



November 25

Commemoration: Isaac Watts, hymnwriter, 1748

Isaac Watts (17 July 1674 – 25 November 1748), was an English hymn-writer, theologian and logician. He was recognized as the "Father of English Hymnody", as he was the first prolific and popular English hymnwriter, credited with some 750 hymns. Many of his hymns remain in active use today and have been translated into many languages.

Born in [Massachusetts], England, in 1674, Watts was brought up in the home of a committed Nonconformist — his father, also Isaac Watts, had been incarcerated twice for his controversial views. At King Edward VI School (where one of the houses is now named "Watts" in his honour), he learned Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

He displayed a propensity for rhyme at home, driving his parents to the point of distraction on many occasions with his verse. Once, he had to explain how he came to have his eyes open during prayers.

*A little mouse for want of stairs
ran up a rope to say its prayers.*

Receiving corporal punishment for this, he cried

*O father, father, pity take
And I will no more verses make.*

Watts, unable to go to either Oxford or Cambridge on account of his non-conformity, went to the Dissenting Academy at Stoke Newington in 1690, and much of his life centred around that village, then a rural idyll but now part of Inner London.

His education led him to the pastorate of a large Independent Chapel in London, and he also found himself in the position of helping trainee preachers, despite poor health. Taking work as a private tutor, he lived with the non-conformist Hartopp family at Fleetwood House and later in the household of Sir Thomas Abney and Lady Mary Abney at Theobalds, Cheshunt, in Hertfordshire, and at their second residence, Abney House, Stoke Newington. Though a non-conformist, Sir Thomas practised occasional conformity to the Church of England as necessitated by his being Lord Mayor of London 1700–01. Likewise, Isaac Watts held religious opinions that were more non-denominational or ecumenical than was at that time common for a non-conformist, having a greater interest in promoting education and scholarship, than preaching for any particular ministry.

On the death of Sir Thomas Abney, Watts moved permanently with his widow and her remaining daughter to Abney House, a property that Mary had inherited from her brother, along with title to the Manor itself. The beautiful grounds at Abney Park, which became Watts' permanent home from 1736 to 1748, led down to an island heronry in the Hackney Brook where he sought inspiration for the many books and hymns he wrote.

He died in Stoke Newington and was buried in Bunhill Fields, having left behind him a massive legacy, not only of hymns, but also of treatises, educational works, essays and the like. His work was influential amongst independents and early religious revivalists in his circle, amongst whom was Philip Doddridge, who dedicated his best known work to Watts. On his death, Isaac Watts' papers were given to Yale University, an institution with which he was connected because of its being founded predominantly by fellow Independents (Congregationalists).