

## *This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'*



*This story was written, in January 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of girls from Leeds, Girls' Industrial School, Yorkshire.*

### **Jane Ann Webster**

According to the Baptismal Register for Leeds Parish Church, Jane Ann Reed was born on 12<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1851 and was baptised two months later on 9<sup>th</sup> Nov. She was the illegitimate daughter of Mary Ann Reed, a spinster. The school record describes Mary Ann as a larder cook at a Mr Ayrtons in Bankruptcy Court, Leeds. This entry turned out to be William Scrope Ayrton born 28<sup>th</sup> Apr. 1804 in Middlesex. William Scrope was discovered in The Leeds Times on 25<sup>th</sup> Oct 1851 (there many more entries for him) which made the school entry clearer; he was actually a Commissioner for the Court of Bankruptcy. Mary Ann Reed was not in Mr Ayrton's household in 1851 but she was in his household along with three other servants in 1861, sadly Jane Ann did not appear. Was she abandoned in order for Mary Ann to obtain a servant's post? Mary Ann was not found in 1871. Mr

Ayrton passed away on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1885. There were too many Mary Ann Reeds to confidently follow her life.

Jane Ann's father in the school record is purported to be Obediah Webster, the son of Abraham Webster, a cotton and woollen manufacturer. The school register does not record exactly who proffers the information for each child. Jane Ann's description of her character on admission was "bold, forward, impudent" and "deceitful in her character". Had Jane Ann supplied the information about her father and tried to give herself "airs and graces" to lessen the impact of her illegitimacy? There is a possibility that Mary Ann had indeed come into contact with Obediah. Obediah's father, Abraham, appeared in the Yorkshire papers on several occasions, for the dissolution of family business partnerships and there was a possible reference to detention in the King's Bench Prison for insolvency. This being the case and Mary Ann being in the employ of one of the commissioners, is this where she came into contact with the Webster family and ultimately, Obediah?

When Jane Ann entered the school she had been committed on 29<sup>th</sup> Apr 1863 by Mr G.W. George and Tho. Tennent Esq, sentenced to 3 years for picking a woman's pocket of 3 shillings and 5 pence. She had brown hair and eyes and quite stout with wide mouth and starey eyes. She had attended a National School and had a little skill in the disciplines of reading, writing and ciphering.

The description of her condition is very upsetting. From about the age of 6 she had been abused in a brothel, coming under the influence of a “Fagin” type character, described as “a bad man”. Her health was so poor that the school “medical man” had to attend her. They appeared to despair of her thinking that she would be a prostitute.

After 3 years at the school it was found that Jane Ann’s character and attitude had totally changed, the authorities recording that they were “much pleased with her conduct”. On leaving Jane Ann secured a position in service at 11, Warwick Street, Leeds in the household of Irishman, John Ringland, a commercial traveller in the drapery trade.

Just over a year later in Sept. ¼ 1872 Jane Ann Reed married John William Stead, a 21 year old school keeper in a Board school. (Usefully corroborated in Jane’s school record.) In 1879 the couple had a daughter, Clara, they were living at 3 Grand Street in 1881. Aged only 5, Clara sadly died and was buried in Beckett Street Cemetery, the place used by all the family.

The couple had another baby in Dec. ¼ 1885, son John Arthur. John Arthur was only 3 when his mother, Jane Ann died and was buried on 6<sup>th</sup> Dec 1888 in the same location as Clara. With a young son to look after John needed someone to look after him and his son as he still needed to work in his school keeper’s job. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1889 he married Mary Vantry a 34 year old

spinster, who was his assistant in the school. John died aged 86 in 1937 and was buried in the same grave as Jane Ann.

Apart from the school record where she is recorded as Jane Ann Webster, her name in other records is Jane Ann Reed, her baptismal name, as she was illegitimate. If a record could be found for her mother claiming support from Obediah Webster the claim that he is the father would be supported.

The first appearance of Obediah is at his baptism on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec 1828 to Abraham and Abigail (nee Pickard) Webster. By 1841 Abigail had died and Abraham was married to Hannah Jefferson, on 26<sup>th</sup> Apr 1835. Obediah and 2 of his brothers, John and Samuel in 1841 were boarders in a local school in Queen's Square. In 1851 he had returned home but 10 years later he was a visitor in the house of his future wife, Emma Hey, who he married on 31<sup>st</sup> Dec. 1862. He died in 1897, a gentleman at 4, Canton Villas, in Bridlington leaving £1614/2/2.

Jane Ann's transformation from a "Fagin's pupil" to a reformed character who married a respectable young man and had a family was a success story for the school but trying to look behind the facts reveals a dreadful story of a very young child who must have been abandoned to abuse, being seduced into crime. The fact that she turned her life around must show that she had strength of character.

*Ann Simcock January 2023*

## Sources:

Ancestry and Find My Past for census information, however Obediah only showed in the Find My Past search for 1841.

Newspapers from Find My Past.

West Yorkshire, England, Church of England, Births and Baptisms 1813-1910.  
(Anc)

Leeds, England, Beckett Street Cemetery, 1845-1987. (Anc)

West Yorkshire Non Conformist Records 1646-1985. (Anc)

Find a Grave

West Yorkshire, England, Church of England, Deaths (Anc)

