

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 Hales' Story

Mary Hales was baptised 18th October 1819 in Wem, Shropshire. Her parents were Robert and Martha Hales. Robert occupation was recorded as a butcher.ⁱ

The name Wem comes from an old English word for marsh. Wem is 9 miles south of Shrewsbury and 9 miles south of Whitchurch.ⁱⁱ Wem at the start of the 1800s was a small market town mainly serving surrounding agricultural areas. The 1801 census recorded the population of Wem as around 1700. The town had a weekly market that had been granted a charter by Queen Elizabeth in 1582. The occupations of Wem's inhabitants were mainly agriculture, forestry and allied trades such as blacksmithing or milling.ⁱⁱⁱ Pigots 1828 directory of Shropshire record the township of Wem's population was 1555.^{iv} At this time it had a bustling High Street with Bakers, Chemists, Butchers, Grocers and Linen and Wollen drapers recorded in this directory.

Mary Hales parents, Robert Hales and Martha Bellingham married on the 30th November 1818 in Wem by licence. The marriage entry records they were both of this parish.^v

I've tried to trace Mary parents and found a likely baptism for her father Robert Hales in Wem. There is a baptism record for Robert Hales the son of Robert and Ann on the 13th April 1789.^{vi}

Unfortunately it looks like Mary Hales died in infancy so there was not much to find out about her very short life. There is an entry in Wem burial register for Mary Hales, aged 18 months, the daughter of Robert Hales junior on the 29th April 1821.^{vii} I am fairly certain this is the same Mary Hales as I have been through the digital images of Wem baptisms from 1818 to 1822 and the only one I can find is for Mary Hales baptised 18th October 1818. There were no other children born to Robert and Martha Hales for the whole of the period I checked. It is likely then that the Mary Hales I am researching was the one who died 1821.

Marys mother Martha Hales died and was buried 25th March 1822 in Wem. She was 27 years old. The burial register records her as the wife of Robert Hales, butcher.^{viii} A check of Wem baptism entries found one a Martha Bellingham the daughter of Samuel and Sarah Bellingham of Tilly Park on the 8th March 1795. This is most likely to be the baptism of Marys mother given her age in the entry of her burial.^{ix}

Unfortunately, both Martha and Mary Hales died before the introduction of civil death registration, so we do not know what they died of. However there was an epidemic of cholera in the 1820s which might have been the cause of their deaths. Other prevalent diseases were typhus and smallpox. I checked the burial register entries to see if they gave any clue to the cause of death, but they didn't.

Marys father Robert Hales was still alive in 1828. The 1828 Pigots directory of Shropshire records Robert Hales as a butcher in the High Street in Wem, There is a William Hales also listed as a butcher in the High Street so maybe a family connection?^x ^{xi}

In the 1841 census Robert was living in High Street, Wem. He is recorded as a lodger, and his occupation is a butcher.^{xii}

Pigots 1842 and 1844 directories also lists Robert Wem as a butcher in the High Street, Wem.

Robert died 28th December 1848, aged 61. His death certificate records he was a butcher and had died of paralysis which he had suffered from for 2 years. A

William Hales registered the death.^{xiii} There is a likely burial record for Robert Hales in Wem buried 1st January 1849, aged 61.^{xiv}

Sources

ⁱ Wem Baptism Register, Findmypast <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/>

ⁱⁱ Wem, Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wem>

ⁱⁱⁱ Wem in the 1800's An agricultural heartland, <https://ourcountryretreat.com/2024/08/09/the-history-of-wem-shropshire-from-the-1800s-to-the-2000s/>

^{iv} 1828 Pigots Directory of Shropshire, Ancestry.co.uk

^v Wem marriage register, Findmypast, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk>

^{vi} Transcript of Wem baptism, Findmypast

^{vii} Wem burial register, Findmypast, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/>

^{viii} Wem burial register, Findmypast, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk>

^{ix} Wem baptism register, Findmypast, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/>

^x 1828 Pigots Directory of Shropshire, Ancestry.co.uk

^{xi} 1842 Pigots Directory, <https://leicester.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/141940/rec/2>

^{xii} 1841 England and Wales census, Findmypast

^{xiii} GRO death certificate

^{xiv} Burials in the parish of Wem, 1849, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk>