

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in July 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were born in the same year as Queen Victoria, 1819 in the parishes of Wem, Shropshire and Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk.

Mary Ann Hall's Story

On the 12th of December 1818, John Hall bachelor of 26 marries heavily-pregnant Mary Skelton aged 28, in the parish of Wighton, around four miles inland from Wells. Both are from there.

Three months later, on March 19th 1819 in the parish church of Wells, Norfolk, they baptise their daughter Mary Ann. John Hall is described as a porter. It's unclear whether they married and then moved, or had already moved and just returned to their home parish for the wedding.

Mary Ann is joined by William (April 1823) in Wells; Rachel (January 1826), and John (January 1830), all also baptised in Wells. For the last of these John sr is described as a working maltster, rather than a porter. Wells produced a significant quantity of malt for export.

Mary Ann Hall next appears in the record aged 19, on July 1st 1838, at the baptism of her week-old bastard-born son Joah Hall. The father's name is not given.

Like her mother before her, Mary Ann is around six months pregnant when she walks down the aisle. Her husband-to-be is sailor Joer Sampher, presumed to be the father of her first child Joah, given the name (Joer and Joah seem to be used interchangeably). It's the 21st of June, 1840, and Mary Ann has been working as a servant; she describes her father as a sailor, which is curious as he's back malting the following year. I actually wonder if the clerk of the parish placed the jobs the wrong way round - it would make more sense if Joer Sampher sr was the sailor and John Hall the porter. On the other hand people do seem to shift between portering and sailing and back in Wells. Joer family is Joer sr, Elizabeth ne Bullock, and siblings - Phoebe (1810), Downing (1812), Jemima (1815) and Maria (1825).

It's interesting that the first time Mary Ann became pregnant by Joer Sampher they didn't marry, but the second time, they did. Perhaps it is relevant that the two witnesses to the wedding are not drawn from among the parents of either of the bridal couple, though all four are alive; instead marks are made for Joer's siblings Downing and Maria. It is tempting to wonder whether the parents approved. Curiously of the two witness and two newly-weds, only Mary Ann Hall can write her own name, suggesting she received a modicum of education above the strictly necessary or the standard for the village.

On the 20th of September 1840, Mary Ann Sampher is born to Mary Ann and Joer; she is baptised in Wells church a week later.

Six months later, in March 1841, Mary Ann's little brother John dies, aged 11.

We find the family in the 1841 census, fisherman Joer, and Mary Ann, and their children - Joer jr aged 3, and Mary aged 9 months.

Mary Ann's parents John (maltster) and Mary Hall are at the Glebe, Wells, with William (18) and Rachael (15)

On the Sempher side, Joer's parents Joer sr (still labouring at 60) and Elizabeth are also in Wells with Maria (16) and two Smith girls - Mary (5) and Maria (11) (who will be relatives of Jemima's husband, James Smith). They are six doors down from our Joer and Mary Ann, in the "West End"; as we'll see, Joer never does go far from his family.

Joer and Mary Ann "Sanfor" then have John Sampher in May 1843, and Robert Charles in 1847.

During that period, in 1846, Mary Ann's 20-year-old sister Rachel dies; then in November 1848 her father John Hall dies.

Mary Ann is 30; of her immediate blood family there is now only her mother Mary - who is now a pauper, and in 1851 is living alone on Black Horse Yard, Wells - and her brother William Hall. In 1847 William - a sailor - marries servant Harriet Green and moves a few miles away. They have John in 1851

In 1851, then, Joer and Mary Ann Sampher, with their four children, are living on Lower Road. Young Joah jr is now 12 and working as an errand boy. They are at number 48 in the schedule, and at 53, also Lower Road, is Joah snr, who had gone back to the sea as a mariner, aged 70, and his wife Elizabeth, with youngest child Maria (a dressmaker), Elizabeth's elderly pauper sister Phoebe, and granddaughter Maria Smith, charwoman. Given that the number distribution matches that in 1841, I suspect neither family has moved since then.

Joer and Mary Ann's brood continues to grow, with James in May 1851, and William in September 1855. Between these two dates Joer seems to have stopped fishing and gone into portering - or perhaps men move flexibly between the two within the Wells economy.

