RIPON
MUSEUMS

Meet the Wintersgill Family

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When Charles Wintersgill was listed in the 1881 census as one of the inmates of the Ripon Workhouse, he was aged 14 (1). He had already spent nearly 10 years there and was shortly to leave the Workhouse and make his way in the world. Charles (b. 1867) was the eighth child in a family of nine, consisting of three girls and six boys (2).

Charles's parents were John Wintersgill (1825-1870) and Mary Serjeant who had married in 1846 when John was 21 and Mary was 18 (3). John Wintersgill's family had settled in Mashamshire as small tenant farmers and farm labourers. John's parents George and Sarah married at St Mary's church in Masham on 25 November 1819 (4). They had seven sons, only 4 of which reached adulthood: George, who eventually settled in Ripon, John (1825-1870) father of Charles, who was baptised in Masham in 1825, William and Robert (5).

In 1841 George Senior was living in Aiskew, near Bedale and his occupation is listed in the census record as that of malster (6). That same year, John, then aged 14, was employed as a male servant by Elizabeth Smith, Innkeeper on the Market Place in Bedale (7). John married Mary Serjeant a few months before his mother Sarah died in 1847 and the young couple appear to have moved in with George Wintersgill in Aiskew where their first two children, Benjamin (1850) and Harriet (1852) were born. George Wintersgill is described in the 1851 census as a brewer and pauper, suggesting that he was in receipt of outdoor parish relief (8). He died in 1853 and at this point John and Mary and their two children left Bedale. Their third child, Joseph was born in Guisborough.

By the following census, in 1861, John whose occupation is stated to be that of shepherd and Mary Wintersgill are to be found living in Stammergate in Ripon with five children: Benjamin, Harriet, Joseph, Sarah Ann and Jane (9). This move to the town reflects the impact that the agricultural revolution of the 1850s was having on male agricultural employment. Although specialists such as shepherds were paid a little more than ordinary agricultural labourers, agricultural workers were the lowest paid workers in the country and agricultural wages were not much higher than they had been a hundred years earlier. Men were paid by the day, with higher wages in the summer than in the winter and many households had to supplement the father's income with a contribution from other members of the family – including children as young as six or seven. Changes in farming practices also contributed to the movement of rural workers to the towns.

The Wintersgill family remained in Ripon throughout the next decade when four more children were born: Henry, George, Charles and William. John Wintersgill gave up agricultural work and, in order to provide for his family, found work as a slater. Nevertheless the family struggled financially and had to apply for parish relief. John and Mary were described in their son George's admission papers to reformatory school as 'sober and honest' (10) but the years of hardship and physical work must have taken their toll and in 1870, at the age of 46, John Wintersgill died leaving his widow Mary with nine children, the youngest being only 2 years old (11). Her own health was obviously precarious for she died a few weeks after the 1871 census was taken at the age of 42 (12) (13).

The Wintersgill orphans

The Wintersgill children recorded in the census for Ripon in 1871, weeks before their mother died, ranged in age from Benjamin (20) by occupation a slater, and Harriet (19) a domestic servant, to Jane, aged 11, Henry (8), George (7), and Charles (4) all living in Stammergate. However, the family also included Joseph (16), Sarah Ann (13) and the baby, William, aged 2, none of whom were living with their mother at the time of the census. . Given their ages, the three older children – Benjamin, Harriet and Joseph - were considered to be too old for the workhouse and to be capable of fending for themselves without further assistance which they achieved with varying degrees of success.

Benjamin Wintersgill: *a reformed character made good?*

As a young man, Benjamin had several times found himself on the wrong side of the law: in March 1870 he was in court at the Yorkshire Spring Assizes accused of night poaching. The *Leeds Times* of 8 Jan 1870 reported that he and a friend had been in pursuit of game (hares and rabbits) with dogs and nets on Christmas Eve (14). Fortunately for them, as the penalties were severe and could include transportation, they were found not guilty. Undeterred, Benjamin and a friend found themselves again summoned for poaching and having in their possession parts of guns used for unlawfully killing game. As neither man was carrying a complete gun, the charge of poaching could not be upheld. The *Knaresborough Post* of 21 December 1872 reported that the defendants did not appear as they were currently serving a term of imprisonment for poaching in the West Riding. In addition to a £5 fine, Benjamin was given 6 months in prison for assaulting and beating the arresting officer (15).

