

Ann Metcalfe/Medcalfe, née Rhodes

b. 1806 – d. 1900?

Marie-Anne Hintze

Ann Rhodes, born in Darley, was baptised at Hampsthwaite in Nidderdale on 28th June 1807 - she was the daughter of John and Hannah Rhodes (1). At the age of 18, she married James Metcalfe in the same church at Hampsthwaite on the 12th April 1825 (2). Her husband, born in Ripley, was baptised in 1799 in Pateley Bridge, he was the son of John Metcalfe, an agricultural labourer and his wife Ann (3). As was not unusual at the time neither the bride nor the groom signed the marriage register with their name but instead marked the entry with a cross.

The 1841 census finds the Metcalfe family in Darley, more precisely at Menwith Hill. By then they had four children at home: John aged 10, Hannah also listed as 10 years old, James aged 5 and Joseph aged 2 (4). In the next census in 1851, the family have moved to Boose Green, Ripon, where James Metcalfe is employed as a farm labourer: three of the children – John, Hannah and Joseph have left whereas James (aged 16) a farm labourer like his father, Rhodes aged 8 and Sarah Ann aged 3 remain with their parents (5).

By 1861, James and Ann Metcalf had moved back to the area where James was born. They were then living in the hamlet of Clint, near Ripley with their son Joseph – now aged 22 also an agricultural labourer and the two youngest children: Rhodes and Sarah Ann, both described as scholars. The entry also notes the presence of two small boys each described as 'Nurse Child'. Newton Watson, aged 2 born in Hampsthwaite and William Swales aged 1 born in Leeds. By then James Metcalfe was 60 years old and Hannah was 55, and the opportunity to earn a little extra income from looking after these young children would have been welcome (6).

The presence of these two young children in the household reflects the common practice in Victorian times of entrusting children to the care of paid women. The practice was widespread and arose out of different situations. Upper class or middle class families might sent their children out to nurse for the first few years of their life (this happened to Jane Austen and her siblings for instance)(7) , because the mother was repeatedly pregnant or, if a child was sickly, it might be placed in a rural area where conditions would be more salubrious. Lower down the social scale, people with demanding jobs in unhealthy conditions (such as work in a public house) might also seek a respectable household in which to place their children.

However, there were far stronger social and economic pressures bearing down on working class girls who produced a child out of wedlock – particularly if their own family refused to assist them. Backed by the notion that promiscuity had to be

punished and immoral behaviour reformed, the Poor Law of 1834 had absolved the fathers from any financial responsibility and made illegitimate children the sole responsibility of their mothers until the age of 16. The mothers were expected to support themselves and their children or would have to enter the workhouse where the mortality rate for babies, especially in urban areas, was very high. One solution to the problem was to place the child in a household against a weekly sum of money for food, clothes and so forth which enabled the mother to earn a living for herself and her child. In the best of cases, the child could be brought up in a neighbouring area thus allowing the mother to make occasional visits. With the coming of the industrial revolution, where work was not necessarily available close at hand, women might have to move to further afield and thereby lose touch with their children. A more dangerous practice gradually arose, particularly in industrial urban areas, which led to the infamous 'baby farms' of the latter Victorian period where 'nurses' would advertise in the press their willingness to 'adopt' the small children of desperate single mothers against a one-off lump sum and to rehome them. In such a context, the incentives for keeping the babies alive could be slim. Some 'baby-farms', as depicted by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, catered specifically for the orphan children of the workhouse (8,9).

The background and the ultimate fate of the two children taken in by Ann and James Metcalfe does illustrate the very different circumstances that led them to become 'nurse children'.

William Swale (aged 1 in 1861) was the son of James Swale, a farm labourer born in Wilsill in Nidderdale and his wife Mary (née Reyner) born in Beckwithshaw. They had married in 1859 and moved to Hunslet in Leeds where James was employed as a farm labourer. William was baptised on 19 June 1861, at the Wesleyan Chapel in Hunslet but was not with his parents at the time of the census (6,10). However by 1871, William aged 9 was living with his parents and three younger siblings born in Fewston on a 21 acre farm run by his father (11). He also became a farmer, married a local girl and raised a family of several children (12). We cannot know what brought his parents to make the decision to send him away from Hunslet back to Nidderdale but clearly William did not suffer unduly by the experience.

For Newton Watson, the circumstances were rather different. He was baptised in Hampsthwaite on 3rd June 1859 and, as noted in the parish register, was the illegitimate son of Mary Ann Watson – a fact that suggests that he was born in that parish (13). Mary Ann's parents (John Watson and Martha Barret) were originally from Otley, but by 1827 at least, when Mary Ann was born, John Watson had secured a position as overlooker in the cotton mill at Birstwith in Nidderdale. Like her son, Mary Ann had been baptised in Hampsthwaite Church on 23rd December 1827 (14). The family's links with Nidderdale must have lasted until at least 1835 when Janet Watson the youngest child was born in Birstwith. By 1841, however, the family

were in Skipton and in 1851, when Mary Ann was fifteen and employed as Milliner and Straw Bonnet Maker, her father was the manager of the cotton mill in Hebden (15). One wonders if, when it was discovered that Mary Ann was pregnant, she was sent away from her family to have her child and discreetly entrust him to the care of some acquaintances in Nidderdale or whether she went of her own accord. Be that as it may, by 1861, the story has come to a sad conclusion. Newton Watson's death is registered in Pateley Bridge for the second quarter of 1861 and a death is recorded later the same year in Skipton for Mary Ann Watson (16,17). That year her father had also died and her brother Walter was now the manager of Hebden Mill and providing a home for his widowed mother (18).

We cannot know if Ann and James Metcalfe raised any other 'nurse children' but in 1871, when James was 70 and Ann 65, they were still living in Clint but their status is noted as 'Pauper' (19). James appears to have died that same year and Ann would have had to seek some means of support. Of her 7 children her youngest daughter Sarah Ann had married and moved to Leeds, her son Rhodes had moved and later settled in Lewisham and only her son Joseph remained nearby, having moved back to Ripon by 1870 where all but his two eldest children were born. By 1881, he was supporting a wife and a family of eight children on the wages of a journeyman stonemason (20). It may be owing to his presence in Ripon that Ann eventually was admitted to the workhouse in Ripon where she is to be found in 1881 rather than to the Workhouse in Pateley Bridge. Her death is recorded in Ripon in the third quarter of 1900 together with the fact that she had reached the age of 91 (21).

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