenly on 25 July 1882. She was buried with her parents across this cemetery in a section behind the catacombs. Widowed with two young daughters, Thomas must have been devastated, but he soldiered on. Happily, he met and married Esther Mary Perks, at Holy Trinity, Walton Breck in December 1883. Within a few short years, Keates' pursuits in relation to football would begin to make the news.

Thomas Keates was by no means an "original" director of Everton, as the Liverpool Echo obituary states. Perhaps he claimed to be. Perhaps the reported who penned the piece had a penchant for gossip-cum-news of his own. Keates did, however, win a place on the Everton F.C. board in 1897 and served the club in his no-nonsense manner for three years, plus a 12-month encore following the untimely passing of John Prescott after Keates had failed to gain reelection in 1900.

As his infamous outburst at the 1894 annual general meeting had proven, Keates was not afraid to speak his mind and hold others to account if he felt the need. He had demonstrated huge resolve in dragging himself and his family both literally and figuratively "up" in the world from the Vauxhall slums to the leafy suburbs of Walton-on-the-Hill in such a short space of time. Keates was clearly a man of action. A "doer". He bothered to write letters to and later pen articles for the local press on a range of subjects and comes across as a self-taught man, someone who strove to involve himself in things, to speak up and try to make a difference.

It is with great pride that I have arrived at today's service. I first located the old headstone, lying face-down, in August 2020. I contacted the Liverpool City Council Cemeteries and Crematoria department and was delighted when they had the stone turned over to reveal the inscription. Being a member of the Everton F.C. Heritage Society means the world to me, and, in my opinion, characters like Thomas Keates are heroes, for without them our history could never have been as accessible as it is. Perhaps his way with words and tendency to be economical with the facts at times helped create the legends that we look back on with such awe today. I wonder whether that was his intention. There are those who would scoff at a working-class upstart rebranding his father as a 'Gentleman', above his station. To me that speaks volumes for Thomas Keates as a son who looked up to and loved his dad, above and beyond any regard he had for social convention.

I am indebted to my fellow Everton F.C. Heritage Society members for supporting me in seeking to have Thomas Keates' grave restored; particularly to the lads who work at St. Luke's Church on a matchday and help fund projects like this, to Allen at E.F. Mackie stonemasons for help and advice and Thomas for his outstanding craftsmanship; to Alan Sheldon and staff at the Cemeteries and Crematoria department and Robert Bleakley at Liverpool City Council for his patience and assistance.

Finally, special thanks and a very warm welcome go to Laura Horton, a three-times great-grandniece of Thomas Keates, for taking ownership of the plot on behalf of the Keates family. It is my absolute honour to have Laura and her family here today to celebrate their Uncle Tom, a gentleman in his own right, a proud resident of Anfield, and a great Evertonian.