Sometime after his release, Benjamin moved to Stockton on Tees, where his uncle William and family were living, to work as a slater and made a fresh start although he had one further fine for illegal salmon fishing at Stockton in 1886 (16). He married Elizabeth Anderson on 5 September 1874 and eventually they had twelve children, nine of which survived (17). Benjamin built up a prosperous business as a slater and slate merchant, employing two of his sons Henry and Benjamin whilst Charles became an accountant and

Thomas a builder. When he died in 1924, a respectable businessman with a successful family, his estate was valued at £5, 474 7s 4d (18).

However, five of Benjamin's sons were to find themselves in the news in the 1940s. In 1942 the national and local press were reporting on a major trial at Northumberland Assizes involving the Blyth Dry Docks and Shipbuilding Co with accusations of conspiracy, fraud, bribery and receiving goods in relation to Admiralty contracts for the building of two minesweepers. Joseph and Henry were acquitted but Charles Wintersgill , aged 52, the Secretary and general manager of Blyth '*the brains of the fraud*' was fined £15,000 with £2,000 costs and imprisoned for 5 years. His two brothers Thomas and Benjamin were also found guilty as were two former mayors and one Admiralty officer (19).

Harriet Wintersgill: *Marriage and motherhood?*

Harriet Wintersgill was baptised in Bedale in 1853 (20). In 1871, she was living with her mother in Stammergate and was employed as a domestic servant. In Harriet's day, domestic service was the largest single employer of women: girls as young as 10 or 11, after a minimum of education would go into service. It was not unusual for young servants in towns to live at home and Harriet might well have been contributing to the family budget from a very early age (21). Marriage was the traditional way of escaping domestic service and Harriet at the age of 23 married Michael Grange, a farm labourer at Darley in Nidderdale (22) where their two elder children were born. At some point after 1881, the family moved to the expanding industrial area of Wortley, and later to Heckmondwicke, which provided work in the mills and ironworks and where three more children were born. However Michael died in 1890 in Dewsbury and Harriet found herself a widow at 39 with five children to support (23).

Heckmondwicke, 9m south of Leeds, was famous for manufacturing blankets in the 18th century and in the 1840s had 14 textile mills. By 1860 carpet weaving had become important as the demand for the recently affordable carpet flooring from the expanding Victorian middle class soared. Handloom carpet weavers were recruited from far afield to satisfy the demand. Harriet's daughters all in turn found employment in the mills. In the 1891 census for instance, her daughter Margaret, aged 14, was a worsted spinner and appears to be the only wage earner in the household (23). In the 1901 census, two of Harriet's daughters, Maggie and Minnie are listed as rug weavers and her youngest unmarried daughter, Frances is called a carpet weaver in the 1911 census (24, 25).

In 1895, Harriet married again, Michael Chamberlain a widower – he appears in the 1901 census for Heckmondwicke as a basket maker (26, 24). In a textile manufacturing area such as Heckmondwicke large hampers and baskets were much in demand in the industry for packing and deliveries. By 1911, Michael and Harriet both aged 59 are employed as basket makers, (25). Harriet, by then a widow for the second time, died in October 1918 at the age of 66 (27). Her son Ralph (1882-1958), a joiner by trade, fought as a private in France in the

Royal Field Artillery and was awarded the Victory Medal. He lived all his life in Heckmonwicke and had at least one daughter who was staying with her grandmother in 1911.

Joseph Wintersgill: *From the farm to the city*

Joseph was born in Guisborough in 1855 and in 1871 was no longer living with his family in Ripon (28). In 1871, he was employed as a farm servant on a 220 acre farm near York employing 2 men and 4 boys (29). However, the 1870s were a time of depression for English agriculture and the proportion of male agricultural workers in the population as a whole declined by a third. For those who lost their jobs or hoped for better wages, the expanding industrial cities offered some alternative. By 1875 when he married Grace Cowling, the daughter of a mule spinner in Armley, Joseph had moved to Leeds and found employment as a riveter (30). Joseph and his family remained in Leeds in the industrial quarters of Wortley and Armley whilst Joseph continued to be employed in local forges. In the 1881 census his brother George, aged 17, is listed as part of the household working as an Iron Forge Labourer (31). Joseph's occupation is listed in the censuses initially as Boiler Riveter and Boiler Maker, but in the last census before his death he is listed as a forge labourer – which no doubt reflects the impact on his health of this physically demanding and dangerous occupation which made him no longer fit for the more skilled and better paid work (32). He and Grace had at least four children. Joseph died in 1904 – he was 39 years of age (33).

