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A life in verse

The life and hard times of 18th century working class Suffolk woman Ann Candler are vividly told thanks to her talent for poetry. Sarah E Doig tells her story. Location photography by Tony Scheuregger

HISTORY books can only ever tell us the facts. And such worthy tomes seek, as best they can, to recreate the lives, loves, pleasures and sufferings our ancestors experienced. But there is no substitute for first-hand accounts.

So, we're lucky that through a single quirk of fate and a generous offer of patronage, the extraordinary poems of a Suffolk pauper survive to give us direct insight into working class life in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. More importantly, they open a window to her soul, allowing us almost to touch her raw emotions.

On November 18, 1740, the wife of William More, a glove maker in Yoxford, gave birth to a daughter they named Ann. Like many Suffolk villages in the 18th century, the main street in Yoxford would have been lined by small shops and businesses, and all the main trades required for serving the local community would have been represented – blacksmiths, basket-weavers, shoemakers,

tailors, leather-workers and glovers. It was a precarious livelihood and a downturn in the economy generally meant that many skilled workers found themselves struggling to survive. William More was no exception and, having fallen upon hard times, relocated his family to Ipswich in 1750. Ann's mother died shortly after the move, so the child was raised by her father, learning from him how to read and write. But there was no expectation that Ann might use these skills in the workplace. A woman's place in the 18th century was in the home.

'The surviving accounts book for the House of Industry for 1784 records that a quarterly sum of ten shillings was paid to Ann Candler for "teaching the children to read".'

MARRIAGE AND MISFORTUNE

When Ann was 22 she married William Candler, who lived in Sproughton, just outside Ipswich. The marriage was blessed with many children in the early years, but the union was not a happy one. William enlisted in the militia army shortly after their wedding, and spent most of the next three years away from home. When he did return, his alcohol addiction



Ann hailed from Yoxford . . .



and married into Sproughton

On the Birth of Twin Sons

Hail, infant boys!
And hail the dawn
That brought your natal hour!
May no malignant
planet frown
With inauspicious pow'r

May heav'n it's kindest
influence shed
Around ye as ye lay,
And watchful angels
guard your bed,
And shield ye in the day.

The last verse of this tender poem was to prove tragically prophetic, as both sons died within a month or so of birth.

For them, for me,
I humbly ask
A portion of His grace
And may we find, when
life is past
With Him and resting place.

During her time in the Tattingsstone workhouse, several of Ann's poems appeared in the Ipswich Journal including one entitled Addressed to the Inhabitants of Yoxford, in 1787.

Dear village! Sweet
delightful spot!
Blest scene that gave
me birth!
Though now, alas!
Unknown, forgot,
I wander o'er the earth.

Yet still thy name I will repeat;
A name how dear to me!
And, maugre this my
wayward fate,
Will claim my part in thee.



Tattingsstone workhouse chapel

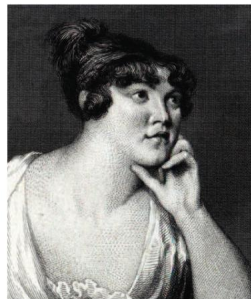


Tattlingstone workhouse gates today

reduced the family to poverty. The following decade brought mixed fortunes until 1777 when William deserted his family and joined the army again. For brief periods when the family were reunited, Ann finally realised she had to put her children first. With no means to keep them fed and clothed, she reluctantly left Sproughton, which she described in later life as her favourite village, despite the hardship she had endured there, and took refuge with her children in the Samford Union House of Industry in Tattlingstone – the workhouse.

Erected at a cost of just over £8,000, the Samford Union House of Industry first opened its doors in 1766. It was a U-shaped, red-brick building, with two storeys and attics, accommodating up to 300 paupers from 28 parishes. The tough regime was intended as a deterrent. The workhouse was the place of last resort. Paupers had to wear the house uniform and weren't allowed to leave the institution for the first six weeks. After that, they were permitted to go out once a month, as long as they returned home at 8pm in summer and 6pm in winter. Visitors were allowed, but visiting hours were restricted to three hours on a Saturday afternoon. All inmates were expected to attend chapel on Sundays and holy festivals, as well as participating in daily prayers before breakfast and supper.

Inmates were chiefly employed in manufacturing wool into yarn. Ann Candler probably spent many hours at this work. But as a literate person in a relatively illiterate community here skills were sometimes put to better use. The surviving accounts book for the House of Industry for 1784 records that a quarterly sum of ten shillings was paid to Ann



Mrs Elizabeth Cobbold

‘Elizabeth was also an accomplished poet and a noted patron of the arts, and was so impressed by Ann’s works, and distressed by her sad story of impoverishment, that she arranged to have them published.’

Candler for “teaching the children to read”.

We don't know when Ann started to write her poems, but one of the earliest we can date was written shortly after her arrival in the workhouse. In March 1781, she gave birth to twin sons and penned these opening verses of a poem she called *On the Birth of Twin Sons* in 1781.

The local newspaper was widely read by literate Suffolk residents and it was how Ann's poems first came to the attention of Elizabeth Cobbold, the second wife of Ipswich brewer, banker and merchant John Cobbold. Elizabeth was also an accomplished poet and a noted patron of the arts, and was so impressed by Ann's works, and distressed by her sad story of impoverishment, that she arranged to have them published. She corrected and arranged Ann's verse, wrote a preface for the book and persuaded 500 subscribers to buy copies. Profits from the publication, *Poetical Attempts*, by Ann Candler, a Suffolk Cottager, with a *Short Narrative of her Life*, enabled Ann to leave Tattlingstone workhouse in 1802. She settled down in Copdock, and ended her days in Holton in 1814. It is solely because of this book, and Ann's own account of her life in it, that we know so much about her and her family.

Today, the former Samford House of Industry has a new life as private apartments and houses. Ironically, the old workhouse gates that kept paupers in the institution, have been replaced by state-of-the-art electronic gates and surveillance equipment designed to keep unwanted intruders out. What might Ann Candler have penned had she witnessed such a transformation? ♦