

## Mrs Jane Fowler:

### 250-word Summary:

Jane Fowler was a York resident who lived in the notoriously poor area of Walmgate, she struggled with alcoholism and in March 1856 she was convicted for the manslaughter of her adult daughter, Jane Rylatt. Jane and her daughter had an immensely strained relationship as they argued constantly and witnesses claimed to have seen Mrs Fowler abuse Mrs Rylatt. Jane Rylatt was left to bleed out from a neck wound for 13 hours before any medical assistance was called. When questioned about her daughter's injury, Mrs Fowler was inconsistent with her explanation, claiming that Jane Rylatt had fallen on a shovel, a coal hole and a kettle. When questioned about why Mrs Rylatt was left so long without medical attention or her husband being notified, Jane Fowler said that her daughter had begged her not to get anyone. The trial that followed Jane's death found that Mrs Rylatt had been stabbed in the neck with a knife that was found in the Fowler residence, stained with blood. The Jury decided that the crime had not been premeditated and she was convicted of Manslaughter. When Mrs Fowler heard about the conviction she reportedly became hysterical. Mrs Fowler spent one week in jail and then went on to look after Jane Rylatt's child, her granddaughter. Jane Fowler's story is one of strained familial relationships in a condensed and impoverished area, her propensity for alcohol combined with this tells a very dark and tragic tale of how these circumstances can have fatal results.

### Image 1:



### Project Output:

Jane Fowler's story is a poignant example of controversial and immoral life choices women have made throughout history. Whilst HERstory has principally spotlighted more positive and uplifting women from the last one hundred years, spotlighting Jane Fowler can challenge the predominantly domestic position Victorian women have been allotted in mainstream history and museum stories. The preconceived notions of femininity – aversion to violence, gentleness, respectability – are challenged by Jane Fowler's story. The visibility of women's history must be inclusive of both good and bad stories. Moreover, uncovering uncomfortable living conditions, and the darker side of life in the Victorian era, will in turn open discussions which challenge the 'ease' of Victorian domestic life – which traditional history often confers onto women's positions in society. Whilst the York Museums Trust tells the stories of convicted women, Jane Fowler can open greater discussion surrounding life in poverty-stricken areas, addiction, mental health struggles, and strains within familial relationships, which contextualise her immoral choices. Recent historiography has begun to explore the relationship between violence and domestic conduct in working-class Victorian families. Jane Fowler can not only widen the scope of stories told in HERstory but also help challenge traditional ideas of women's conduct, within wider discussions of violence's position in the Victorian domestic sphere.

Mrs Jane Fowler is believed to have been born in Darlington in 1797, a town in County Durham, before moving to York where she is recorded living in the 'slum district' of Walmgate. Whilst residing in York, census data showcases Mrs Fowler living consistently in Walmgate. Jane is first recorded living with husband William Fowler, daughter Jane Fowler, and ten other 'lodgers' on 'Water-lane' in 1851.<sup>1</sup> Laura Harrison highlights how during the mid-19th century, the three water lanes seemed to 'dominate the slum question' in York, conveyed as the poorest and most unsanitary area of York with the highest criminal activity.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Fowler continues to reside in Walmgate, recorded moving to 'Paver Lane' with her Husband William, as the majority of Waterlane was demolished in 1852.<sup>3</sup> Harrison conveys how many former residents were 'forced to move to overcrowded areas as corporations had already agreed that the Water Lanes ought to be demolished' as the horrendous conditions in the lanes had been well publicised by the 1850s.<sup>4</sup> Mrs Jane Fowler's Daughter and her newly married husband, Thomas Rylatt also moved on to Paver Lane at this time, with newspaper reports such as the Gazette highlighting how daughter Jane would visit her parents' house regularly as they were living in the same street.<sup>5</sup>

