

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 Ellums's Story 1819-1894

On April the 11th 1819, Mary, the daughter of John and Martha (nee Maddocks) **Ellums** in the Parish of Wem, in the county of Salop, was baptised by Richard Walker, curate, in the parish church. Her parents, unlike a good number of her peers, were married.

John **Allems** and Martha Maddocks were married on the 3rd of February 1818 by the same curate. Since they both signed with their mark, neither would have noticed that the curate had not yet decided on the spelling of their matrimonial surname. Another baby was baptised into the family on the 5th of August 1821, the creative curate assigning the surname **Allums** to Mary's baby brother John.

Mary Ellums/Allums married William Ashley, Labourer of Edstaston, 3 miles north of Wem, on the 31st of December 1839 at Wem parish church by Curate John Steward and witnessed by Thomas Ashley and Martha Dodd.

The newlyweds seem to have returned to William's family in Quina Brook, the final destination of an arm of the Ellesmere Canal. This arm was originally going to terminate at

Prees It is now known as the Prees Branch of the Llangollen Canal, navigable for about a mile to Whixall Marina, the following 3/4 mile is still followable on the towpath.

The 1841 Census for Edstaston is described the area as:

‘All that part of the Parish of Wem which has within the township of Edstaston together with all that part of the township of Lacon, which lies to the right and left of the road leading from Quinabrook to Prees’

On the first page we find Martha Dodd, Witness at the wedding, and her future husband William Williams both working for William Taylor farmer in Pepper Street.

In the 1841 Census Mary and William are there both aged 25 (rounded up and down presumably), living next door to John Ashly aged 65, agricultural Labourer and Mary Ashly aged 60. Although These ages, like William and Mary’s are suspect. Both men are agricultural labourers. Both dwellings are flanked by public houses.

Quina Brook is quite a stronghold for the Ashly family. In 1841 there are 4 households totalling 11 people. In addition to Our newly-weds and their closest neighbours; Richard Ashly Blacksmith aged 20, John, boatman, and Sarah Ashly both aged 30 and their 4 children, Thomas, George, Ann and Mary.

There are also the names Ruscoe and Maddox here.

John Ellums/Allems/Allums and now **Allams** senior, Mary’s father, was a labourer, born 1764 in Whixall, who died in Ellesmere Workhouse, on the 3rd of May 1841 so did not live long enough to appear in the census of 1841 which was recorded on June 6th. His death was registered on the 31st of May by John Pembrey Pritchard master of Ellesmere Workhouse.

155	John Allams	Male	67	Labourer	and	Master of the Workhouse Ellesmere	1841	15	Signer
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There is some evidence of John jnr. having met an early death in 1836 aged 15. He was buried in Wem on the 22nd April 1836

Martha, widowed, aged 60, is to be found as a bread seller in Noble Street Wem, with a Robert Ruscoe aged 50 in the 1841 census.

The death register for the 2nd quarter of 1844 names Martha **Alloms** of Wem. Martha **Hallums** was buried in Wem on the 3rd of April 1844 aged 66.

By 1851 Mary (30) birthplace Wem and William (40) have four Children aged from 10 and 2yrs: John, Ann, William, George. Next door are John (65) and Ann Ashley. Strangely they have not aged by much and Mary has become Ann, aged 67. Ann has a birthplace of Fitz. Both John and William have Cotton as their birthplace and are 'Boatmen' as is 10 yr old John. Mary and Ann are 'Boatman's wife'.

All the children have Quina Brook listed as place of birth. All their baptisms are recorded in the parish register other than George's, which is elusive. There are many Ahley children baptised in the Parish records in the mid 1800s, at Edstaston, Cotton, and Quina Brook, presumably to brothers and cousins of our family of Ashleys.

In 1861, the census for the township of Edstaston, hamlet Quina Brook, the family are still there, although the enumerator has written Astley instead of Ashley. John, William, and George are still at home and now listed as Boatmen and have been joined by Mary aged 8 and Thomas aged 6. Mary and William are aged 44 and 50 respectively. All have Wem as a birthplace with no further distinction.

They have new neighbours as Mary's in laws, if that's who John and Ann were, have died. Daughter Ann has moved out and could be the servant maid found in the Census in an Inn at Red, Whixall with innkeeper Richards and Elizabeth Allmand.

1871 sees a move up stream along the canal. William, Mary and Thomas now 15, are living at Waterloo.

By 1881 they have moved further along the can to Canal side, Whixall, Prees. Now it's just William and Mary, him aged 69 and she 68. He is referred to as a Boatman, but waterman

has been added after. Mary for the first second time in the documentation of her life, has a rank, profession or occupation and is recorded as 'do. Wife'.

The definition that I found using Grok, of Boatman/Waterman on UK canals in the 1800 is as follows:

In the context of UK canals in the 1800s, the terms boatman and waterman referred to individuals working on or around waterways, but their roles and connotations differed based on their specific duties, environments, and historical usage. Here's a concise breakdown of the differences:

Boatman

Role:

A boatman was primarily someone who operated or worked on canal boats, often narrowboats or barges, used for transporting goods or passengers along inland canals.

Duties:

- *Navigated and steered canal boats, often pulled by horses or, later, powered by steam or engines.*
- *Loaded, unloaded, and managed cargo (e.g., coal, grain, or manufactured goods).*
- *Maintained the boat and performed minor repairs.*
- *Sometimes lived on the boat with their family, especially in the case of "canal folk" or "boat people."*
- *Environment: Worked specifically on inland canals, such as the Grand Union Canal or the Birmingham Canal Navigations.*
- *Social Context: Boatmen were often seen as a distinct community, living a nomadic lifestyle on the canals. They were typically working-class and associated with the canal transport industry.*

Terminology:

The term "boatman" was more specific to canal or river vessels and less associated with coastal or estuarine waters.

