

Eliza Emma Reed Research Summary

Eliza Emma Reed was a mother, daughter, wife and sister born in Rudston in 1851. Daughter to Margaret and James Agars, Eliza became affiliated with York's dark history when she was admitted to the Retreat on May 14 1893 on account of her acute melancholia and violent outbursts. Eliza's husband, Walter John Reed, consented to her admittance, leaving their three children, Clarice Annie, Ethel Margaret, and Hilda Gertrude, in his sole care. On only her second day at the Retreat, Eliza attempted suicide, using a piece of broken crockery to cut her throat. From this point on, Eliza was kept under mechanical restraint to prevent her from inflicting further self-harm. This inhumane approach to mental illness is something that must be discussed and reflected upon. Stories like that of Eliza Emma Reed are vital to our understanding of women's history in York; though it is important to celebrate change-makers and glass-ceiling breakers, we must also recognise the existence of women who deserved so much better than what they got. Eliza died on January 27 1894 of pneumonia. She was so close to being formally discharged from the Retreat but, unfortunately, fell ill before getting the chance to rewrite her story. It is, therefore, up to us to do so.

The Retreat was originally founded as a Quaker Organisation by William Tuke in 1792, formally opening as a mental institution in May 1796. Appalled by the treatment of the mentally unwell following the death of a Quaker patient in Leeds, Tuke condemned the use of violence and restraint, instead promoting a philosophy of "moral treatment". Its mission was to treat the "insane" without the use of restraint, thus the Retreat became famous for its pioneering role in the moral treatment of the mentally ill.¹In fact, Robert Gardiner Hill's infamous lecture stressing the need for the abandonment of mechanical restraint paid tribute to the "admirable institution" of the Retreat.² A prerequisite of occupational therapy was implemented, with patients being encouraged to engage in tasks, such as gardening and sewing.³ This marked the beginning of patients being treated as equals, as opposed to animals, and the composition of the Retreat's patients and staff reflected this, regarding themselves as a "family-like unit".⁴In wider debates surrounding mental health, restraint was beginning to be deemed an unsuitable treatment, seeming only to produce the very worst

¹ R.H.S Mindham, "The Retreat at York of 1796," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 218, no. 5 (2021): 286. ² Robert Gardiner Hill, *A concise history of the entire abolition of mechanical restraint in the treatment of the insane; and of the introduction, success, and final triumph of the non-restraint system: together with a reprint of a lecture delivered on the subject in the year 1838* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1857), 146, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/kmarx2c8>.

³"1893- 97th Report," 1 Jan 1893-31 Dec 1983, RET/11/2/1/11, The Retreat Annual Reports, The Borthwick Institute for Archives, York.

⁴"The Retreat," *The Rowntree Society*, accessed Jan 18, 2024, <https://www.rowntreesociety.org.uk/explore/rowntree-history/rowntree-a-z/retreat-the/>.

effects for patients. Therefore, the supposed moral treatment of patients displayed at the Retreat marked a distinct change in attitude, with compassion being of the utmost importance.

It was due to a petition by her husband, Walter Reed, on account of Eliza's violent behaviour and suicidal ideation, that Eliza was admitted to the Retreat.⁵ After just a single day inside, Eliza would be placed in a mechanical restraint to prevent further self-injury, having already torn open her throat.⁶ Further attempts at self-injury, as well as physical and verbal abuse directed towards members of staff, would continue for several months. This led to almost daily instances of Mrs Reed being restrained for hours at a time. Many might regard restraint as controversial or immoral. Indeed, the Retreat itself had forbidden the "use of manacles and chains", so how does Eliza's reality align with the hospital's claims?⁷

Crucially, whilst perhaps cruel by modern standards, Eliza's restraint via straitjacket was a far more humane method than, say, ropes or chains in the sense that it prevented self injury whilst not cutting the skin of the one being restrained. That being said, while the Retreat's methods of restraint were, contextually, far more benevolent than their counterparts, in hindsight a modern audience can understand its problematic nature. In some cases, Reed was restrained for up to twenty-three hours at a time. This carried enormous health risks – namely the potential for blood to pool in the elbows, as well as swelling and pain as a result of poor circulation.

It must be noted that by the time of Eliza's arrival, the Retreat had lost much of its personal, Quaker touch. By the mid-1800s the Retreat's population had grown substantially, putting a strain on staff and causing serious regression in the treatment of its patients. In 1893, the year in which Mrs Reed was admitted, the Retreat struggled through major staffing changes, as well as considerable financial loss – a sum that would amount to £170,000 today.⁸ While attempts at reform were made in the twentieth-century, no significant changes were implemented until the 1950s, demonstrating the importance of funding and sufficient training in ensuring appropriate treatment for the mentally unwell.