The key event our research discusses is the conviction of Mrs Jane Fowler for the manslaughter of her daughter on the second of March 1856. Jane's daughter (also called Jane, surnamed Rylatt) came to her mother's house to retrieve her key, bringing her neighbour Mrs Othick along, as she'd asked her to stay with her while her husband was working in Monkgate, but also likely because she was drunk and feared her mother. When Mrs Fowler let them in (also intoxicated, holding a knife and frying meat) she verbally abused her guests and threatened them. For her safety, Jane told Othick to leave, with Mrs Fowler locking the door. While outside, Othick then heard a

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<sup>1</sup> "1851 England Census", *Ancestry.com*, ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com): accessed November 28, 2023), database entry for Jane Fowler, living in Water-Lane; citing "Census Returns of England and Wales, 1851, Kew, Surrey, England: The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO), 1851."

<sup>2</sup> Laura, Harrison. *Creating the Slum: Representation of poverty in the Hungate and Walmgate districts of York, 1857-1914*, (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2015), Pg. 62-63

<sup>3</sup> "MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK." *York Herald*, March 8, 1856, 10. British Library Newspapers (Accessed 20 Oct. 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Harrison. *Creating the Slum*, Pg 62

<sup>5</sup> "MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK.", 10

shout: Jane crying “Oh Mother! Mother don’t!” then “Oh, Fowler, Fowler!” from a distressed Mrs Fowler<sup>6</sup>. Hearing her walk to the door, Othick returned to Mrs Quinn’s. Shortly after Mr Fowler came running outside in a panic, seeking his neighbour Mr Quinn and Jane’s husband<sup>7</sup>.

*The York Gazette* tells of how “the poor creature” was left for 13 hours without medical attention<sup>8</sup>. Mrs Blain (the landlord’s wife) who came to tend the dying Jane, told the deceased’s father to fetch the doctor and was the one to tell her mother that she was dead. Mrs Fowler responded by crying and screaming<sup>9</sup>. Eventually, Mr E Allen (the surgeon) arrived and Mrs Fowler said Jane had fallen into the coal hole and injured herself. (noteworthy though is that Mrs Fowler’s story varies – she said her daughter fell on a coal hole, the kettle spout and a shovel). However, the coal hole was reportedly 6 feet away from where the deceased was lying, and she had cleaned the floors surrounding it. The surgeon was unconvinced, as the small wound on Jane’s neck indicated a small sharp object, like a knife, was responsible for her death<sup>10</sup>.

Circumstances surrounding her arrest are not explicitly recorded, but any one of the aforementioned people could have reported her, especially because of how implausible her changing stories concerning her daughter’s death were. Additionally, the *York Herald* reflects on the shock of this event: “It cannot be forgotten that the temper of a mother must be very ungovernable indeed that would lend her to inflict a blow upon her offspring with such an instrument as a knife”<sup>11</sup>. The shock of the deviation from assumed maternal love was too shocking to keep concealed for any witness. At her trial, Mrs Fowler had little in her favour: a history of alcohol, treating Jane “carelessly and negligently”, being so secretive about the events of the night, and being called “flighty” by Mrs Quinn<sup>12</sup>. For the Court, it was taken as fact that Jane Fowler was responsible, especially since she changed her story, saying to her husband that Jane had fallen back on the stool, hitting the kettle spout and Mr Fowler admitted to not knowing what the girl fell against<sup>13</sup>.

Another inquest was held, on account of this new evidence. The sergeant had searched Fowler’s house and found a small knife with a white shaft, a kettle and cloths all bloodstained (the latter two in the coal hole)<sup>14</sup>. Mrs Quinn and the landlady also reaffirmed that Mrs Fowler was abusive and negligent<sup>15</sup>. Although murder was unquestionable, the Jury had to consider whether this was premeditated<sup>16</sup>. The sudden argument, the fact that Mrs Fowler was already holding the knife instead of seeking one, and the continual changing narratives from Mrs Fowler herself meant she was ultimately convicted.