Waterman

Role:

A waterman was a broader term, typically referring to someone who worked on or around rivers, estuaries, or coastal waters, often in a more urban or tidal context like the River Thames.

Duties:

- *Operated small boats or wherries to ferry passengers or goods across rivers or to larger ships.*
- *Sometimes acted as lightermen, transferring goods between ships and shore on rivers like the Thames.*
- *Could also be involved in fishing, salvage, or other river-based activities.*
- *Environment: Watermen were more commonly found on navigable rivers (especially the Thames in London) or near ports, rather than the narrow inland canal network.*
- *Social Context: In London, watermen were a well-established trade, often organized into guilds like the Company of Watermen and Lightermen (founded in 1555). They had a more formalized status compared to canal boatmen, with apprenticeships and licenses.*

Terminology:

The term "waterman" was historically tied to skilled river workers, particularly in London, and less commonly used for inland canal workers.

Historical Context (1800s UK Canals)

The 1800s was the peak of the UK canal era, with boatmen being essential to the transport of goods during the Industrial Revolution. Watermen, while also active, were more prominent in river-based trade and passenger services, particularly in London.

The distinction became less pronounced as canals and rivers were sometimes interconnected, and some workers might have performed both roles depending on the region.

William Ashley does not make another appearance in the census of 1891. Mary is there as a widow, living in Cotton, Edstaston in a 3-room dwelling. She is noted as being 76 years old. It seems that William died on the 10th of October 1887 in Cotton, now merely a Labourer (general) rather than having the distinction of being a boatman or waterman. His cause of death is 'Old age' he is 76. The informant on the 13th of October, is Thomas Sutton, son-in-law, present at the death, of Steel, Whitchurch. He is buried at Edstaston on 15th October 1887.

Whitchurch (Salop) R.S.D.					U.M. Watkins m.R.C.S.	Sherrymill Hill Whitchurch	1894	Registration
6 th September 1894 45 Tilstock Road Whitchurch (Salop) R.S.D.	Mary Ashley	Female	82 years	Widow of William Ashley General Laborer	Old Age Certified by A.M. Watkins m.R.C.S.	Thomas Sutton Son in law Son Attendance Tilstock Road Whitchurch	Sept 1894	George Richardson Registrar

Mary's relationship with her daughter Mary and son-in-law Thomas appears closer than that of her and her own parents. She is living with them in 1894, although we don't know how long she has been there but she's not in the Workhouse. Her death caused by 'Old age' on the 6th of September 1894 is at Tilstock Road, Whitchurch, Salop, again Thomas Sutton Son-in-law is in attendance.

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She was buried on Tuesday September 11th. On the same page of Burial records there's an entry for a Thomas Sutton aged 4 Months on January 14, presumably Mary's grandson.

All of the places documented in the research are no more than a few miles away from each other. The family travelled very little over the years of Mary's life; Wem, Prees, Waterloo, Whixall, Quina Brook, Edstaston, Tilstock. The 'Canal side' addresses hint that at least part of their lives being on the water.

Mary & William had 6 Children, all of whom survived infancy. From a quick tally of Grandchildren from one family tree of descendants showing John b.1841's line, and the 1991, 1901 and 1911 Census for Prees and Cotton, showing the family of Mary b.1844 and Thomas Sutton, listing 7 children, I'm sure Mary's genes have thrived... but that's another story.



Olwen Moseley

Sources

Martha Maddocks, Father: John, Mother: Ann, Wem Baptism Register, Register date range 1746 -1799, page 147.
Archive ref. P295/A/1/6

Martha Maddocks & John Allems, 23rd Feb 1818,
Shropshire Marriages, Wem. Register date range 1786 - 1837, Page 140. Archive ref. P295/A/3/2

Mary Ellums, 11 April 1819. Father: John, Mother: Martha,
Wem Baptism Register, Register date range 1813 - 1839, page 43.
Archive ref. P295/A/2/1

Mary Allams (of Wem) & William Ashley (of Edstaston), 31st Dec 1839,
Shropshire Marriages, Wem. Register date range 1837 - 1861, Page 33. Archive ref. P295/A/3/3 Fathers' names: John Allams, John Ashley.

Census returns:

1841 Source Citation

Class: HO107; Piece: 902; Book: 3; Civil Parish: Wem; County: Shropshire; Enumeration District: 3; Folio: 5; Page: 4; Line: 14; GSU roll: 474580

1851 Source Citation

Class: HO107; Piece: 1995; Folio: 92; Page: 14; GSU roll: 87397

1861

Class: *Rg 9*; Piece: *1886*; Folio: *55*; Page: *16*; GSU roll: *542882*

1871

Source Citation

The National Archives; Kew, London, England; *1871 England Census*; Class: *RG10*; Piece: *2795*; Folio: *90*; Page: *5*; GSU roll: *838846*

1881,

Source Citation

Class: *RG11*; Piece: *2669*; Folio: *101*; Page: *16*; GSU roll: *1341640*

1891

Source Citation

The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891*; Class: *RG12*; Piece: *2123*; Folio: *54*; Page: *1*; GSU roll: *6097233*

Mary's death

Source Citation

Indexes created from Anglican Parish Registers held at Shropshire Archives; Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England; *Anglican Parish Registers*

Shropshire parish records, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials

England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915

Map: 1893-1900s (ordnance Survey 1:10,560)

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