



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

WHAT IS UNITARIANISM?

Clara was a Unitarian, a radical thing to be at the time. Unitarians shun ideas of Biblical texts being an authority and instead place emphasis on free thought, personal spiritual experience and reverence for the earth.



REMEMBERING CLARA CLARKSON

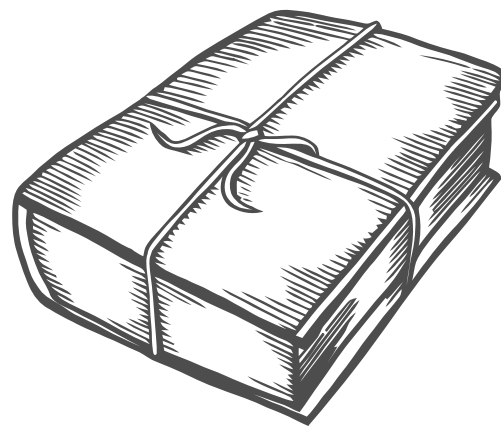


CLARA DESERVES A BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE...

her journals provide an incredible insight into the period of time in which she lived, illuminating the life of a Unitarian and a non-conforming woman at a time that demanded women behave and act a particular way.

A LOVER AND PROTECTOR OF WOMEN

BY SARAH LEAH
COBHAM



'I Clara Marie Clarkson of Wakefield in the County of York, Spinster, hereby revoke all wills and Testamentary dispositions heretofore made by me.... I declare that every gift interest and benefit taken by any female under this my Will shall be for her own sole and separate use free from the debts control and insolvency of any husband with whom she may at anytime intermarry.'

Clara died 9th October 1889 and split her considerable fortune, in specific detail, to family, friends, and loved ones. One loved one, who was referred to as 'Emma' in the highly sanitised 1971 published diary, 'Merrie Wakefield' authored by distant relative Ann K Jacques, is Ann Ashton. Ann Jacques had cracked the cipher Clara had used in her journals for 60 years but, despite further editing to remove most of the personal information, enough has remained to identify some of the people within it. Ann Ashton, is referred to as a 'servant' both in Clara's final will as well as the census of 1861, 1871 & 1881 when they were living together on Hatfeild Street. Clara's voice is strong and resolute when she names Ann Ashton not once, but six times in her will. Ann was gifted everything that made up their home together, the jewels, trinkets, linen, china, glass, books, pictures, prints, furniture and household effects were listed as going to her within the first five lines. The final third was dedicated almost solely to Ann's financial well-being. Much like Shakespeare leaving 'the second best (marriage) bed' in his will to his wife, Anne Hathaway, Clara ensured that the most intimate items, all their memories and secrets of their lives together, stayed with Ann. It was highly unusual for a mere 'servant' to receive such personal items but Clara was a most unusual woman. Ann Ashton was also gifted a £1000 annuity, held in trust to enable her to buy a freehold property and a life-time yearly annuity of £1000 administered by trustees. This meant that this single woman, Clara's companion for nearly 30 years, was well cared for until her own death. Twenty eight years younger than Clara, Ann joined the household after Clara's overbearing and protective mother died and is referred to as Clara's 'companion' on the back of a photograph held in the Wakefield Library archives. The woman in the photograph is dressed in mourning black, holds a bible and sits in genteel surroundings. How do we know Ann Ashton is Emma in the diary? Because the facts stack up and have been corroborated through extensive research by the Dream Time Creative team, most notably Helga Fox.

Overleaf we present a number of extracts from Clara's diaries and a discussion about why Ann's name might have been changed, the nature of Clara's relationships with other women, the historical relevance of this, and also a wider discussion about Clara and her life in Wakefield.

