

## Dorothy Bleckly Research Profile

Dorothy Bleckly (also spelt Bleckley) who was born and raised in Yorkshire, was admitted into The Retreat shortly after the abrupt death of her husband in 1826.<sup>1</sup> She was widowed at the age of 50, with seven remaining children, her youngest aged 10.<sup>2</sup> Dorothy's life had many characteristics which fit the mould of a typical Georgian mother, however several aspects of her later life signified a break away from such assumptions.



The Friends Retreat, York  
Print by Henry Brown, 1800-1830

Dorothy fits into the HERStory ethos of fronting the history of ordinary women. Although her life was largely undocumented, her story still highlights the importance of grief and bereavement in the Georgian period.

### Dorothy's Early Life

Dorothy was born in the Georgian period, which witnessed the beginning of the industrial revolution in York. Although this was not a period of particular impact for the citizens of York, the city did grow, majorly boosting the economy whilst maintaining the importance of markets. The industrialisation of York only matched competing cities in the nineteenth century. The city housed shopkeepers and domestic servants with family firms taking pride of place in the community.<sup>3</sup> Through Ancestry it was discovered that her husband, William Bleckly, worked as a linen draper and tea dealer in York and Scarborough and was a Quaker Minister.<sup>4</sup> Research into Dorothy's places of work was inconclusive as her documents from The Retreat labelled her occupation as 'unknown'.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that she would have spent the majority of her time as a stay at home mother caring for her children and maintaining the household.

### Dorothy's Experience of Motherhood

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Bleckly Admission Papers, 3 September 1827-11 January 1833, RET/6/1/2, Patients Admission Papers, The Retreat Archive, York. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fsnr6ja3/items?canvas=7>.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Bleckly Admission Papers, 3 September 1827-11 January 1833, RET/6/1/2, Patients Admission Papers, The Retreat Archive, York. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fsnr6ja3/items?canvas=7>.

<sup>3</sup> "A City Left Behind," *History of York*. Accessed January 22, 2024, <http://www.historyofyork.org.uk/themes/a-city-left-behind>.

<sup>4</sup> "Dorothy Bleckly, 1775", *Ancestry*, Accessed Dec, 20, 2023, [https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/?name=Dorothy\\_bleckly&birth=1775](https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/?name=Dorothy_bleckly&birth=1775).

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Bleckly Admission Papers, 3 September 1827-11 January 1833, RET/6/1/2, Patients Admission Papers, The Retreat Archive, York. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fsnr6ja3/items?canvas=7>.

During the Georgian era, the role of the mother was frequently romanticised as the peak of womanhood. Ingrained societal expectations of motherhood often forced the reality to look a lot more demanding as society expected women to “devote” their lives to raising their children, especially their sons.<sup>6</sup> Dorothy would have been expected to raise her five daughters and three sons alone. However, despite having a life-long dedication to raising their child, mothers were not usually the official guardian as, by law, this was the role of the father.<sup>7</sup> However, there were some circumstances where mothers were the official guardian including widowed women, unless the will of the husband stated differently. Therefore, in the case of the widowed Dorothy, she would have likely had rights over her youngest children who were still unmarried since the death of her husband.

Dorothy’s life seemed to follow the typical trajectory of a woman over this period. Women would often have a large family over the period that they were fertile, but only had a life expectancy of around 50 years.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Dorothy had her children over a 15 year period, yet died at 61.<sup>9</sup> During this period the maternal instinct was believed to stem from the same place as “insanity”.<sup>10</sup> Both were believed to fall underneath the same umbrella of “hysteria”, which was frequently misunderstood and neglected by doctors.<sup>11</sup> Women were warned that “hysteria” could lead to sudden out-bursts if not kept under “watchful guard”.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the practical duties of motherhood ended for Dorothy once she entered the Retreat, after the death of her husband. This suggests that Dorothy was struggling with both the mental strain of motherhood and grief.

### The Death of Dorothy’s Husband and Her Widowhood

The death of Dorothy’s husband highlights a neglected part of history which considers loss, bereavement and grief. Research surrounding specific areas of emotional history can be fairly sparse, meaning the scholarship has focused mainly on the Victorian period which began shortly after Dorothy’s death and was hugely influenced by the Georgian era. A hugely significant factor affecting women’s grief during Dorothy’s lifetime, was their ability to earn and provide for their families. In Dorothy’s case, her husband was the breadwinner and with

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<sup>6</sup> Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk, and Klaver, “‘Bland, Adoring and Gently Tearful Women:’ Debunking the Maternal Ideal in Geroge Eliot’s Felix Holt”, *Other Mothers : Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, 2008, 55-74.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Bleckly Admission Papers, 3 September 1827-11 January 1833, RET/6/1/2, Patients Admission Papers, The Retreat Archive, York. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fsnr6ja3/items?canvas=7>.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Taylor Allen, “Employment or Endowment? The Dilemma of Motherhood”, *Feminism and Motherhood in western Europe, 1990-1970*, 2005, 63-86.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Bleckly Admission Papers, 3 September 1827-11 January 1833, RET/6/1/2, Patients Admission Papers, The Retreat Archive, York. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fsnr6ja3/items?canvas=7>.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenman, Bayuk, Klaver, *Other Mothers : Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, 55-74.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenman, Bayuk, Klaver, *Other Mothers : Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, 55-74.

