

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in June 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon.

The Story of Mary Chidley, Deaf Pupil

Information accessed by kind permission of The Deaf Academy, Exmouth at Devon Archives and Local Studies, DHC 7645C. Written by Helen Shields

In 1861 21% of the workhouse population were long term residents who had been there for 5 years or more, up to 60 years in fact. 197 of those were deaf and dumb. Once admitted it was probably more difficult for the profoundly deaf to find a way to leave again than other paupers.

THIS STORY IS IN TWO PARTS. The first is the result of putting my research into ChatGPT, with some editing. The second half is my research written as biography with references. Whilst the first version of her story was too flowery, it does capture some aspects a straight genealogy biography can miss.

The Silent Thread: The Life of Mary Chidley”

In the spring of 1819, in the quiet parish of Tawstock, North Devon, a baby girl was born to a labourer named John Chidley and his wife Elizabeth. Baptised as Maria, she was likely named in remembrance of an earlier child, Mary, who died in infancy. Our Mary was born into a silent world. She was profoundly deaf — a condition society then often misunderstood, and too often such individuals were underestimated. In a world where few people could read and write, she would have little chance of having more than basic hand gestures to communicate.

When Mary was just eight years old, a remarkable opportunity emerged. In 1827, a new school - in Exeter. One of the few places where children like Mary could learn to communicate, and live among others who shared their silence.

For six formative years, Mary lived within the Georgian walls of the institution. She was far from home, but here, she had a voice of sorts.

In 1833, Mary returned to Tawstock, but rural Devon was a hard place for a young deaf woman to thrive.

Records show her living at home in 1841, assisting her mother, while marked as a “pauper.” The word “dumb” — written and then scratched out on the census — stands as a silent testament to how society saw her: with confusion, perhaps pity, but rarely with opportunity.

The Chidley family lived at Church House in Tawstock, likely a poor house or type of alms house. Her brother Henry trained as a tailor — a glimmer of upward movement perhaps — but in 1858, Mary’s father John Chidley died, sending the fragile economic balance that kept the family afloat into turmoil.

Mary’s life took a cruel turn. By 1861 she was in the Barnstaple Union Workhouse. Mr William Muxworthy was the Master with his wife Ann as Matron. The workhouse was a grim place,

designed to separate and control, not nurture or uplift. But here, Mary had her own small miracle. At the age of 42, Mary was now — a mother. With her was a baby boy, John, just one year old. It is not known who the father was. Whether love, misfortune, or violation brought her child into the world, Mary bore the responsibility in silence.

Mary's son John remained in the workhouse for more than a decade. The workhouse was designed on a cross shape with men, women, boys and girls separated by the cross into four different areas. I wonder how much Mary was able to have contact with her son, whether watching him silently as he grew helped to sustain her.

By 1881, John had left the workhouse, and was working as a shoemaker in Yarnscombe. Mary remained behind, never to leave the workhouse. After 20 years she was listed as a *charwoman* — a humble but honest role within the workhouse walls. In a world that had often tried to make her invisible, I like to think she had reclaimed a small place of purpose and perhaps could share a smile to brighten her silent world.

Mary Chidley died in her early 60's in 1882. It was the same man who had registered her son's birth two decades earlier, when she had entered the workhouse, Mr. William Muxworthy, who recorded her death.

So there you have it, not quite novel material but one way to present her story.

See the next pages for the research I gave ChatGPT “to create an interesting story.”

Mr Henry Brothers Bingham, the first master had been an assistant master at the Edgebaston Institution in Birmingham, so was well-qualified to lead the school in Exeter. Once suitable premises had been found, repaired and furnished, he opened the school on 10th April 1827 with 6 pupils, namely -

Samuel Skinner Winsor of Bridgedown, Devon
Andrew Dunley of Bovey Tracy, Devon
Mary Chidley of Tavistock, Devon
Selina Collins of St Martin's, Cornwall
Henry Haden of Bodmin, Cornwall
Henry Pope of Exeter¹

Mary was baptised Maria in Tawstock on 20th May 1819, daughter of John Chidley, a labourer and his wife Elizabeth (formerly Mills). Tavistock above appears to be an error since she was from Tawstock. Interestingly a baby was baptised Mary, with parents of exactly the same details, two years earlier on 4th May 1817 at Newton Tracy. I suspect the first baby died and our Mary was named in her honour.

The name Mary Chidley, or Chudley, is surprisingly common but this account is how our Mary seems to have lived. The label 'deaf and dumb' helps confirm we have the right person when it is present.

She went to the West of England school for the deaf in Exeter from 1827 until 1833. Then she went home to 'assist her mother'.

