

Anne Harcourt – HerStory York and York Museums Trust

I stumbled across Anne Harcourt when researching notable women for this project as I was investigating the Yorkshire Philosophical Society (YPS). I read about a 2019 exhibition entitled “York’s First Photographs”, and here is where I first saw the featured image of Anne attached to this piece. As the only individual woman featured, I was intrigued about her connection to the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, and instead discovered a fascinating history of a woman who remained connected to York Museums Gardens until her death.

The Yorkshire Philosophical Society was formed in 1822, and founded the Yorkshire Museum and Botanical Gardens, both in the York Museum Gardens, after being given part of the grounds of St Mary’s Abbey. Founded by four men, notably including William Vernon Harcourt (later to be a relation of Anne), I was interested in researching the women involved in the society, and this is where I learnt more about Anne, who has been labelled by some as the first woman member.

Born 1796 in Exeter as Anne Gater, her first connection to the museum gardens comes from her marriage to William Danby on 5th January, 1822. Danby was a collector of antiquities and a writer of moral philosophy, and in 1824 was elected Vice-President of the YPS, one of the earliest members, and making Anne present in the establishment of the society. 44 years Anne’s elder, I find the vast age gap in this relationship a bleak example of reality for women throughout history, obligated to marry affluent, successful men to secure or maintain a strong position in society. Upon Danby’s death in 1833, at the age of 81, Anne subscribed as a member of the YPS in his place until 1837, arguably making her one of the first female members of the society.

On the 22nd February 1838, Anne remarried to Octavius Vernon Harcourt, and remained at Danby’s estate, Swinton Park in Masham. Despite not having children in either marriage, Anne used her wealth and position to provide substantial support and facilities to children in her area, including erecting Masham National School in 1834. Anne was involved in building a free school for 12 girls, an infants school in Swinton in 1875 and building almshouse’s (charitable housing for the poor or vulnerable) in Masham in 1853.

“The Victorian Visionaries” trail in 2019, a collaborative project between the YPS, the York Museums Trust and Explore York Libraries and Archives is where I was able to read more about Anne and find the photo attached. Believed to focus on the first photographs taken in York, as daughter in law to the Archbishop of York, Anne was photographed at Bishopthorpe Palace, featuring as one of the few singular portraits of a woman in the trail, emphasising her historical impact.

Anne remained with Harcourt until his death in 1863 and lived in Swinton Park till her death on 26 June 1879. A prominent figure in her community, I found a newspaper extract that details her funeral, noting “every seat in the church was occupied”, with mourners including children from the Grammar, National and Swinton schools. Having had no children of her own yet devoting much of her life to providing opportunities to young people, I find it moving to think of her life being celebrated and valued by all those she supported. In reading summaries of her will, I was pleased to read of her charitable nature sustaining in her passing. Not only did she gift substantial amounts such as £1000 to the York County Hospital and £500 to the Leeds Infirmary for Women and Children, but she donated £500 to the Wilberforce School for the Blind, a school once based in Kings Manor, a prominent building in York Museum Gardens. I feel this not only emphasises her intrinsic ties to York and the Museum Gardens, through both her husbands, but her genuine commitment to funding education for children, particularly those vulnerable or under-privileged. She maintained her relationship to the parish of Masham, as she left £100 to the Vicar of Masham to be used for the purchase of bedding and clothing for the needful poor in the parish townships.

In learning of Anne’s life, I hope to have spotlighted a woman who, due to her social privilege and advantageous marriages, was given a life where she could deliver meaningful impact to those less fortunate than her. Moreover, it tells the story of a woman who was granted access to predominantly male spaces and used her wealth and status to deliver education and healthcare to her local communities. Her generosity has stood the test of time, with the housing care property in Masham “Harcourt Almshouse” still bearing her name, showing the lasting legacy of a highly interesting woman.



References and Readings:

[Newspaper Extract - Anne Holwell Danby Vernon Harcourt \(harrogatepeopleandplaces.info\)](http://harrogatepeopleandplaces.info)

[Ann Holwell Gater Harcourt \(1796-1879\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#)

[UK and Ireland, Find a Grave® Index, 1300s-Current - Ancestry.co.uk](http://Ancestry.co.uk)

[The British Association Conference 1844, and the first photographs taken in York | Yorkshire Philosophical Society](#)

[Calotypes-and-biographies-from-the-2019-exhibition.pdf](#)

[Museum Gardens walking trail shows off the first photos ever taken in York... | York Press](#)

[New Display at the Yorkshire Museum Reveals the Hidden Women of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society](#)