TIMELINE

17th February 1811	Born at Alverthorpe Hall to Benjamin Clarkson ca. 1759-1820 (solicitor) and Sarah Clarkson nee Wood 1779-1853 of Flanshaw Hall
2nd June 1811	Baptised at Wakefield's Westgate Unitarian Chapel
5 Aug 1817	Death of Clara's Maternal Grandfather Thomas Wood (ca. 1737-1817) This marks a period of several deaths that seem to have impacted Clara's mother Sarah greatly
1819	Clara's Sister Emma Clarkson and her brother Edwin Clarkson die in infancy
1820	Benjamin Clarkson, Clara's father, dies. Clara is nine years old
10 Oct, 1831	Clara's first diary entries that survive today. We know however that Clara had been writing diaries since she was at least 15, and that several volumes were destroyed by trustees and some by the family
21 Mar, 1832	Clara begins recording details of various Cholera outbreaks in the area
The 1841 and 1851 census	Clara is still living with her mother Sarah Clarkson whose loss of several children and her husband seems to have made her particularly clingy with Clara
14th October 1853	Sarah Clarkson, Clara's mother dies. From this point on, Clara's relationship with servant Ann (Emma) deepens
7 Jun 1866	Clara signs a Suffrage Petition presented to Parliament
25 March, 1871	Clara signs up to the Band of Faith, a radical document that, among other things, denies the existence of Original Sin, embraces other religions, and holds that Revelation is ongoing.
9th October, 1889	Clara dies after many years of struggling with ill health. She leaves nearly all of her personal effects and a large sum of money to Ann Ashton
1971	'Merrie Wakefield', based on four of Clara's journals, is published



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CLARA CLARKSON: A LOVER AND PROTECTOR OF WOMEN

BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

September 5th 1876

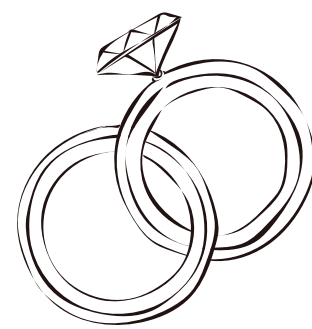
'Mr Wagstaffe arrived about my will. I gave him the copy I had written out and explained that I wished Emma to have 1,000 pounds in an annuity and furniture and my wearing and household linen. We talked for a long time and he had cake and wine.'

But why change Ann's name to Emma? Like the now famous 'Gentleman Jack' lesbian diarist Ann Lister, and anyone else who wishes their thoughts and observations to remain private, Clara wrote her diary in code. At aged 15 Clara began to keep a journal into which she recorded daily, sometimes thrice daily, all the details that made up her life. The pages are full of comment and gossip, observations personal and public, and they give a detailed insight into the life of a woman who was restrained, repressed and full of contradiction. As the existence of the journals was well known, the trustees were bombarded with letters from solicitors of families far and wide requesting that the journals be destroyed. Unable to read the cipher but after identifying specific dates, half of the volumes were burnt. Wakefield's 'great and good' no doubt breathed a sigh of relief. The remaining volumes went to her cousin Lawrence's child, Mary Clarkson. Mary Louisa Clarkson broke the cipher and, due to what she felt was further indiscretion or 'unkindness' burnt several more volumes. Unlike Anne Lister's family who, for fear of societal reprisal and embarrassment, merely hid her journals, Clara's family destroyed hers. Out of the ten journals remaining, only four ended up with the Ann Jacques and they were further reduced to one volume. Where those other four are is unknown but the remaining six that had been passed down from Ann Jacques's brother were destroyed, this we know. Why? Westgate Chapel folklore tells us that Clara was well known to have loved women and to have lived openly with them. Indeed, there are two brass plaques on display naming Clara and another woman, Harriet Alexander, mounted side by side, to acknowledge that fact. Clara was a trail blazer, an early suffragist and publicly embraced the acceptance of all faiths and peoples of the world. The teaching of Rev Goodwyn Barmby at Westgate Chapel empowered her, and brought her into contact with radicals of the Victorian era. She, like Barmby, rejected social convention around class and gender and was known to Frances Power Cobbe, a well known women's rights campaigner, activist, lesbian and vociferous animal rights advocate and fellow Unitarian whose name sits alongside Clara's on the Unitarian Band of Faith Declaration in 1872. This records that she rejected all current teachings of Christianity. Unable to see herself married to a man from an early age she states in her diary:

April 13th 1832

'My grandmother told me that she hoped to live long enough to see me happy with a good husband, and I asked her if she could not be content to see me happy without the husband?'

