

HERStory.York Research: Hannah Mills

The Retreat was a mental health facility founded with the principles of sympathetic treatment, over 200 years ago.¹ It is a landmark in the city of York, recognisable by residents. However, little is known about the catalyst for its founding, a woman named Hannah Mills, whose death in the York Insane Asylum prompted the Tukes' establishment of the Retreat. This fits the trend of overwhelmingly male-dominated history, in which women's stories are often ignored or rewritten. Whilst Hannah's death had a huge impact on the proposed treatment of mental health patients, there is little material evidence of the actual life she lived.

Hannah Mills' known story begins in Hunslet Carr, Leeds.² A History of Leeds (1797) describes Hunslet Carr as a hub of industrial activity, frequently mentioned by travellers who used the road to commute to London.³ It was founded in 1770, and was impoverished but rich in textile artisans, mainly settled by families.⁴ On Samuel Mills' (Hannah's husband) burial certificate his occupation is stated as "stuffmaker"- a weaver and trader of woollen goods.⁵ This was often a lower earning position, making it likely that Hannah's life in Leeds was difficult, especially with a growing family. Whilst it is currently unknown whether Hannah and Samuel married in Leeds or where the births of her four eldest children occurred, their deaths and the grief inflicted on Hannah is clear.

Hannah's life after 1785 begins to unravel - likely beginning with the death of her husband Samuel in March 1786.⁶ Sadly, she was three months pregnant at the time and the baby, John Mills, was born in September of the same year - making her a widow and mother of five young children at the age of 38.⁷ Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon experience - Hannah would not be alone in her grief.⁸ However, the events that followed further impacted her grief. Tragically, Hannah consequently lost three of her children. Her eldest child, Samuel Mills Jnr, passed away at the age of 13 in September 1787; her youngest child, John Mills, at the age of 16 months in January 1788; and finally her daughter, Hannah Mills Jnr, at the age of 5 in November 1788.⁹ In spite of her grief, Hannah became solely responsible for her two young children, Thomas (who was physically disabled) and

¹ We are extremely grateful to Rosalind Batchelor, without whom the extent of our research would not have been possible.

² Samuel Mills Burial Record, England & Wales, Quaker Birth, Marriage, and Death Registers, 1578-1837, *Ancestry*, <https://www.ancestryinstitution.co.uk/search/collections/7097/>

³ *A History of Leeds: Compiled from Various Authors. To which is added, an history of Kirkstall Abbey* (Leeds: c.1797), 37.

⁴ Gillian Cookson, "Hunslet Foundry and the Making of Industrial Leeds", *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 93, no. 1 (2021): 149-155.

⁵ Samuel Mills Burial Record, *Ancestry*; Yorkshire Historical Dictionary, <https://yorkshiredictionary.york.ac.uk/words/stuff>

⁶ Samuel Mills Burial Record, *Ancestry*.

⁷ John Mills Burial Record, England & Wales, Quaker Birth, Marriage, and Death Registers, 1578-1837, *Ancestry*, https://www.ancestryinstitution.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/253164:7097?tid=&pid=&queryId=c31db7fb9360b2a97c012a384d9e7568&_phsrc=ewt50&_phstart=successSource

⁸ Bridget Hill, *Women, Work & Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: UCL Press, 1989), 242.

⁹ Samuel Mills Burial Record, England, Select Deaths and Burials, 1538-1991, *Ancestry*, https://www.ancestryinstitution.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/15952940:9840?tid=&pid=&queryId=cc323b54081063eb8295fa995174204a&_phsrc=48a463900&_phstart=successSource; John Mills Burial Record, *Ancestry*; Hannah Mills Burial Record, England & Wales, Quaker Birth, Marriage, and Death Registers, 1578-1837, *Ancestry*, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/321293:7097?tid=&pid=&queryId=1b89d006784260ae407d72ab0ad5f44f&_phsrc=uFX5&_phstart=successSource

Joshua.¹⁰ Whilst little is known about their later lives, they spent their younger years at the Gildersome School in Leeds after their mother's confinement in 1790.¹¹ This combination of painful events would have created immense financial and emotional distress for Hannah, compounded by the circumstances of a lack of income and a likely inability to run her husband's business with two young children.