Though it should be noted that admission to an asylum was perhaps controversial for a lady of some wealth in 1881, it was not entirely unusual. Plenty of women suffered from

⁵"Admission Papers," 22 Dec 1891-12 Oct 1894, RET/6/1/11, The Retreat Archive, The Borthwick Institute for Archives, York, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ffjyu445/items>.

⁶"Register of Mechanical Restraint," 26 Oct 1890-18 Jun 1893, RET/6/8/2, The Retreat Archive, The Borthwick Institute for Archives, York, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/w35n38s2/items>.⁷ Mindham, "The Retreat at York of 1796," 286.

⁸"1893- 97th Report."

However, such tales are frequently silenced. Thus, while Eliza's story may be rare to hear about, it was not an atypical experience for women in the nineteenth-century, and the onus is on us to highlight this.

On January 4 1894, Mrs Reed was declared ill, and her prognosis was not optimistic. Having taken a leave of absence from the Retreat towards the end of November, it would seem that Eliza's mental condition was improving. She was even willing to express her gratitude towards those at the Retreat who had, supposedly, aided her. Even though her psychological state had significantly improved – she was happier, more talkative, and able to have coherent conversations – she, sadly, did not have much time left. Just a few weeks later, Eliza Emma Reed died of pneumonia, aged 41, in the company of her medical attendant, Arthur H. Thompson, at Houndgate House on January 27.⁹ A report states that, “after many months of very anxious nursing, [Eliza] recovered sufficiently to go home on trial, and was on the point of discharge, when she was attacked a second time with influenza, which becoming complicated with pleura-pneumonia rapidly came to a fatal termination”.¹⁰ Eliza was on the cusp of receiving her official discharge from the Retreat but, unfortunately, never had the opportunity to change her narrative for the better.

Despite this, Eliza's influence on York is enduring, and her experiences can teach us a great deal. Eliza Emma Reed is remembered as a woman who struggled with her mental health, a woman who spent a good portion of her life within the confines of a mental institution, and a woman whose early, untimely death prevented her from seeing a positive change. However, she is so much more than this. Thanks to the archival records documenting the Retreat, her life can be explored and drawn upon in more depth. Using her story as an example, we are able to reflect upon the ethical nature of such facilities, with discussions around mental health continuing to be extremely prevalent within society to this day. Further, the late nineteenth-century saw the beginnings of the Women's Rights Movement, with discussions of female mental health becoming part of a larger debate around gender inequality and female autonomy. Reed's life and the challenges she faced fit into a much wider narrative of women who have known what it is to struggle, not just in York, but around the world.

⁹“Case Book Females,” 22 Oct 1892-30 Mar 1898, RET/6/5/1/17/65, The Retreat Archive, The Borthwick Institute for Archives, York, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/u2necjtx>.

¹⁰“Annual Reports,” 1889-1994, RET/1/2/1/11, The Retreat Archive, The Borthwick Institute for Archives, York, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/bxfubd4b>.

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Eliza Emma Reed was a mother, daughter, wife and sister born in Rudston in 1851. Daughter to Margaret and James Agars, Eliza became affiliated with York's dark history when she was admitted to the Retreat on May 14 1893 on account of her acute melancholia (depression) and violent outbursts. Eliza's husband, Walter John Reed, consented to her admittance, leaving their three children, Clarice Annie, Ethel Margaret, and Hilda Gertrude, in his sole care.

Opening in 1796, York's Retreat advocated for a more humane approach to mental health treatment, rejecting the use of fear to control patients, instead allowing them as much freedom as possible. However, on only her second day at the Retreat, Eliza, sadly, attempted to take her own life. From this point on, Eliza was kept under mechanical restraint (in a straitjacket) to prevent her from inflicting further self-harm. This inhumane approach to mental illness is something that must be discussed and reflected upon.

Stories like that of Eliza Emma Reed are vital to our understanding of women's history in York; though it is important to celebrate change-makers and glass-ceiling breakers, we must also recognise the existence of women who deserved so much better than what they got. Eliza died on January 27 1894 of pneumonia. She was so close to being formally discharged from the Retreat, going so far as to take a leave of absence at home with her family merely a month before. Unfortunately, Eliza fell ill before getting the chance to rewrite her story.

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