The Workhouse Wintersgills

The six younger Wintersgill children, being under the age of 14, all spent some time in the Ripon Workhouse where they would receive, as well as food, clothing and lodging, the modicum of education felt appropriate to *"fit them for service and train them to habits of usefulness, industry and virtue"*.

Interestingly, the six orphans were not all admitted at the same time: Jane, aged 11, Henry, aged 8 and George aged 7, came to the workhouse days after their mother died on 10 May 1871. A month later, William, aged 2 who had been with his uncle William's family in Stockton on Tees arrived - obviously his uncle felt that this could not be made a permanent arrangement. Charles, aged 4, arrived in January 1872, perhaps he too had been cared for by relatives for a time (his Uncle George and family were living in Ripon) and came as a last resort. As for Sarah Ann, aged 13, she had been employed as a domestic servant in 1871, but presumably because she was out of work, was admitted to the workhouse in March 1872 (34).

Ten years later, the Master of the workhouse referred to them as *'a family of six … who have been a constant source of trouble to the officials and inmates'* (35). Their lives after

leaving the workhouse were, as far as the records allow us to determine, no less eventful and difficult.

Sarah Ann Wintersgill (1858 - ?) and Jane Wintersgill (1860 - ?)

At first sight, the two younger sisters were destined to follow the same path through life as their older sister Harriet: domestic service followed by marriage and raising a family. But this did not prove easy for either of them.

Sarah Ann, aged 13 in 1871 was already engaged on the traditional path for young working class girls (36). In April 1871, she was employed by William and Sarah Cropley as a servant at the Crown Inn in Darrington near Pontefract (37). She was the only female servant in a family that included five young children, the eldest being only a couple of years younger than herself. This arrangement was obviously not successful since in March 1872 she applied to enter the Ripon Workhouse from which she discharged herself in 1874 (34).

She may have moved to the Wakefield area (her brother William's records for 1887 mention an address in Stanley) because her sister Jane was already living there or simply because the area with its collieries, mills and expanding economy offered more opportunities. She may also have hoped that marriage might offer her a way out of her life of domestic servitude. Indeed, we find in the Parish records for Lofthouse in September 1881 an announcement of marriage banns between Sarah Annie Wintersgill (aged 23) and William Henry Lee both residing in Lofthouse, near Wakefield (38). William was a widower, a coal miner aged 34, and the census for 1881 shows that he had three children living at home: Anna, 14, housekeeper, Mary, 12 and Arthur 6, both still at school (39). However, the marriage did not take place: the entry in the parish record is marked: '*Marriage not consummated*'. A few months later, William Lee did remarry, his second wife was Hannah Johnson, the widow of a coal miner (40).

A possible explanation as to why the marriage with William Lee did not take place is provided in the evidence given at the widely reported trial for bigamy against her sister Jane's husband Amos Thorpe in 1883. The marriage had taken place in Lofthouse in the first quarter of 1881. The groom's best man, a bricklayer named Jabez Parker, was reported in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (5 May 1883) as *living in open adultery with the bride's sister*. The court report continues: *the prisoner and his wife* [Jane] *lived together for a short time, and then the woman who was formerly a tailoress in Leeds, left her husband, and her sister got into trouble and was sentenced to five year's penal servitude* (41). The report adds: '*Jabez said he had been living with her sister now serving 5 years at Millbank*'.

No further details of the nature of the offence or the reason for the sentence could be found nor any indication of Sarah's whereabouts. However the reference to Millbank Prison in London, originally built as a National Penitentiary and later classed as a convict prison, and the five year sentence suggest a serious offence. For a woman, the offenses that

attracted this sort of sentence ranged from theft, being drunk and disorderly and various offences relating to prostitution (42).

Although Sarah Ann disappears from view at the time of her conviction a tentative link might be made with an unmarried female inmate of the Stanley Royd Pauper Lunatic Asylum, recorded in the 1901 census (42). This might be explained by the fact that magistrates could direct that persistent or repeat offenders be committed to a county lunatic asylum, especially if they had no means of support or subsistence (Turner and Johnson, 2016)(43). There is a suggestion in her brother William's army discharge papers (1887) that she had come back to Stanley after serving her sentence where he intended to join her but had she got into further trouble and ended her days in the Asylum?

Jane, aged 11 when her mother died, entered the workhouse in 1871 and spent nearly three years there before being discharged in 1874 (34). We do not know what her first employment was, but by 1880, her address was given by her brother as the Barley Corn Inn in Leeds. In early 1881, she married at the Registry Office in Wakefield one Amos Thorpe, a quarryman from Lofthouse near Wakefield, 12 years older than herself (44) and they moved to Lofthouse (45).