<sup>12</sup> Rosenman, Bayuk, Klaver, *Other Mothers : Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, 55-74

children to care for, some still being quite young, this meant that material concerns would have been a great source of worry. David Vincent said that ‘The loss of a close relation was so bound up with the material problems of life that at worst it seemed no more than an intensification of the misery of existence’.<sup>13</sup> Whilst this is a bleak outlook on Dorothy’s life span, it provides a useful lens to examine the general struggles of womanhood in this period. Familiarity with death could come across as a lack of feeling, highlighting the importance of ‘breaking bonds with the deceased and the return of survivors to autonomous lifestyles’.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, it is understood that mourning a loved one could be a rushed and impersonal process, which prioritised practical matters of finances and child care instead of expressing one’s feelings of loss. In this sense, Dorothy could be seen as an anomaly compared to other women in her period due to the depth of her grief after her husband’s death. This implies that this led to her admission a few months later into The Retreat in York.

### The Retreat

After the death of fellow Quaker Hannah Mills in York Lunatic Asylum, William Tuke built The Retreat in 1794.<sup>15</sup> Quakers played a dominant role in York, especially with the influence of the Tuke family. However, their different beliefs, such as the idea that the spirit of God was only found in people’s hearts, not through an intermediary, led them to be viewed differently from the general public.<sup>16</sup> But it was their humanist beliefs which were most influential.

Created during the Enlightenment period, The Retreat used Quaker teachings to provide ground-breaking care, focusing on ‘moral therapy’ to help care for patients, rather than the brutal methods used in other asylums.<sup>17</sup> Studies have also shown that women were often treated there more frequently than men, and for longer durations of time. It was first believed that it was due to the “confinement of ... gender-roles” that led to increased female admittance to asylums, and later ideas appeared that female ‘madness’ could be caused by their reproductive hormones.<sup>18</sup> Whilst it is not known exactly why Dorothy Bleckly was

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<sup>13</sup> David Vincent, “Love and Death and the Nineteenth-Century Working Class,” *Social History* 5, no. 2 (May 1980): 245.

<sup>14</sup> Julie-Marie Strange, “‘She Cried a Very Little’: Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c. 1880-1914,” *Social History* 27, no. 2 (May 2002): 145; Margaret Stroebe et al., “Broken Hearts or Broken Bonds: Love and Death in Historical Perspective,” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 10 (1992): 1205.

<sup>15</sup> R. H. S. Mindham. The Retreat at York of 1796 – Psychiatry in Pictures’, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 218, no. 5 (2021): 286–286, Accessed December 12th, 2023, doi:10.1192/bjp.2021.11.

<sup>16</sup> A.D. Bluckley, *Pietism to Preaching: The Changing Attitudes and Activities of Quakers in York. 1760-1825*, University of York, Department of History, n.d, 1-3.

<sup>17</sup> Ann-Marie Akehurst, ‘Quaker Architecture as an Agent of Cure at the York Friends’ Retreat’. *Quaker Studies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 45–76, Accessed December 23th, 2023. doi:10.3828/quaker.2020.25.1.4.

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Mason, ‘Quaker View of Female Lunacy? A Comparison of the York Retreat and York Lunatic Asylum in the Years 1813-15 and 1865-6.’ University of York: Department of History, 1992.

admitted, this suggests one reason as to why she was admitted, in addition to her grief, which gives a general idea about the treatment of women.

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# Dorothy Bleckly Journalistic Summary

Much of Dorothy Bleckly's life followed a predictable course. Born in Yorkshire in 1775, she was a wife and mother for 26 years. While her husband was the typical breadwinner, Dorothy took on the role of caretaker, looking after her children and her household. Our research shows that Dorothy's time as a devoted full-time mother was fairly typical of women in the Georgian period.

She had eight children over a 15 year period. Unfortunately one of her three sons passed away at a young age. Despite this loss, society placed an inordinate amount of pressure on women, expecting them to be fully dedicated to the raising of their children, an expectation that Dorothy largely fulfilled. However, after the sudden death of her husband in 1826, it is likely that Dorothy became overwhelmed by her grief.

While nineteenth century society mandated a practical fatalistic look at death, with a quick return to normal life, Dorothy, on the other hand, was heavily impacted by the loss of her husband. In this aspect of her life, Dorothy broke from the ordained course of life, becoming an anomaly compared to most other women of her period. This led to her admission to The Retreat, a York mental health asylum, opened by a local Quaker. Dorothy entered The Retreat in 1826 under constitutional circumstances, in the case of her first attack. This suggests a direct link between the death of her husband and the subsequent admission.

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