

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in October 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were working in the Ulster linen industry.

Sarah Byrne 's Story

Sarah Jane Byrne, born Doyle, entered the world in Banbridge, County Down, Ireland, and was baptised on 10 April 1870 in the Roman Catholic Church there. Her parents, Hugh Doyle and Catherine Henvey, were both mill workers — part of the thriving linen industry that dominated life in the Lagan Valley and Upper Bann districts. Her godparents were Charles Henvey and Margaret McCormish, names that suggest strong family ties within the local weaving and spinning community.

Sarah grew up at a time when Banbridge and nearby Gilford were humming with the sounds of mill machinery and thread production. The Linen Thread Company, along with smaller local mills, provided steady if demanding work for men and women alike.

By the time of the 1901 census, Sarah had married Thomas Byrne, and the couple were living at 38 Castle Hill Street, Gilford, County Down. Sarah, then aged 30, was working as a Yarn Reeler in a Thread Factory — a skilled position requiring precision and patience. Her husband Thomas, aged 40 in the same record, was also employed locally, though his exact occupation varied between sources.

The 1911 census shows the couple still at the same address, with Sarah now aged 40 and still listed as a Yarn Reeler. Curiously, Thomas's recorded age changed slightly — shown as 45 — though their 1899 marriage record from the Roman Catholic Chapel in Gilford indicates that he was in fact only a year older than Sarah.

Sarah's parents, Hugh and Catherine Doyle, had themselves been part of the mill workforce. They were married thirty years earlier, on 13 May 1869, at the Roman Catholic Chapel of Tullylish. Hugh was then 24, and Catherine 21. Their shared background in textile works almost certainly influenced Sarah's own path into the mills.

As a Yarn Reeler, Sarah worked after the spinning stage of thread production. Once yarn had been spun onto bobbins, it had to be reeled off into measured lengths—usually into skeins of fixed yardage—to ensure consistency for dyeing and finishing.

Her daily routine involved:

- Reeling yarn from bobbins: operating a hand-driven or mechanical reeling frame, winding yarn in precise, measured turns—such as 80 turns of 7 yards each to make a 560-yard skein (known as a “lea”).
- Ensuring accuracy: carefully counting turns or using a counter to maintain the correct “yarn count,” vital to the factory's quality standards.

- Making skeins or hanks: cutting, tying, and slipping off the yarn once measured, forming neat skeins ready for the next process.
- Inspecting and sorting: checking for knots, breaks, or uneven thickness, discarding or rejoining damaged sections under the supervision of a Yarn Ruler or Overlooker.
- Preparing for dyeing: producing smooth, evenly wound skeins that could absorb colour uniformly.

Thread factories in Banbridge, Gilford, and Lisburn were hot, noisy, and dusty, filled with the constant rhythm of reels and wheels. Most of the reelers were women or girls in their teens, working long hours—often 10 to 12 hours a day—before the Factory Acts began to shorten the working day.

Reeling demanded steady hands, careful eyes, and an unwavering attention to detail. Experienced reelers like Sarah could earn slightly higher pay than winders or spoolers because the work required more precision and responsibility.

Sarah's life at 38 Castle Hill Street reflected the stability of a working-class household in Ireland's linen heartland. The family lived close to the mills that employed them, their daily rhythms marked by the factory bell and the flow of the River Bann that powered the industry.

Though her occupation might seem humble today, the role of a Yarn Reeler was vital to Ireland's reputation for high-quality linen thread — and women like Sarah Jane Byrne were at the heart of that achievement.

Sources

Genealogical and Civil Records

- *FindMyPast* – *Ireland Census 1901 & 1911* (entries for Sarah Jane and Thomas Byrne, Castle Hill Street, Gilford, County Down).

- *IrishGenealogy.ie* – *Civil Registration Records* (Birth, Marriage, and Death indexes for Banbridge and Tullylish Roman Catholic parishes).
- *National Archives of Ireland* – *Census Returns of Ireland, 1901 and 1911: Roman Catholic Parish Registers* (microfilm images for Banbridge and Gilford).
- *FamilySearch.org* – *Ireland Births and Baptisms 1620–1881 and Ireland Marriages 1619–1898* (transcriptions of parish and civil entries).

Local and Industrial History Sources

- *Ulster Architectural Heritage Society. Case Study: Gilford Mill, Dunbar McMaster & Co.* (history of thread and linen production, Gilford, County Down).
<https://www.ulsterarchitecturalheritage.org.uk/case-studies/gilford-mill-dunbar-mcmaster/>
- *Craigavon Historical Society. Rev. Lutton, Industry in the Upper Bann Valley* – background on thread manufacturing and the Linen Thread Company.
<https://www.craigavonhistoricalsociety.org.uk/rev/luttonindupperbann.php>
- *Reading University Special Collections. The Linen Thread Co. Ltd. Archives* – Company records, 1899–20th century.
<https://www.reading.ac.uk/adlib/Details/collect/20114>
- *National Museums NI – Ulster Folk & Transport Museum. Textile Industry Collections* – examples of reeling frames, spinning tools, and working conditions.
- *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History. Entries on Thread Manufacturing, Linen Trade, and Textile Processes* (historical definitions of "Reeler" and "Yarn Ruler").
<https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/>
- *The Factory Inspectorate Reports, United Kingdom Parliamentary Papers (1890–1910).* Descriptions of women's work in thread and linen mills.

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- Chapman, Stanley D. *The Cotton Industry in the Industrial Revolution*. London: Macmillan, 1987.
- Smout, T.C. *The History of the Linen Industry in Scotland and Ireland*. Edinburgh University Press, 1986.

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