Mary Ann's mother Mary dies in January 1855, and as the first burial of the new year is placed in, as the parish register notes, "grave 1 first in the New Cemetery"

In October 1860, daughter Mary Ann jr, a tailoress, marries James William Smith Dye. He's a porter, and his "father" is Mary Dye, spinster - presumably he's illegitimate. From the parish records it seems not uncommon.

Which leaves, in 1861, Joer Sanfer [sic], 43, porter; Mary A (43) a tailoress, with John (17, ag lab), Robert (13), James (9), and William (5). All at Lower Road yards.

Notably Joer and Sanfer's eldest, Joer jr, isn't there. There is no obvious record of him after 1851. One way or another, he's gone.

Joer's mother is now dead. Our Joer and Mary Ann haven't moved, but the Sampher family group there has started have started to congregate in Dogger Lane, with two of Joer's siblings and his father.

In 1869 tragedy strikes the family. Four sons are still living at home. One is James Sampher, now 18 years old and working as an ordinary seamen on a

sloop called the Three Betsys. On the night of the 16-17th of October a severe gale hits the east coast, which the Norfolk News says "resulting in a series of maritime disasters and loss of life such as we have never before recorded from this part". The Three Betsys headed out loaded with barley and bound for Grimsby, but never made it back. As the Globe reports on the 19th "her boat and portions of her timber have since washed been washed ashore and it is believed that the vessel, with all on board, has gone down." The crew of three are assumed to be drowned; they are never found. We can only imagine how this time must have been for Mary Ann.

Additionally at some point in the late 60s, Robert Charles has moved out. It's possible on the basis of later records that he's joined the merchant navy.

In December 1870, son John marries Elizabeth Snell and moves out.

So in 1871 we see Joer Sampher, now a 53 year old coal porter, Mary Ann Sampher, and one remaining child, youngest son William, now a 15 year old labourer.

Notably, the couple have moved onto Dogger Lane, Wells. Ten years before, there were two Sampher-related households in the street of around 33 houses. Now, there are at least eight. Son John and his new wife haven't gone far, in fact they are living next door to Joer and Mary Ann; and their daughter Mary Ann and with her family are just a few doors down. Which means that all the couple's children who are alive and in the country are still right by. Also on the lane are the families of four of Joer's five siblings! It seems likely that this was a close knit group of Samphers who had welcomed Mary Ann and any children who stayed into the family.

The area doesn't make much of a dent in the record at that date. In 1889 there's a description for a rental property: four "substantial brick and tiled cottages with large enclosed Yard, Pump, and Well of excellent water, capital Wash-houses, Dirt Bins and Offices". But in 1893 one house on the lane is reported as being "totally unfit for human habitation"; the following year the Surveyor finds that the drain of a cow house on the lane is overflowing into the lane. By then our couple have moved out, though.

William gets away from the Dogger Street community in 1879, marrying Eliza Wyatt and moving to live with her parents inland at Shipdham. He's become a railway porter then a signman. Here they have a family of five.

By 1881, Jonah [sic], still a porter, and Mary Ann are still on Dogger Lane, all the children having left or died. Many of the other members of the family are also gone, though one of Joer's sisters is still down the street.

In 1884 Joer and Mary Ann's son Robert Charles Sampher - who has been missing from the record since some time in the 1860s - dies at sea. He's been using the alias Robert Temple, and according to the record of deaths of masters and seamen in British merchant vessels he is an able seaman, and he dies of acute tubercular meningitis while sailing near Aden.

The following year son John also dies, at Wells, leaving a widow and four children. Mary Ann Sampher has now outlived four of her own six children.

By 1891, the couple are in their seventies, living on Freeman Street West End, and Joer can apparently no longer work. No occupation is given for him; "parish relief" is written in then crossed out. Yet, he was on the electoral register for 87, 88, 89 and 90.

Mary Ann Sampher dies and is buried in Wells on the 2nd of June, 1896, having never noticeably left the town. Only two of her children live, but she's seen the birth of 17 grandchildren (and the death of at least four) and several great-grandchildren.

Joer lives on parish funds, with his daughter Mary Ann jr, until his death in 1908.

Sources

Sources:

Parish births, marriages and deaths for Wells and for Wighton.

Census 1841, 51, 61, 71, 81, 91, 01

Records of deaths of masters and seamen in British Merchant Vessels

Norfolk News, The Globe

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