HERStory: Making Invisible Women Visible

Research notes

| Group Number and Researcher Name: Group 6; Ana Velody, Lauren Cheetham-Birmingham, Meely Doherty, Hollie Tilling | |
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| Name of Research Focus: Mary Ann(e) Felgate | |
| Date of Birth: 1839 | Date of Death: c. 1919 |
| Main Reason to Research: Lady’s Companion at the Friends Asylum for the Insane, a crucial role to illuminate and a really interesting period for women at the Retreat and within mental health care. | |
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| Key Words: nurse, lady’s companion, asylum, mental health | |
| Synopsis for website | |
| *[Max 150 words]*  Mary Ann Felgate (sometimes spelt Mary Anne Felgate) was born in 1839, and worked at the Retreat, previously known as the Friends Asylum for the Insane, as a lady’s companion. She was born in London, and lived in Paddington, Middlesex, and Kensington during her lifetime. Mary moved to Walmgate, York during the 1880s. The asylum was one of the first in the world that believed psychiatric patients should not be mistreated; Mary Ann’s role was vital for this process as her role encouraged patients to feel comfortable and at home during their stay. Mary was not a nurse; instead, she provided the patients with comfort and support, and was one of the two women responsible for this role within the Retreat. During her time at the asylum, a number of new buildings were constructed and the hospital expanded widely.[[1]](#footnote-0) | |
| What have you found out? | |
| Mary Ann Felgate (sometimes spelled Mary Anne Felgate) was born in 1839 to Mary and John Felgate in Stepney, London, and is listed in their birth index for July-Aug-Sept, which means she was born in the latter part of that year.[[2]](#footnote-1) She was baptised on October 27, and was likely born in July. In 1861, she’s listed as living in Middlesex; by the 1881 census she was living in Kensington, where she works as a companion to a young woman, and she has moved to York by 1891 and is listed as living in Walmgate.[[3]](#footnote-2) [[4]](#footnote-3)She never married and is listed as a spinster in the 1911 census. [[5]](#footnote-4)After finishing working in Yorkshire in 1910, she moved to live with her sister in Paddington.[[6]](#footnote-5)  She was a Ladies Companion at Belle Vue House, a residence very near to the Retreat, which was acquired by the Retreat for a Ladies Villa in 1879. The role of a Ladies Companion is detailed in a written note with a list of the duties likely to be adopted from c. 1878 - 1879. [[7]](#footnote-6)These roles include looking after the linens and clothes of the patients, making sure they are well fed, and providing them with company. This was also a role of great significance in the context of the care provided by the Retreat to psychiatric patients. The Retreat was a front running in more humanitarian care for mental health patients and employing Ladies Companions was a big part of that.  She is listed in four annual reports at the Retreat published in 1889, 1890, 1892 and 1900 that develop in their structure firstly showing the role of Ladies Companion as the sole role of female authority and gradually including more matrons and senior nurses as both more positions were created and more authority given to nurses.[[8]](#footnote-7) Her time at the Retreat also saw the building of a number of new buildings to house and support the recruitment of more nurses including in 1899 the creation of the new Nursing Home or West Wing, which then continued to be developed into the early 20th century noted as one of the most significant expenditures in the 1900 report. [[9]](#footnote-8) [[10]](#footnote-9) | |
| Why is this interesting and what impact have they had? | |
| *[What is it about their life that is interesting to you]*  Mary Ann Felgate was a Ladies Companion at the Retreat, previously known as the Friends Asylum for the Insane. While nurses and doctors are often well-recorded in the Retreat records, Mary’s role of lady’s companion is not so widely researched. Rather than being involved in the treatment of patients, she instead was a friend and comforter for them, helping them feel at home. We thought this was interesting as it embodies the humanisation of mental patients that the Friends Asylum’s founders were hoping to encourage in the psychiatric community.  The Ladies’ Companion was fundamental to the running of institutions both internally and externally, and played a huge role in the management, wellbeing and entertainment of patients, and were responsible for maintaining regular correspondence with the family and friends of patients. On a large scale, they would be responsible for the working of the household, directing the housekeeping department and ensuring that all female nurses and servants followed the rules and regulations. They were also responsible for the amusement of the patients: being expected to interact with them, see that they were regularly taken for walks and drives, and act as a general ‘companion’. A specific role mentioned within the Retreat Archives that Mary Ann Felgate herself would have had to carry out includes reading a chapter of the Bible to the nurses, servants and patients, every morning and evening.  Ultimately, her role as a Ladies’ Companion must not be underestimated, as while the institution itself aimed to improve the mental wellbeing of the patients, the role of the ladies companion was to “encourage, soothe, amuse and employ [the patients] as circumstances may suggest and as the treatment may permit”. | |
| Are there opportunities for follow up research? | |
| *[If you had more time or resources, where would you go to next]*  Mary Ann had an interesting family tree, with numerous siblings. At the end of her life, she was living with one of her siblings; it would be interesting to know which sibling this was and what their occupation was. Mary Anne also moved across the country numerous times in her life, and it would be interesting to find out whether this was typical for lady’s companions, and if she was the common stereotype for this role.  It would also be interesting to compare the lady’s companions of upper class households with the lady’s companions of the asylum and whether their roles were similar. Moreover, to focus specifically on the Retreat, an area for further research would be how much input the lady’s companions like Mary had on running it/how involved they were in decision making processes/if they have any authority. It would be interesting to find out if they were treated as integral members of the pastoral care team at the Retreat or if they were dismissed or treated poorly.  To take this in the wider context, there is potential follow up research to be done when looking at the Retreat's humane attitude and treatment of mental health patients is reflected in modern mental health treatment and attitudes today: what role did lady’s companions like Mary Ann Felgate have in this process and changing attitudes to mental health? What is, over 100 years later, the modern equivalent of her role? | |
| In your research have you discovered any connection to the Castle Museum collections/sites | |
| *[Key collections/buildings or items held by YMT to support the research ]*  N/A | |

1. Image of Mary Ann Felgate: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/nfzzav2q/items> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. 1839 Birth Index: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/8912/images/ONS_B18393AH-0940?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=03acd9b58cb86ae9072b8c190a477083&usePUB=true&_phsrc=MnL210&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=2965189> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. 1881 Census: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/7572/images/LNDRG11_24_29-0750?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=6f29c6829fdef060585ce2c3b8ff9d42&usePUB=true&_phsrc=MnL212&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=13142658> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. 1891 Census: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/6598/images/ERYRG12_3895_3898-0175?usePUB=true&_phsrc=MnL201&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=17951931> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. 1911 Census: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/2352/images/rg14_00059_0889_03?treeid=&personid=&rc=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=AkL1&_phstart=successSource&pId=814331> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Timeline of her life: <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/family-tree/person/tree/3119949/person/-1190676375/story> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Letter: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/xz2vveeq/items?canvas=6> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. 1889 Report: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/un3d86mm/items?canvas=9>

   1890 Report: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/mga8e62j/items?canvas=3>

   1892 Report: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bxfubd4b/items?canvas=3>

   1900 Report: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/nm22pfum/items?canvas=5> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Report: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/nm22pfum/items?canvas=7> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Pictures: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/zxgtzyzv/items?canvas=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)