Through her children's burial records, we can trace Hannah's associations with Quakerism; they were all buried near Meadow Lane, in the "Friends Burying-Ground", by the same man, David Jepson.¹² However, the family were not officially Quakers - "not in unity" is written on all their records, instead, they were attendees until Hannah joined in 1788. Quakerism has an established history of preaching and implementing philanthropic principles, aiming to help anyone who needs it. It is unsurprising that Hannah turned to them when facing this incredibly turbulent period in her life for emotional and financial assistance.¹³

Despite Hannah, along with her children, spending much of their lives in Leeds, the pivotal part of her life that we are focusing on is the short but significant period she spent in York. Many of her Quaker connections were in Leeds, including David Jepson who was involved in her admission to the Asylum.¹⁴ These connections spread across the religion, not only does it appear that the Quakers collectively financed her stay in York, but they also took responsibility for her two surviving children - further lending support to the idea that her membership was heavily influenced by a want to provide for her family.¹⁵

After the death of her husband and children, Hannah experienced a period of melancholy which resulted in her admittance to the York Insane Asylum. While there is a lack of records from her time there, something which can be attributed to a 'suspiciously' timed fire in the early 19th century, there is evidence of how other patients were treated, and one can infer that Hannah was treated similarly. Godfrey Higgins' investigation into the Asylum, revealed women being kept in appalling conditions, observing 13 in a tiny room that was soiled with excrement and had a complete lack of light. In his investigation, Higgins also found cases of female patients being harassed and abused by other male inmates and keepers.¹⁶ This is likely the kind of experience Hannah had, or at least witnessed in her time there.

¹⁰ In a phone call to the authors dated November 21, 2023, Rosalind Batchelor informed us of this additional information using her access to the Brighouse Monthly Meetings, circa May 7, 1790.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John Mills Burial Record, *Ancestry*.

¹³ Sheila, Wright, *Friends in York: The Dynamics of Quaker Revival, 1780-1860* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Entry of Hannah Mills in York Lunatic Asylum Admission Register, 15 March 1790, RET 1/8/8/7/1, The Retreat Archive, *Borthwick Institute for Archives*, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/n8ssn2bx/items>

¹⁵ Rosalind Batchelor, phone call to the authors, November 21, 2023.

¹⁶ Kathleen Jones, *Lunacy, Law and Conscience 1744-1854: The Social History of the Care of the Insane* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 89.

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250 Word summary:

Hannah Mills (1748-90) was a mother of five children. She spent the majority of her life in Leeds but the crux of her story takes place in York. She was married to Samuel Mills, a stuff-maker in Hunslet Carr.

In March 1786 Hannah lost her husband - this loss was compounded by becoming a pregnant single mother and widow, who would go on to lose three of her children, including her youngest within the space of two and a half years. This induced a period of deep melancholy, during which she sought help and found solace in the Quaker community, who would often provide for those in need - both financially and spiritually.

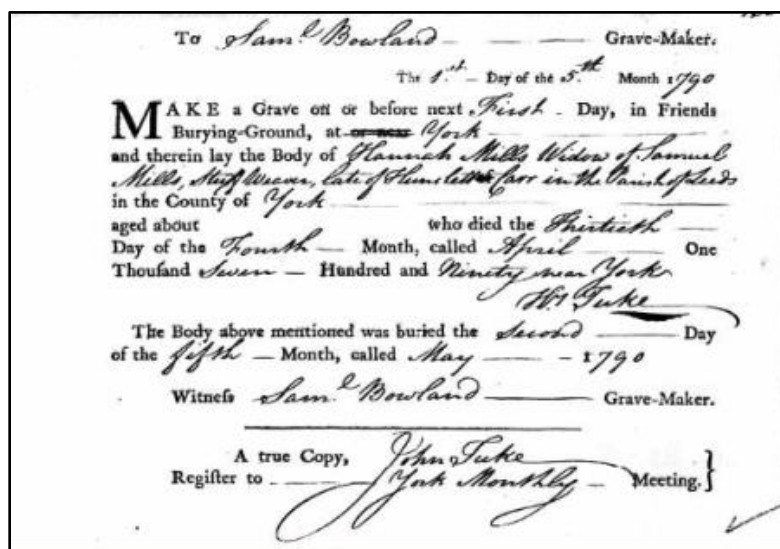
Consequently, in March 1790, Hannah was admitted to the York Insane Asylum, now Bootham Park Hospital. This was renowned for having very poor conditions, with patients regularly experiencing neglect and abuse. Whilst the records were lost to a fire during an investigation in the early 1810s, it is likely that Hannah would have witnessed or perhaps even suffered herself.

The Quakers in Leeds financed both her confinement and her children's future welfare and made unsuccessful attempts to contact and visit her through the Friends of York. In response to her death, just six weeks after her admittance, the Tukes (a prominent Quaker family in York) proposed The Retreat as a safe haven for Quakers struggling with mental health. Despite the pioneering mental health treatment ideas, Hannah Mills is rarely mentioned outside of a footnote.

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Hannah Mills Burial Record, Quaker's Death Register

Produced by:

Amelia Ancketill, Helena Eastwood, Amy Jones and Libby Nichols. University of York, History Students, Jan 2024