Clearly the marriage did not prosper for in May 1883, the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* under the headline '*Extraordinary Charge of Bigamy at Wakefield*' was one of the many newspapers to cover the case of Amos Thorpe's prosecution for bigamy by Mary Jane Elmley, aged 17. The paper reported that Amos had married Jane Wintersgill in 1881, a former tailoress in Leeds – who left him after five months. Amos then went to Ardsley where he met Mary Jane, and after a whirlwind courtship of two weeks married her (46). She left him because of ill usage and because she had heard he already had a wife. Amos was tried at the Leeds Assizes in July 1883 when his defence was that Jane had two previous husbands living in Leeds and Hunslet and was currently cohabiting with another man. He had therefore concluded that she was not his wife and he was free to marry. Initially the judge suspended sentence '*so that evidence of a mitigating nature might be produced to the effect that the prisoner's first wife was a bad character*'. Eventually, the court found him guilty and sentenced him to 12 months hard labour (48) (49).

We can follow the subsequent life of Amos Thorpe, as he returned to live with his father in Lofthouse until the latter's death in 1897. In 1901 we find Amos Thorpe in the Wakefield Union Workhouse and Infirmary where he died in 1909 (50). However, we lose sight of Jane Wintersgill after 1883. No record of a subsequent marriage, employment or death can be found. Nor did she seek help from her siblings who had their own problems to deal with.

Henry, George, Charles and William Wintersgill

Henry, born in 1863, was 8 when he entered the workhouse (51). He is a somewhat shadowy figure, but he would probably have left the workhouse at the age of 14 or so to

look for employment: the fact that his brother Joseph was settled in Leeds may have induced him to try his luck there. According to William's records, he was living in Holbeck, Leeds in 1887. Holbeck, formerly a village on the outskirts of Leeds, reputed for its spa water in the 18th century, expanded hugely in the 19th century first with textile mills and later engineering works producing locomotives, steam engines, and machinery of all kinds. It was described in 1834 as '*one of the most crowded, one of the most filthy, one of the most unpleasant, one of the most unhealthy villages in the county of York'* (52). Overcrowding, poor back to back housing in crowded yards and industrial pollution cannot have made Henry's lot an easy one.

George Wintersgill, was a troubled young man who throughout his life found it difficult to stay on the right side of the law and the authorities. He was born in Ripon and was baptised at Ripon Cathedral on 31 July 1864 (53). He entered the workhouse at the age of 7. From the age of 11 he absconded from the workhouse three times, on one occasion for almost a year (34). On being readmitted a series of petty thefts culminating with the theft of two pigeons brought him before the magistrates at the Ripon workhouse in 1877. He had a previous record for stealing pyjamas and was therefore classed as a '*juvenile offender*'. Being judged to be in need of a more rigorous environment to save him from '*a fallen life'* his sentence was 10 days in prison to be followed by 4 years in a Reformatory School. He was sent to the Calder Farm School near Wakefield from which he was to be discharged on 26 January 1881 (54).

His admission records give some interesting background information on George. At the age of 14, he had a fresh complexion, brown hair and grey eyes and was of short stature. Despite attending the national school for 2 years and the workhouse school for 5 years, he was assessed as '*reading and writing imperfectly'*. It was noted that he had earlier run away from the workhouse to be with a brother and had been working in a forge for two years. This was presumably his brother Joseph. On his discharge, as recorded in the 1881 census, he returned to Leeds, found work as an Iron Forge Labourer and stayed in Wortley with his brother Joseph, his wife Grace and their three children (55). Although the family had been split up by their parents' death, clearly the brothers remained in contact and the older brother was willing to help out his younger sibling.

This was a very temporary arrangement. By June 1881, George had left Leeds and was again in front of the magistrates at Ripon City Court. The *Leeds Times* reported:

On Sunday morning, Mr Greenwood, the Workhouse Master at Ripon, discovered a lad in one of the wards, wearing a reformatory uniform. He had gained entry by scaling the wall. Supt Metcalfe found that he had come by the last train to Ripon from Leeds on Saturday night and had in his position a ticket from Holbeck.

