

Anne Robinson 1834-1893: Content warning: Contains discussions of suicide.

Anne Robinson, (sometimes spelt Ann or Annie) was born in 1834 in North Yorkshire to parents John and Mary Smith. She was baptised as Anne Smith on the 2nd of March 1834 in Thirsk.¹ In 1851 when Anne was seventeen, she was living in Sowerby, a village within Thirsk, along with her parents and three younger siblings Elizabeth, Margaret, and John.² It is unknown how they met, but in 1857 Anne married Richard Robinson, a watchmaker from Sheffield.³ Although they married in Thirsk, afterwards, Anne moved to Sheffield with Richard where she lived until her death in 1893. In 1858, a year after their marriage, Anne gave birth to their first daughter Annie Robinson and then in 1860 and 1864 gave birth to their two sons Herbert and Edgar Robinson.⁴ Her husband Richard eventually took over his father's, Thomas Robinson's, watchmaking business which is believed to have been the family's main source of income. Anne did not have her own occupation and is registered on the census records as a 'watchmaker's wife'. It is therefore believed that Anne, after marrying her husband, lived a reasonably comfortable life as a middle-class woman within Sheffield. However, to class her as unemployed is probably untrue, she would have been involved both in the running of her house and to some extent her husband's business. Although, as newspaper reports suggest, there were continuous money issues for Richard and his family leading to bankruptcy in the 1870s.⁵ Whilst this cannot be proven, we theorised that the family's bankruptcy may have been a major factor in Anne's deteriorating mental health and eventual stay at the Retreat.

Anne was admitted to the Retreat on the 8th of December 1892 when she was 58 years old and whilst there she was deemed to be depressed and suicidal.⁶ In the Retreat's patient notes Anne repeatedly worries over her husband's financial state, anxious that he cannot afford for her to be there at the institution implying that the family's money troubles were a factor in her current mental state. However, these concerns were repeatedly dismissed as "ramblings" by the Retreats staff.⁷ On the 25th of February 1893, only two months after her admittance, Anne was discharged from the Retreat and said to have been mentally improved,

¹ Yorkshire Baptism Records.

² 1851 Census Record.

³ Yorkshire Marriage Records.

⁴ 1881 Census Record.

⁵ Sheffield Daily Telegraph (Sheffield, England) Issue: 6241, June 12, 1875.

⁶ Case Books Females, Admission dates 22 October 1892 - 30 March 1898, Borthwick Institute Archive RET/6/5/1/17, 25-26.

⁷ Borthwick Institute Archive RET/6/5/1/17, 25-26.

only becoming depressed occasionally.⁸ However, in reality, Anne's mental state had seen little improvement and in April 1893 her suicide was reported in the local newspaper. Anne committed suicide through deliberate consumption of carbolic acid at her home, 10 Northumberland Road, in Sheffield. The Jury's verdict was that she had committed suicide whilst in a state of temporary insanity suggesting that the Retreat's medical care had not been sufficient.⁹ Anne Robinson was buried at Fulwood Christ Church in Sheffield on the 18th of April 1893 where her husband was also buried nine years later in 1902.¹⁰

Historiography of suicide and mental health during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century varies. Anderson evaluated that as Victorian England industrialised from traditional to modern living, it was inevitable that suicide rates would increase.¹¹ The case of Anne Robinson supports this notion, given it is evident that her husband's finances may have contributed to her self-destruction. Kushner's study of Victorian women and suicide identified that periodically it was argued men committed suicide at a higher rate than women because they took sole responsibility of the household, finances and family.¹² Comparatively, women had a lower suicide rate seemingly because their only motive was a loss of honour, and as a sex they were more adjusted and harmonised with their easier domestic and social roles.¹³ Kushner suggests this perception was only the case because men choose more violent methods whereas women would choose more passive ones for self-destruction.¹⁴ Whilst Anne's death is contingent with this idea of the Victorian's female suicide as passive, it is perceptible the instability of her domestic life, out of her control, contributed further to her illness. Higonnet proposes the notion that the cause of suicide is a matter of interpretation as it is difficult to assess, since the autonomy and freewill of women was always in question in the nineteenth century- their intentions were opaque.¹⁵ Anne's true motives aren't known purely because they were not directly recorded by her, what drove her to this can only be inferred from educated guesses of what was recorded by men around her.

⁸ Borthwick Institute Archive RET/6/5/1/17, 25-26.

⁹ Borthwick Institute Archive RET/6/5/1/17, 25-26.

¹⁰ Yorkshire Death Records.

¹¹ Olive Anderson, "DID SUICIDE INCREASE with INDUSTRIALIZATION in VICTORIAN ENGLAND?," *Past and Present* 86, no. 1 (1980): 149-73, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/86.1.149>.

