

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker goes in search of his ancestor Mary Ann Norman, a Victorian laundress and charwoman

It's 11 o'clock on a Monday morning in April 1861. Just off Oxford Street – opposite the Swan & Rushes – a narrow alleyway brings me into Paradise Place. Seven cottages nestle around a courtyard, alongside the Mission School. I can hear the click and rattle of framework knitters in several of the cottages. At No 5, Mary Ann Norman has already spent three hours beating bed-sheets with a dolly in the washtub. Now she's ironing linen, helped by her mother, Fanny Wells. The air is damp, with petticoats drying on a line strung across the room.



For about 30 years, Mary Ann worked as a laundress. I'm fortunate that her work merits a mention in each census return – women's employment was often under-recorded – but the particulars of Mary Ann's work are scant. She leaves behind no employment papers or trade directory listings. As Patricia Malcolmson writes in 'English Laundresses: A Social History, 1850-1930':

"The laundress and her work were too commonplace, too rough, and too undramatic to attract much interest or public attention. As long as laundry work remained small-scale... often performed by isolated women in their own or their employer's homes, contemporaries were little concerned to investigate, document, or regulate it."

I'm keen to find out more. A dip into Ancestry pulls together the basic facts. Born Mary Ann Wells in Whetstone in 1823, her family moved to Leicester

when she was seven or eight. By 1841, Mary Ann is a servant for framework knitter William Hancock and his family at Russell Street. Illiterate – unable even to sign her own name – hers was a life of fetching water, cleaning the house, preparing food and doing the laundry.

There's time to have a daughter – Jane Wells arrives in 1847, born out of wedlock – and then to partner up with Thomas Norman. After marrying in 1849, they settle at 5 Paradise Place, renting a two-up, two-down. Both of them work as framework knitters, but by 1861 Mary Ann has become a laundress.

Thomas Norman	Head	43	Framework Knitter
Mary A. Norman	Wife	38	Laundress
Jane Norman	Serv	14	Counter Girl in Factory
Ann Norman	do	12	Scholar
Sarah Norman	do	9	do
Thomas Norman	Son	5	do

The 1850s were tough for the hosiery trade: “There was a recession in 1851, general distress during the dreadful Crimean winter of 1854-5, and serious unemployment again after the financial crisis of 1857,” explains historian Jack Simmons. Such a volatile backdrop might have prompted Mary Ann to take up laundry work, to counter-balance her husband’s precarious income. “Washing and ironing other people’s dirty linen could be a life’s work; it could also be a temporary income source in times of adversity,” writes Malcolmson.

Let’s re-visit Paradise Place, this time with J H Stallard as he prepares his ‘Personal Observations upon the Conditions of the Poor’ for the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society in March 1849. He nips into courtyards off Oxford Street:

“These squares are in some instances entirely surrounded by houses and in the centre of most are a pump, privy, and cesspool... “Paradise-place” is a perfect parody on the name! Confined in front, it abuts behind on that receptacle of warm water and dead animals called Bankart’s Pond, the stench from which in the summer months is directly carried into the windows of this delectable spot!”

About 130 other children regularly troop through the courtyard to the school. In November 1854 there is bother with John Dorman’s pigs: “The complaint it seems was initiated by parties connected with a Sunday and Infant School situated in Paradise-place, which experienced great annoyance from the presence of the grunterns.” Despite these conditions, it’s a place to call home. As well as little Jane, the Normans raised three children there: Ann (1850), Sarah (1853) and Thomas (1856).

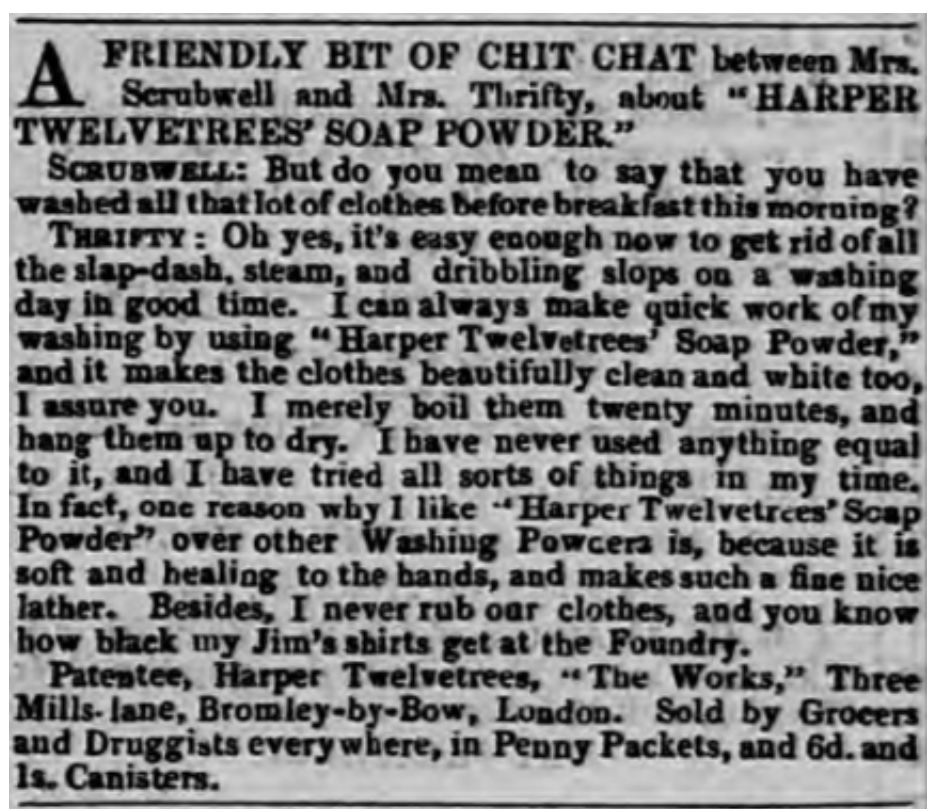
Enough of Paradise Place, what about Mary Ann’s work as a laundress there? As Judith Flanders sets out in ‘The Victorian House’, laundry was an