Mrs Jane Fowler was convicted of manslaughter and upon hearing this news she became hysterical.<sup>17</sup> The Jury came to this conclusion as it was decided that the crime had not been premeditated as she already had a knife in her hands, therefore it was not a cold-blooded murder.<sup>18</sup> It was also reported that Fowler had ‘alcoholic

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<sup>6</sup> “MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK”

<sup>7</sup> “Melancholy Catastrophe at York! a Daughter Stabbed by Her Own Mother !” *Yorkshire Gazette*, 8 Mar. 1856, p. 11. British Library Newspapers, (Accessed 20 Oct. 2023).

<sup>8</sup> “Melancholy Catastrophe at York!

<sup>9</sup> “MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK”

<sup>10</sup> “Melancholy Catastrophe at York!

<sup>11</sup> “MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK”

<sup>12</sup> “Melancholy Catastrophe at York!

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> “Melancholy Catastrophe at York!

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

tendencies' and a difficult relationship with her daughter. One newspaper stated that the crime could have been committed through "a sudden fit of passion which of liquor" and "the peculiarity of her mother's temper".<sup>19</sup> The mother was described as a 'queer woman' and a heavy drinker, often talking to herself and bickering with her daughter.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the daughter often complained to the neighbour, Alice Quinn of her mother's mistreatment towards her stating 'Oh! Alice, nobody knows what I have to put up with'.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that Mrs Jane Fowler struggled with alcohol moderation and her mental health which led her to treat her daughter so poorly and eventually led her to her daughter's death. Similarly, the newspaper reports clearly sensationalised this event due to its 'controversy' surrounding gender stereotypes and reactions towards motherhood. After the trial, Jane Fowler went to gaol for one week.<sup>22</sup> We are unsure why Jane only went to jail for one week but we have speculations. First, she was transferred to a different Gaol or prison after this week and there are no records of this. Second, the punishment for manslaughter was only a week in jail for women. Finally, we believe that the leniency of her sentence could reflect the discomfort surrounding male workers assuming maternal responsibilities such as raising a granddaughter. There is a chance that Jane Fowler was given such a short sentence as she had a granddaughter that she needed to take care of. Furthermore, working-class women were looked down on in society, creating an idea that they were different from other people.<sup>23</sup> Gregory Durston, a crime historian, argues that the crowded domestic environment that the working class tended to live in often caused sudden violence, including manslaughters like Jane Fowler.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, Jane Fowler's life challenges the traditional notions of feminine conduct, which dominated traditional discussions of women's lives within the Victorian period. Living in Walmgate, a slum area of Victorian York, Jane Fowler's struggles with dependency on alcohol may reveal the negative impact of her environment and her mental health. The misfortune prevalent in her life culminated with her murdering her daughter in 1856. Intoxicated whilst the murder occurred, Jane Fowler's actions may not be easily explained as logical, nor as coherent: the ensuing media coverage was markedly focused on presenting the case as a sensationalised and malicious act. This murder, occurring in Jane Fowler's house and carried out with a knife, contradicts traditional narratives of feminine aversion to violence and feminine domestic bliss which permeate wider discussion of Victorian women's lives. The murder resulted in a lenient prison sentence. Ultimately, Jane Fowler's story undermines popular assumptions about gender roles and represents a dark and controversial account of women's lives in the Victorian period.

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<sup>19</sup> "MANSLAUGHTER IN YORK"

<sup>20</sup> "Melancholy Catastrophe at York!"

<sup>21</sup> Ibid,

<sup>22</sup> "England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892", *Ancestry.com* ([www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com); accessed November 13, 2023), database entry for Jane Fowler, date of trial 8 March 1856 in Yorkshire - North Riding, England; citing "Home Office: Criminal Registers, Middlesex and Home Office: Criminal Registers, England and Wales; Records created or inherited by the Home Office, Ministry of Home Security, and related bodies, Series HO 26 and HO 27; The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, Surrey, England."

<sup>23</sup> Charles Walter Master, *The Respectability of Late Victorian Workers: A Case Study of York, 1867-1914* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Gregory Durston, *Wicked Ladies: Provincial Women, Crime and the Eighteenth-Century English Justice System*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

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(Image 1)

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