

HerStory Research: Elizabeth Frowe

Elizabeth Frowe lived and worked in York in the early fifteenth century, specifically 1409. Her colleague was listed, in ‘The Dean and Chapter Act Book’, as Joan Plummer of Goodramgate, suggesting Elizabeth likely worked there also. Plummer was charged in 1409 for procuring Frowe and another to ‘fornicate with ecclesiastical and other men’.¹ Having close links with the Augustinian clergy in York, Frowe worked as a bawd like many other

sex-workers in York at this time.² Naturally, as this involves the church - records on this are few, but

Excerpt from D&C AB

‘The Dean and Chapter Act Books’ in the Borthwick

Archives provided us with evidence of this co-operation.³ Whilst it is rare to find lay women in religious documentation of the time, the connection between the church and sex-work was not uncommon - 119 vicars choral of York Minster were accused of fornication between 1396 and 1489.⁴ Frowe’s experiences are particularly important as they illustrate the relationship between the church and the community it serves, whilst also starting conversations on the moral integrity of people who had a central role in fifteenth century York.

Context:

Sex-work and sexual identity as prominent themes in medieval York, are important to understand, to not only grasp the beliefs and ideals surrounding the topic but also to understand the position of Elizabeth Frowe. In medieval English society, sex-work played a crucial role in maintaining social order through the discourse that surrounds them, with literature presenting sex workers as cooperative and clever, which helped found a sense of solidarity.⁵ Sex workers were able to possess some degree of agency, as they were in charge of brothels and acted as bawds, as Frowe did. This is illustrated through sex-workers frequenting taverns, seeking out customers - John Derby, vicar choral of York Minster, was presented in 1472 for visiting the

¹ Ruth Mazzo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.

² Ibid.

³ *Dean and Chapter Act Book, 1387-1494* (D/C.AB.1), Borthwick Archives (York).

⁴ Adele Ryan, “‘Vicars and Tarts’: Medieval Prostitution and the Vicars Choral of York Minster, 1393-1485,” (master’s dissertation, University of York, 1995), 7.

⁵ Ruth Karras, “Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe” *Journal of Women’s History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 159-177.

tavern of John Betson every night and conversing with sex-workers.⁶ As a consequence of this, sex workers were both sexually and economically regulated, something which women bore the brunt of.⁷ Such prosecutions can be seen with Civic Ordinances in 1301 forbidding the keeping of brothels within the city and an entry to the House Books for 1483 describing the banishment of the sex-worker ‘Cherry Lips’.⁸ Despite these measures, sex-work in medieval York was viewed as a necessary evil, explaining the tolerance it received. Frowe’s story highlights how medieval sex-workers navigated society and shows how wider society, specifically religious houses, both used and tolerated this outlet.



Mapping sex-work in York:

Understanding the proximity of sex-work and religious related spaces is important when discussing the story of Elizabeth Frowe. Many cities in medieval England, such as Coventry (1445) and Leicester (1467), began to introduce legislation against brothels, especially outside the city walls and in Bristol action was taken against sex-workers themselves. However, other than this very little was done to dispel sex-work.⁹ In York the main centre of sex-work was in the shadow of the walls of the Minster in the centre of the Dean and Chapter area¹⁰. Many streets associated with sex-work in the Middle Ages, such as Love Lane, Cock’s Lane, and Grape Lane, maintained this status into the nineteenth century and hint to their former use. It is interesting to note that the primary locations for sex-workers were often close to religious houses - Grape Lane is near the York Minster and St Helen’s Church (1). Goodramgate, Frowe’s presumed place of work is within close proximity to the Parish Church of Holy Trinity Goodramgate, York’s second oldest medieval Church (2). Not only highlighting the availability of sex-work in medieval York, this links sex work with the Church, indicating that the clergy were key clients.¹¹ This may explain the lack of enforceable action against sex-work and the idea of it as a regrettable necessity. Medieval sex-workers in York are scarcely found in archival records, yet their work has left an important mark on the city today.

⁶ Karras, *Common Women*, 67.

⁷ Ibid.; Ryan, ““Vicars and Tarts””, 48.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 153-154.