expensive business for the middle classes; a laundress was hired to come in by the day or the washing was sent out, though 'sending out' brought with it concerns over the 'promiscuous' mixing of clothes. The aspirations of the growing middle class – who believed "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" – helped to keep laundry workers busy.

In advance of the wash, clothes needed to be sorted and soaked overnight:

"Sheets, towels, men's collars, linen, underwear, men's shirts, night-clothes, aprons, petticoats and nappies were separated; then fine muslins; coloured cottons and linens; woollens; delicate items like women's collars and cuffs, decorative handkerchiefs, and babies' best dresses; and finally very dirty items such as kitchen cloths, household dusters, and cloths used to clean our chamber pots."

Come the morning of wash day, a large copper holding about 20 gallons of water was heated over the scullery fire; warm water was ladled out as needed into wooden washtubs – or later into basic washing machines – and a dolly or passing stick was used to agitate the dirt out. Victorian laundresses didn't have detergents, but laundry soap was shaved and dissolved in boiling water to form a jelly that could be rubbed through the wash. Amongst the more enterprising manufacturers was Harper Twelvetrees who promoted his penny packets of soap powder in the 1860s with characters Mrs Scrubwell and Mrs Thrifty.



Soaps had a tendency to turn whites yellow, so 'laundry blue' was used to counteract this. Dyed fabrics had to be treated separately, with different additives to protect them: "mauves and violets needed soda; dark green was maintained with alum or vinegar; blue by salt; brown and grey by ox-gall, bought from the butcher," explains Flanders.

After rinsing, clothes had to be wrung (to remove water), mangled (smoothed dry) and hung outside to dry. If the weather – or odours from local factories, sewers, or pigs – precluded outdoor drying then clothes were drip dried inside from ceiling-mounted rails and lines.



A glutinous starch mix was applied to stiffen men's shirts, collars, and frilled caps and petticoats, before ironing. Flat irons were used in pairs – one sat on the range, whilst the other was in use. Alternatively, box irons had two metal slugs that could be heated and slotted inside.

As Malcolmson writes, "Laundry work involved many hardships for the laundress and her family... The thunk of the heavy wooden box mangle, the hiss of irons, the thwack of the dolly, the slosh of washing, the splash of seeming oceans of water, mingled with muttered curses – these were the lullabies of the laundrywoman's child." Mrs Beaton's Book of Household Management (1861) provided detailed guidance to middle class housewives and their maids; Mary Ann would have learnt her trade from female relatives, and years of experience.

In the 1860s, a laundress earned between 1s 6d and 2s a day, rising to 2s 6d a day during the 1870s, with a beer allowance being an expected perk. It was a paltry income for the effort involved, but one that helped sustain the Norman

family. After Paradise Place, Mary Ann continued as a laundress at 25 Mill Lane (1871) and 5 Court A, Gray Street (1881).

By the mid 1880s, she is starting to feel less agile. Younger women are better able to handle heavy laundry loads, and commercial laundries have popped up at Belgrave and Saffron Hill. And so we find her in 1891 living at 5 Gosling Street, a 68 year old widow now working as a charwoman or 'char' – essentially a cleaner or skivvy, at other people's homes or commercial premises.

Punch magazine (1850) sketched an uncharitable – but perhaps not inaccurate – pen portrait of 'Mrs Grimes, the Charwoman':

“Let her come with daybreak, and leave close upon stroke of midnight, she can never do all the work that is required of her. She pleases no one... She fetches the beer, lays the cloth, washes the plates, toasts the muffins... She has a penchant for snuff, which she carries in a screw of brown paper. Report declares that she smokes... And for all her trials, labours, snubbings, and accusations, she has but one compensation – buttered toast, and tea! Give her plenty of butter, plenty of thick toast, and ponds of strong tea, and she is happier than any bride at a wedding feast.”

And so it is that I leave Mary Ann Norman in 1891, lifting a brimming saucer of tea to quench her thirst after a busy day. For decades she has grafted. It's time for her to put her feet up and enjoy a cuppa.

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Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

You can read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles at his website, www.auntiemabel.org