

Wives, Widows, Spinsters: Women in Victorian Ranmoor

This is an edited version of a talk given by local historian Val Hewson for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor on 7 March 2026.

Victorian Ranmoor was a remarkable place. Until the mid-19th century, it might have been described as the space between Sheffield with its fast-developing industries and the quiet village of Fulwood of medieval origin. Within a few years Ranmoor became a rich suburb, when the innovative Firths, Mappins and other men who made Sheffield famous, chose to settle there, high above their factories and foundries. When these men were finished with business for the day, they directed their carriages up the hill, to the great homes they had built for themselves.

These homes were the domain of their wives, who sometimes became their widows, and their daughters. The women's lives were largely private, comfortable of course, busy with households, children, social events and good works, often based around St John's. (All this was made possible, of course, through the labour of servants, both female and male, who lived under the eaves of the mansions or in the few terraces squeezed into Ranmoor. But their lives are another story.)



The Royal party at Oakbrook, Picture Sheffield.

There was Caroline Firth (1833-94) of Oakbrook, the second wife of Mark Firth, mother to seven and stepmother to two of his children. She had every eye in Sheffield upon her when, in 1875, she opened a ball at the Cutlers' Hall with the Prince of Wales, while her husband escorted the Princess. The Waleses were in town to open Firth Park, and they stayed at Oakbrook. In 1879, the Prince's younger brother, Leopold, came to Oakbrook and attended morning service at the new church of St John. You can imagine the pressure on Caroline, hosting the Royals and escorting them to public ceremonies while the press and townsfolk looked on avidly.



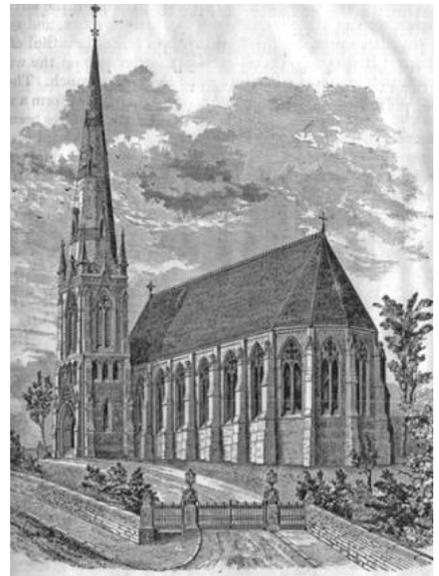
Sarah Hall, photo credit Peter Flew

Caroline's stepdaughter, Sarah Firth (1843-1927), was probably among the guests in 1875 but not in 1879, when she would in all likelihood have been in mourning. Her husband, the surgeon Marriott Hall, had been killed in a riding accident near Oakbrook in 1878. Sarah remained a widow for the next 49 years - one of several Ranmoor wives who, like Queen Victoria, lost their husbands at a relatively early age and never re-married. Her obituary noted 'her philanthropic work'.

Not every widow devoted herself to the home or good works. Mrs Ann Hartley (1845-?) of Graham Road described herself in the 1891 census as a woollen merchant. The business was probably Hartley Brothers on Pinstone Street. We don't know if Ann had always played a role in the business or if she got involved out of necessity after the death of her husband William but her position working outside the home was uncommon.

Ranmoor was home to spinsters as well as wives and widows. Foremost among them, perhaps, was Miss Mary Keddie (1844-1930). She was brought up by her aunt and uncle, Mary and Henry Wilkinson of Endcliffe Edge, and inherited their wealth. Mary dedicated herself to charitable works, and her name appears often in the records of St John's. She was the honorary secretary of the Cherrytree Orphanage from the age of 32 until a few months before her death at 86.

There are many more stories to uncover of Victorian Ranmoor's wives, widows and spinsters, mothers and daughters. Unlike their menfolk, the women rarely appeared on the public stage and, without access to family records, it can be difficult to uncover their lives. Official documents, newspapers and the records of St John's, which for many of them seems to have been a valued part of their lives, are usually all we have, but these sources can reveal, as they have here, lives of achievement to be celebrated.



St John's Church, Picture Sheffield

*Val Hewson
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