Clara's fierce loyalty and friendship with women can be seen clearly in her journals and, like all of us, it took her time to find someone who was agreeable to live with and care about. Certainly, her friendship with Eb (Eliza Burton) is instrumental in her formative years in helping her decide what was and what was not acceptable behaviour. 'Dear Eb' appears on nearly every page, several times. Their relationship, which involved many long walks in the countryside around Dircar (Durkar) consisted of gazing at scenery, drinking tea and day dreaming. It played out under her mother's domineering eye and often caused conflict within the home which caused real heartache for Clara.



October 20th 1831

'Eb called and she told me that her father and mother had been at the ball at Thornes House last night. When she went Mother was much worse about dear Eb than ever before. She seems quite cross whenever I mention her name or any of her family, and I can't tell why. What can I do? Dear Eb and I are just like sisters and I know she loves me better than of my other companions. I feel so grieved. I cried famously about it in bed when Mother could not know.'

August 13th 1831

'Eb called to say goodbye as she is going on a visit to Hull for about three weeks. I wept at our parting'

When her brother, Alfred, and Eb start to flirt beyond, what Clara felt, were the limits of acceptability her diary shows just how astute she was at character observation, and how quick she could be with her tongue, even at the tender age of just 22:

Feb 26th 1833

'Alfred is much more attentive to Eb than he used to be. They sing duets together and I am sure Eb encourages him just to flatter her vanity. I am sure Alfred is not thinking of her seriously and after all she is so much older than he. I shall contrive to point that out to her sometime.'

In 1834 Clara has met, albeit fleetingly for the first time, Miss Alexander. Harriet Alexander became incredibly significant in Clara's life. Their intimate friendship is shown in the final years of her journal. It took a long time for Clara to accept herself for who she was however and it was not without some soul searching.

August 8th 1837

'Ann and I had a long talk about getting married. I am sure I do not know what is the matter with me. I have been very unsettled lately and not had the same joy in religious duties as I used to have. I am growing worldly and discontented and selfish.'

Could it be that she is beginning to accept that marriage between her and a man is not going to be possible and that that is what is the 'matter'? Clara finds distraction during the years which many of her close friends marry, in both the Literary Society, which Miss Alexander often hosts, and in the setting up of a Musical Society called The Philharmonic which brings many of the women in her life together for regular concerts and companionship. The loyalty some of the women have to Clara at this point is heart warming. Annie O'Dwyer is another strong and influential woman whose name appears on the 1866 Suffrage Petition organised by Mr Barmby. Annie ran a school on Northgate and visited Clara at one of her lowest points. Faced with several familial deaths and surrounded by yet another outbreak of Cholera in Wakefield, and dreadful December weather, she writes:



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CLARA CLARKSON: A LOVER AND PROTECTOR OF WOMEN

BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

December 19th 1837

'A very wet day and I felt depressed and poorly. Annie O'Dwyer came in spite of the rain.'

By early 1838 the women's networks Clara had set up provided refuge from the machinations of her cousin Henry who was looking to re-marry now that his first wife had died. Both Clara's mother and Clara were mortified at how his family conspired to such a match.

May 9th 1938

'After the service we went to the inn and dined. Henry came and sat by me and I thought it very wrong of him to make himself so conspicuous so soon after his wife's death and dearest Mother noted that several people observed it. What bitter mortification it caused me! For I know he never did and never would like me except for what I have and I am not so foolish to be pleased with attention which stems from such a motive.'

The journals between 1838 and 1875 are missing. The long lasting heartfelt friendships between Clara and her women have, by the time she writes her last will and testament in 1875, blossomed into easy, established and varied hearth partners. Dear Alex, Miss Alexander from 30 years ago, is integral to Clara's life now and they reside for weeks on end together, shopping, resting, reading. Emma (Ann) is also there, ever present but in the background and making herself scarce when necessary. She is the epitome of a good 'servant' but with qualities of an understanding partner.