In 1841 she is living in Tawstock village with father John, an Ag Lab, Mother Elizabeth, sisters Charlotte aged 9, Anne aged 7 and brothers Henry aged 6 and Joseph aged 4. Mary is 25 and is a Pauper (the word dumb is also written but crossed through). Tawstock, as the enumerator helpfully describes, is adjacent to

"the turnpike road leading from Barnstaple to Torrington."²

¹ Royal West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter HISTORICAL SURVEY 1826-1926 copies at South West Heritage Trust

² 1841 England Census Class: HO107; Piece: 221; Book: 19; Civil Parish: Tawstock, Devon; Enumeration District: 17 accessed via [_____](#) 16 May 2025

In 1851³ the Chidleys (spelled Chudley) are one of eight families living in Church House, Tawstock. John aged 57 is a labourer and his wife, Ann and Henry are still there but two new daughters are also there. There is also a widow, a lodger Ann Mills aged 95, almost certainly John's mother-in-law. Mary is not listed here as a pauper but the fact she is deaf and dumb is noted. Henry aged 15 is a tailor. I believe Church House was an Alms house or Poor house of sorts.⁴

18th April 1858 after a two week illness, with influenza and bronchitis, her father John died at Tawstock. The death was registered by son Henry (22y) who was present at the death. This is likely to have had a destabilising effect on the whole family. He would have been the main bread winner.

By 1861 Mary is found in the Barnstaple Union Workhouse. There are 203 paupers in the workhouse on enumeration day, 97 male and 106 female. Mary's age is stated as 42y, just an initial for her given name and the surname again spelled Chudley. The end column states "Deaf and Dumb from birth". There is also a 1 year old Chudley with her. No occupation is stated.

The [GRO.gov](https://www.gro.gov.uk) birth index has the birth of John Chidley⁵, registered in Barnstaple Union. The later census states he was born at Tawstock. Perhaps that was true and he and Mary were admitted to the workhouse after his birth. She was not listed as a longterm resident (5 years or more in 1861), this was to be her home until she died.

A union workhouse was built in Barnstaple in 1837 on the east side of Alexandra Road. The architect, Sampson Kempthorne, also designed other Devon workhouses at [Axminster](#), [Crediton](#), [Exeter](#), [Okehampton](#), and [South Molton](#). Intended to accommodate 270 inmates, the Poor Law Commissioners authorised the sum of £4,800 on its construction.

The layout was Kempthorne's standard cruciform or "square" design which created four courtyards — one each for men, women, boys and

³ 1851 England Census Tawstock, Barnstaple 6a /68 Piece 1893 Folio 590 page 18
Accessed June 2025 via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)

⁴ Episcopal Visitation Returns 1744. "[Alms-house, hospital or charitable endowment](#): There is a Church house in our parish who have a monthly relief {in} from ye parish" accessed May 2025 via [_____](#) (Friends of Devon Archives)

⁵ [GRO.gov.uk](https://www.gro.gov.uk) Birth Index John CHIDLEY 1860 S Quarter in Barnstaple Union Vol 05B page 434 Mother's maiden name blank.

girls. I wonder how much time Mary managed to spend with her young son. The workhouse location and layout are shown on the 1903 map which can be accessed online⁶

In 1871⁷ Mary and her 10 year old son John are still in the workhouse. It is not clear whether he would have received much schooling whilst in the workhouse, though he is down as a 'scholar' in 1871. No occupation is given for Mary. Purely the word 'Dumb' in the disability column tells us it is her. The fact John is still with her suggests to me they had stayed rather than a re-admission. This is so sad as she had managed to complete education even if she was not thought able to take up a position on leaving school.

I wonder whether her family kept in touch. Were they able to keep in touch? They too were paupers. I am sure she would have loved to know about her nieces and nephews.

By 1881 John has left the workhouse, likely sent out as an apprentice. The most likely place we find John in 1881⁸, apparently 19 years old (actually 20) is in Yarnscombe, a shoemaker, living in the house of Mr Tucker, boot and shoe-maker. I wonder how his age was wrong. A genuine error? Did the master underestimate his age so he would be an apprentice for longer? Or perhaps his mother did so he would stay near her for longer? (He is not said to be an apprentice on the census, and may have completed an apprenticeship by then.)

Mary remains in the workhouse in 1881. She now has 'charwoman' as her occupation. I do hope that, perhaps once she no longer had a son to concern her, she was able to find her niche, to feel she had a role in the Institution and found some happiness.

Sadly in 1882 she died with Congestion of the Lungs. The same Master, William Muxworthy was there registering her death as was there to register John's birth 20 years earlier. He again gives her occupation as Charwoman.

⁶ Information regarding the Barnstaple Union Workhouse from Peter Higginbotham's website <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Barnstaple/> accessed May 2025

⁷ 1871 England Census; Class: RG10; Piece: 2184; Folio: 81; Page: 11; GSU roll: 832050 accessed June 2025 via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)

⁸ 1881 England Census Class: RG11; Piece: 2253; Folio: 18; Page: 11; GSU roll: 1341542 accessed June 2025 via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)