

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 Chesters' Story

Mary Chesters was baptised on 2 January 1820 in the parish of Wem, Shropshire (recorded as 'Salop')¹. She was the daughter of Samuel and Elizabeth Chesters, with baptism records indicating that the family lived in Aston, a village within the Wem parish area, where Samuel worked as a labourer.

Family Background

Mary had several siblings, including Martha Chesters, who was born on 4 November 1810 in Wem to Samuel Chesters and Elizabeth Furmstone². The couple were unmarried at the time of Martha's birth. Marriage records for this couple present some confusion, with entries found in Pallot's marriage index

for 1811³ and a transcription for a separate marriage record showing Samuel Chesters marrying Elizabeth Furmstone at Wem on 24 June 1811⁴. However, another marriage record exists for a couple with identical names who married in 1821 at Wem. The records have become confused across genealogical databases. An original banns document available on Find My Past clearly shows the banns for the 24 June marriage took place in 1821⁵, not 1811. The exact date of their marriage therefore remains uncertain, complicated by the presence of multiple individuals with the same names in the local area during this period.

The Chesters' Children

What remains clear is that Samuel and Elizabeth had several children together. Hannah was baptised on 1 January 1815⁶. Original baptism records for Mary and her siblings consistently show the family living at Aston, with Samuel's occupation listed as labourer. Elizabeth was baptised on 13 April 1817⁷, followed by Sarah on 9 June 1822⁸. Another son, also named Samuel, was baptised on 15 August 1824⁹. Tragically, this younger Samuel appears to have died as a boy. A burial record exists for a Samuel Chesters who died aged 14 and was buried at Lee Brockhurst, approximately four miles from Wem, on 20 June 1838¹⁰.

Later Life

The 1841 census records Samuel Chesters, age 55, as an agricultural labourer living with his wife Elizabeth and a Hannah Chesters, age 70, at Basfordwood¹¹. Given that adult ages were rounded in the 1841 census, Hannah may have been Samuel's mother, which would explain why they named a daughter after her. According to a gazetteer entry from 1868, Besford was a township in the

parish of Shawbury, approximately three miles southeast of Wem, near the river Roden¹².

Elizabeth died on 5 June 1843 at Besford-Wood, aged 56, with no cause of death recorded. The informant was Samuel, who made his mark on the document as he was unable to write his name¹³.

Mary's Adult Years

Mary may have been the Mary Chesters recorded in the 1841 census living ten miles away in Watergate Street, Whitchurch, working as a female servant to the Hughes family, who were also agricultural labourers¹⁴. By the 1851 census, Mary had returned to live with her father Samuel when she was 31. Her mother having died, Samuel, then 67, was recorded as a widower. Their address was Bessford Wood, Wem, with Samuel continuing to work as a labourer and Mary described as a 'labourer's daughter'. Both were recorded as being born in Wem¹⁵.

The 1861 census shows Samuel still living at Besford/Besford Wood, but Mary was no longer with him. Instead, his granddaughter Elizabeth Pugh (likely the daughter of Martha, who had married John Pugh), age 22, was living there. Samuel remained an agricultural labourer, while his granddaughter was described as a 'servant out of place' (unemployed).

Mary's Death

An entry in the GRO indexes revealed that Mary Chesters died on 14 November 1858 at Besford Wood, Shawbury¹⁶. The informant was her father, Samuel, and the cause of death was recorded as 'Consumption Debility'.

Although Mary's age was incorrectly recorded as 28 when she was actually 38, the other details confirm this was indeed the Mary Chesters from our story.

Mary Chesters's life represents that of many working-class women of her era—born into a labouring family, she likely worked as a domestic servant before returning to care for her widowed father, ultimately dying young from tuberculosis, a common killer of the time. Her story, while brief, provides insight into the lives of ordinary women who lived alongside Queen Victoria but whose experiences differed dramatically from the monarch's privileged existence.

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