November 24th

'Dear Alex is with me for a few days before going back to Lupset from Southport where she spent three weeks. We went into town and did much shopping and came home in a hansom and dined at three o'clock. Emma went to a Panorama so we waited upon ourselves.'

Clara tends to become poorly when faced with a situation linked to a potential emotional conflict. Through the diaries she retreats to her room and her bed in times of emotional stress often linked to affairs of the heart. However, now a woman in her 60s and more confident in her relationships and her place in society, she does what she feels is right for the women in her life. This is shown very clearly when Annie O'Dwyer, her life-long friend and confidant in times of trouble, dies.

September 10th, 1875

'Dear Annie O'Dwyer died a few minutes before noon and I wept bitterly when I heard. I must put on mourning and think I must buy a black dress so in the afternoon I went to King and Kingswell's but did not find anything suitable so bought 15 yards of black striped material and arranged for the making of it.'

Mourning protocol was strict in Victorian England but Clara ignored it. Clara was not a family member of Annie's so, in terms of Victorian propriety, she was unable to 'officially' wear black to show the depth of her grief. She did anyway. We shall never know just how close the two women were during the 'missing years' but Clara's actions, once again, tell us more about what her heart felt and how, in her dotage, she no longer conformed to social convention. After Annie's funeral Emma is mentioned more and more in the journals, but her role is confused.



The Unitarian Chapel which Clara attended and in which she is buried.

This is perhaps a sign of Ann Jacque's own interpretation of who this woman was in Clara's life. Although apart, Dear Alex and Clara write almost daily, each mirroring one another's illnesses, the intensity of their connection is felt through their shared loss of Mr Gaskell, politician, friend and fellow Unitarian. The death of Annie O'Dwyer and Mr Gaskell throws into sharp focus for Clara the responsibility she has with regards to her estate, and while Dear Alex seems to be the perfect companion with which to discuss the decisions she wishes to make, she isn't.

December 31st

'Looking back on the year I feel thankful to God. But since July I have had much anxiety about investments. I have no one to confide in and feel alone. Dear Alex is not that kind of friend and I must trust in God Who has helped me in the past.'

Perhaps Clara cannot discuss with Dear Alex her investments because it will be the ever faithful Ann who will receive thousands and thousands of pounds whilst Dear Alex will receive a mere £50. Or perhaps it will be because constant companion Ann will be in receipt of everything that is personal in Clara's life, and Alex will be gifted nothing. 1876 sees Clara and Emma (Ann) settling into a long winter together beset with illness followed by a delightful recovery in the spring in Ilkley. Dear Alex appears less and less in the pages with less frequent letter writing and visits. When she does appear, it is to bring with her gossip that keeps Clara in a constant state of anxiety. Is it any wonder that their friendship becomes less intense whilst Emma (Ann) offers reliability, intimacy and security. The more Dear Alex is concerned with idle gossip, the more Emma's role in Clara's life is cemented.

August 2nd

'Later dear Alex's nephew Reginald called. He is staying a few days at Lupset and he questioned me about my ailments which I quite resented, but he meant it kindly. I do wish dear Alex would not talk to him or to anyone, about my health'

February 17th

'My 65th birthday. I spent the morning re arranging my will. I must leave 1,000 to Emma in an annuity.'



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BY SARAH LEAH COBHAM

March 19th, Sunday

'Very cold and thick now, so had a quiet service of prayer at home. I read Mr. Wickstead's farewell lectures with great pleasure. By evening my pain was so bad Emma put on a mustard plaster for me.'

October 10th

'Back in Wakefield and Emma soon had everything comfortable.'

October 23rd

'Very ill in the night. Bore it as long as I could but at 2 o'clock rang for Emma who got me hot bran bags and made some tea.' Looking after Emma, (Ann) even before she dies, is at the forefront of Clara's mind and so she increases her salary to £16 a year.