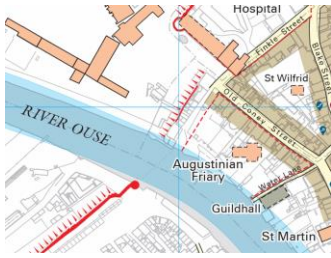


Figure 2. Map of Medieval

The Augustinian Friars:

Monastic orders were the centre of medieval communities, be they urban or rural. They were a system of charity and provision, providing work for their neighbours and food from the land they possessed. In York the Augustinian Friary - or Austin Friars as they are nominally known- was located on land between the Ouse and Old Coney Street, which stretched from St Leonard's

Landing to 'Common Hall Lane' near the Guildhall.¹² In 1409, the time Elizabeth Frowe's involvement with the Friars is recorded, the Friary was at its largest, with a walled precinct and a gateway opening into Old Coney Street. Much of what is known regarding the friary is discovered in their library catalogue, compiled on 8 September 1372 when William de Staynton was prior.¹³ The closest record of activity regarding the Austin Friars at York that we have is the year following Elizabeth Frowe's mention in the Dean and Chapter Act Book, on the 20th February 1410, Pope John XXIII, known as the anti-pope during the Western Schism, 'exhorted the faithful to give alms to the chapel,' we know from this that devoted religious activity was highly present within the York Austin Friars, which makes the record of the brothers' involvements with Frowe and her colleagues even more scandalous for the time. That the 'anti- pope' acknowledged the friars in this way suggests that either the information about their various fornications did not reach him, or that in his bid to legitimise his role as Pope he wished to gain the loyalty of prominent religious houses such as York's Austin Friars, but this is speculative. The Austin Friars was, as a city monastery, not secluded from the everyday life of the general population like the Cistercians at Fountains Abbey, but clearly from the story of Frowe, were to an extent, worldly.

Conclusion

Sex workers are historically seen as 'doubly deviant', both for breaking the law and for breaking moral ideals of femininity, and the documentation of Frowe helps to subvert this idea

¹² City of York Council 'York Historic Environment Record - Monument Record MYO2393 Augustinian Friary' in *City of York Council Online* originally in 'A History of the County of York' Vol. 3 in *Victoria County History* (London, 1974) <https://her.york.gov.uk/Monument/MYO2393> 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*,4.

by demonstrating how sex-work is not exclusively a female venture.¹⁴ Revealing the active participation of religious figures in sex-work is crucial to not just documenting women's lives but changing our perspective on the prevailing beliefs on female sexuality. While subverting the tradition of masculine story telling to ensure that these beliefs don't persist, the exploration of Elizabeth Frowe's life is significant to this day as these issues prevail.

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Appendix:

Figures 1 and 2., "Homicides in Late Medieval York." *Medieval Murder Map*. 2023. Accessed Jan 23, 2024. <https://medievalmurdermap.co.uk/maps/york/?t=%5B%22homicide%22%5D>.

¹⁴ Ashley Chen and Sarah Fiander, "Commemorating Captive Women: Representations of Criminalised and Incarcerated Women in Canadian Penal History Museums," In *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, ed. Jacqueline Z. Wilson, Sarah Hodgkinson, Justine Piche and Kevin Walby (London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018): 391.

Web summary

Elizabeth Frowe lived and worked in York in the early fifteenth century, specifically around 1409. She was involved with sex work within the city, probably in Goodramgate, where much of York's medieval sex work occurred. Joan Plummer, another sex-worker mentioned alongside Elizabeth in The Dean and Chapter Act Book, is stated to have worked in Goodramgate, and the close working relationship between these women would identify that Elizabeth also likely worked there. She had close links with the Augustinian clergy in York, procuring prostitutes and working as one for their benefit. Naturally, as this involves the church, records on this are few, but The Dean and Chapter Act Books in the Borthwick Archives provided us with evidence of this co-operation. It is rare to find a woman of low status mentioned in medieval archives, let alone religious ones, especially as she was mentioned alongside another woman, which shows the plurality of York's sex work in the fifteenth century. Through researching Elizabeth Frowe, a more personalised approach to medieval sex work in York can be formed, something which leaves its mark on the city to this day. There is a gap in historiography for sex workers specifically involved with the church, and the case of Elizabeth Frowe is particularly salient because it illustrates the relationship between the church and their community, whilst also provoking conversations around the moral integrity of those who had such a central role in the religious lives of lay people in York.

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