The *York Herald* for 23 June reported the same incident and added that: *It had been suspected that he had left [the reformatory] before his time. In fact he was discharged in*

January 1881 previous to which he had attempted to make an escape. *He had been employed in Leeds. It appears he is of weak intellect*'. (57)

However, as George stated in his defence that he wanted to go to his brother Benjamin at Stockton on Tees, the magistrate did not press charges. Unfortunately, this was not his last appearance in court. In 1882 he received two separate sentences for stealing coats: two months in prison in January and 6 months in June 1882, for stealing a coat at Stockton, the judge having noted his previous conviction (58). Almost a year later, in April 1883, the *York Herald* reported that George Wintersgill, a painter, had been jailed for two years in prison with 12 months hard labour for stealing a quantity of linen and woollen articles from the Ripon Workhouse (59). He was sent to Northallerton prison. It is not clear what happened to George on his release from prison, but there is an indication that, at some point, he returned to Ripon Workhouse for the Admissions/Discharges record for 1893 note:

George Wintersgill was removed to the lunatic asylum by order of the Medical Officer (60)

Charles Wintersgill was 4 years old his mother died, he was admitted to the Workhouse the following year and he was the last of his family to leave it in 1881 (34) (61) . Compared to his brothers George and William he seems to have had a fairly trouble-free passage through the workhouse. At the age of 14, he was sent out as a pauper apprentice on trial as a farm labourer to a farmer in Bishopton near Ripon. Later that year, on 23 November 1881 he was discharged from the Workhouse and was subsequently reported to be '*doing fairly well*' (62).

Whether he was unable to continue to find work as a farm labourer or he wished to lead a more adventurous life, in 1890 he was in Sunderland where he applied to enlist in the Royal Artillery. His short service records tell us that he was a farm labourer, and that he was 5ft 8 ¾' tall, weighed 153 lbs and had grey eyes and red hair. Unfortunately he was found unfit for service as he had flat feet and he was discharged the next day (63). His movements cannot be traced after this date.

William, the youngest member of the family, was a disruptive and difficult inmate of the workhouse. He was baptised in Ripon in 1868 (64) in 1871 aged 2, he was living in Stockton on Tees with his uncle Henry and his family but he was admitted to the Ripon Workhouse shortly afterwards (65). Aged 11, he was found to have stolen a brass tap from the Workhouse and tried to sell it. In September 1880, he appeared before the magistrates at the Ripon City Police Court, charged with having stolen 2s 6d from the purse of Annie Greenwood, the daughter of the Master of the Workhouse. The *York Herald* under the headline '*Juvenile Depravity*' quoted from the statement of Mr Greenwood:

… the lad is one of a family of about six who were admitted into the house about nine years ago and have been a constant source of trouble to the officials and inmates. About four years ago, a brother of the prisoner was sent to Mirfield Reformatory for theft. Prisoner was

constantly committing petty thefts, and his example had a demoralising effect on the other children in the house. In reply to the Bench, the boy said he wished to be a sailor -

He was sentenced to 10 days in prison and 5 years in a reformatory. However, at his request, the court recorded that an attempt would be made to get him on board a training ship (66). These were an alternative to reformatory schools and took in boys committed by magistrates to provide them with discipline and skills to enable them to find work and become respectable adults. In fact, over 50% of boys trained went into the merchant service and a small proportion into the Royal Navy. However, William was not to get his wish to become a sailor but was instead sent to Calder Farm Reformatory like his brother George. There he would have been subjected to a strict disciplinary regime and given training in agricultural work or a trade such as carpentry, tailoring or shoemaking.

William did not find it easy to make his way after was released from Calder Farm on 7 October 1885 (67). He first went to work for a milk hawker, but that lasted only a few months although his conduct was reported to be good and he returned to Calder Farm for several months in 1886. He then had two brief periods of employment as a collier one at Stanley Ferry near Wakefield, the other near Pontefract until July 1887, his conduct being judged to be moderate. Although he had failed to be taken on for naval training, William had apparently not given up his dream of a career in the armed forces. On his second attempt, he was passed as medically fit and was able to enlist in the Northumberland Fusiliers in 1887 (68). At that point, he was listed as a farm servant. He was 64 ½ inches tall and weighed 122lbs.

His military career however was short lived: he was discharged for misconduct at Colchester on 13 Sept 1888, having served just under a year during which 79 days were spent in prison on offences ranging from resisting arrest, using threatening language, injuring public property and the like. On his discharge, he stated that he intended to reside with his next of kin, his sister Sarah Ann then residing at Stanley Lane End, Stanley.

Once again, we cannot trace his movements with any certainty after this date.

There were clearly no ‘happy ever after’ endings for the Wintersgill workhouse orphans as their struggles to find work and stability demonstrate. What the records do show in their limited way, however, is that the children of John and Mary Wintersgill did not entirely lose touch with each other and that in times of need they attempted to assist each other.

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