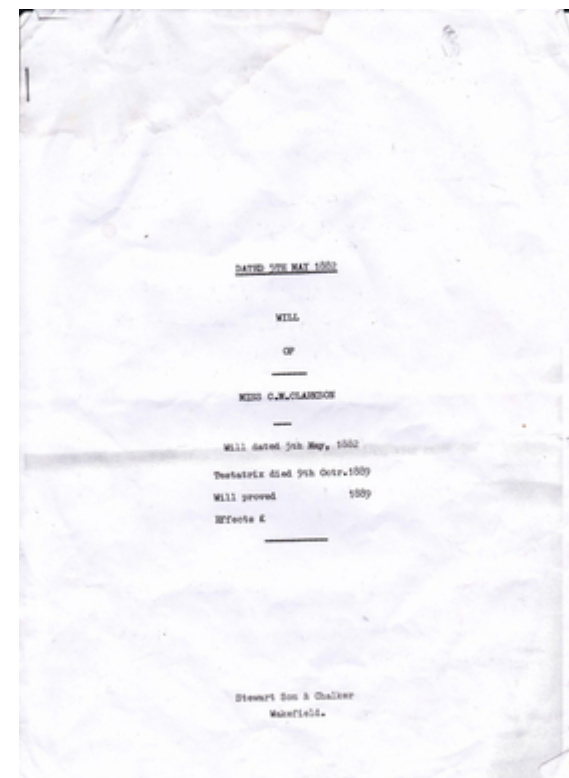
November 10th

'I am now giving Emma 16 pounds a year. I do hope she will be sensible and save. She is a good kind girl and I feel that she deserves this increase.'

As Emma (Ann) is left such a substantial amount of money every year after Clara dies (over £134,000 in today's money) it is telling that in her will, Clara instructs the trustees to administer that in £500 chunks every six months. This diary entry tells us that Clara recognises that Emma (Ann) is possibly naive about the impact having money can have on her and is probably preparing her for what is to come.

The remainder of the diary shows a sharp contrast between Clara's public face and her private one. Dear Alex continues to insist on Clara trying new remedies for her ailments and Emma (Ann) is always there with a hot compress or a trip to find Dr. Wright, often in the middle of the night. Ann is always there, always constant, always loyal and always loving. Dear Alex writes often but for Clara, trips to town and long walks in sun lit fields with people whom she once loved are long gone. Instead Clara sometimes takes walks along roads that used to be lanes and plays the piano at dusk. She is content with her own company and that of Emma (Ann) and has ensured, with the final lines of her will, that the women in her life will benefit greatly from her wealth and her wisdom. A powerful and empowering legacy.

Clara Clarkson, Wakefield's protector and lover of women, suffragist, diarist and social commentator, died 9th October 1889 at the age of 78 and is buried at her spiritual home, Wakefield Unitarian Chapel, on Westgate.



Clara's will is remarkable for a number of reasons. As noted previously, the large sum she left Ann has sparked speculation that the two women were more than just good friends. However, our researchers were unable to find any material evidence of a romantic relationship. This fact to one side, it is in keeping with Clara's character to be deeply loyal to the people who have been good and true to her. Clara's will demonstrates a woman who by the end of her life had thrown off many of the shackles imposed by her mother and wider society, though certainly not all. She is someone making decisions based on what she believes to be right, and in accordance with her faith. It is fair to say that in many senses of the word, Clara is an example of what many Unitarians have hoped to embody: temperance, fairness and a large capacity for kindness.

CLARA CLARKSON - A CUTTING WIT

Our researchers dug into Clara's journals and loved all the gossip, the intrigue and the musings of a woman finding herself and her way in the world. One thing also stood out -- Clara had a cutting sense of humour. Here's just one extract dated Sep 6th, 1837:

"So Mr Cameron read the poetry and in his great ecstasy he at last went down on his knees on the floor and held the book high to the candles which looked a little comical. We all walked home together and cousin Ann kept talking about animals as usual. She told Mr Cameron that she always thought there was something about little pigs which greatly resembled human infants. I am now disenchanted by Mr Cameron."