¹² Howard I. Kushner, "Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10, no. 3 (April 1985): 537-52, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494159>.

¹³ Kushner, "Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective"

¹⁴ Kushner, "Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective"

¹⁵ Margaret Higonnet, "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century," *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2 (1985): 103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772124>.

The Retreat, although deemed as revolutionary at its inception, ultimately conformed to popular Victorian attitudes towards female mental health, which may have led to a decline in the effectiveness of the care provided. The narrative of the Retreat is often simplified to one of enlightenment; it was founded by William Tuke and the Society of Friends in 1796, due to their concerns over mistreatment within asylums after the death of Hannah Mills in 1790.¹⁶ Tuke envisioned a new hospital which provided compassionate treatment to those with mental health conditions, devising an approach to care characterised by the Quakers belief in an individual's right to equality, peace and most of all in “inner light”, where everyone is seen to have goodness and reason within themselves.¹⁷ However, especially by Anne’s admittance in 1892, gender stereotypes and class prejudices still affected the treatment given in these reformed mental asylums.¹⁸ Femininity and women’s hormonal cycles were linked to their predisposition to mental health issues, they were seen as weaker and had more risks to provide stress.¹⁹

Whilst Anne’s suicide was tragic, she herself was not a ‘dark’ woman; she was a real person, a mother and a wife. Her life and experiences should be interpreted in a manner that goes against the temptation to cast those who fell against idealised Victorian womanhood as ‘dark’, as if there was instead a lightness to those who conformed; instead the misogynistic system and it’s failure to care for her should be highlighted as wrong. Instead, the social history focus of York Castle Museum can be used to demonstrate that Victorian misogyny stripped women of their agency. Anne’s financial status and how her mental state was perceived were taken out of her control based on how her gender dictated her behaviour and her lack of control over her own finances and future. Anne’s only agency, her control over her household, was ultimately how she obtained the cleaning agent carbolic acid she destroyed herself with, a juxtaposition which builds upon the unique social history setting of Castle Museum and its medicinal and domestic collections. Anne’s life is archetypal of the social and particularly medical historical interests of Dr Kirk, the Museum's founder and her contemporary.²⁰ Interested in how industrialisation was changing society, he amassed part of

¹⁶ Barry Edginton, “The York Retreat,” *Victorian Review* 39, 1 (2013): 9

¹⁷ Anne Digby, “Changes in the Asylum: The Case of York, 1777-1815,” *The Economic History Review* 36, 2 (1983): 229; Edginton, “The York Retreat,” 9, 12

¹⁸ Andrew Scull, *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, (Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 1981), 320

¹⁹ Janet Oppenheim, “*Shattered Nerves*”: *Doctors, Patients, and Depression In Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 188

²⁰ “The History of York Castle Museum”, *York Castle Museum*, accessed January 07, 2024. <https://www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk/about-us/the-history>

the collection from his patients in exchange for medical treatment, so not only was he considerate of how the financial implications of illness were experienced in those consequences also directly shaped York Castle museum's collection.²¹

250 Word summary:

Anne Robinson was born in 1834 in North Yorkshire. In 1857 Anne married Richard Robinson, a watchmaker and subsequently moved to Sheffield. In 1858 Anne gave birth to their daughter Annie, followed by two sons, Herbert and Edgar. Sometime after their marriage her husband Richard took over his father's watchmaking business and Anne is registered on the census records as a 'watchmaker's wife'. Anne then, for a while, lived a comfortable life as a middle-class woman, which would have involved running her house. However, newspaper reports suggest there were continuous money issues for Richard's business leading to bankruptcy in the 1870s, which appears to have been a major factor in Anne's deteriorating mental health and eventual treatment at the Retreat hospital.

Anne's story shows how misogyny affected the treatment of women in asylums. She was admitted in December 1892 and whilst there she was deemed to be depressed and suicidal. In the patient notes Anne repeatedly worries over her husband's financial state, anxious that he cannot afford for her to stay and receive treatment at the hospital. However, her concerns were repeatedly dismissed as "ramblings" by the staff. In February 1893 Anne was discharged and said to have been mentally improved, only becoming depressed occasionally. However, in April 1893 Anne committed suicide through deliberate consumption of carbolic acid at her home in Sheffield. The Jury's verdict was that she had committed suicide whilst in a state of temporary insanity suggesting that the Retreat's medical care had not been sufficient.

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²¹ Ibid.

[returnUrl=%2Ftree%2Ffmp-27973236-1865664172%2Ftree%2Ffmp-27973236-1865664172%2Frecord-merge%2F2566317121.](https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=GBC/1881/0021627196&expand=true)

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