

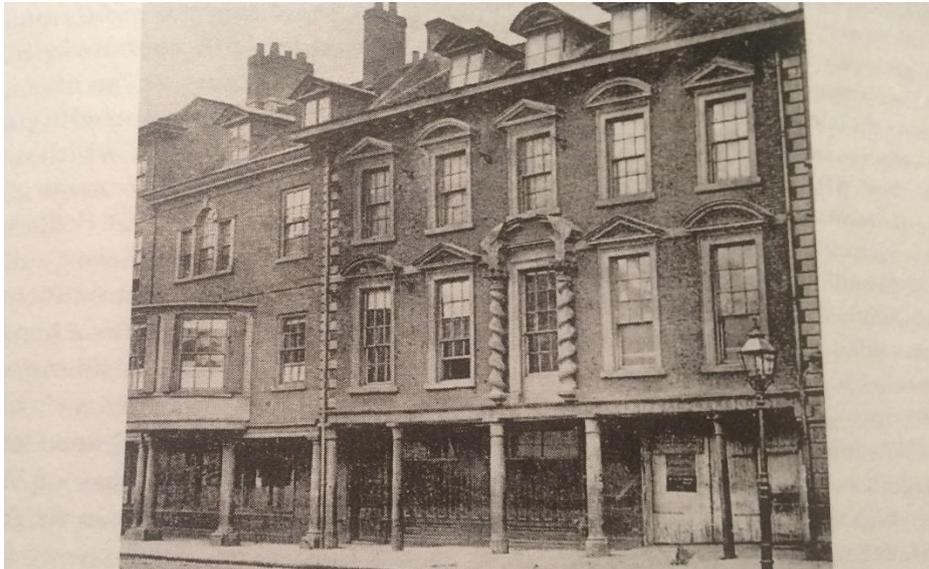


Mary Howitt nee Botham 1799-1888

Writer

Mary was born into a prosperous but strict Quaker family and lived in Uttoxeter, she and her sister Anna were educated at home with a governess and then went to Friend's schools in Croydon and Sheffield leaving in 1812 and again having teachers at home. Mary and Anna taught her younger brothers and sisters and some poor children in a schoolroom fitted out in the stable loft.

Mary began to write at an early age. In 1821 aged 19 she married a fellow Quaker William Howitt aged 26 also a prolific writer and they moved first to Heanor in Derbyshire where William was a pharmacist. By 1823 they were living on Timber Hill- now South Parade next door to Smith's Bank which was known as the Howitt House.



Both Mary and William were writing, together and separately and William's brother Richard took over the pharmacy on Lower Parliament Street so that writing became their focus. In 1824 Mary had her first child Anna Mary and she also describes in that year, touching Byron's coffin as his funeral procession passed through Nottingham on route to Hucknall. Together with William she wrote some 180 books including poetry, hymns, children's tales, travel, natural history etc she is credited with 110 in her own name.

Living in the heart of Nottingham for over 12 years – Mary witnessed first-hand a turbulent time in Nottingham's history; one that included the 1831 Reform Riots which she describes watching from the roof of their house, in her autobiography. They were on the side of those seeking radical reform.

William and Mary mixed with many literary figures, including Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mary's most famous poem was 'The Spider and the Fly' published in 1829; it was parodied by Lewis Carroll in Alice in Wonderland – The Lobster Quadrille. In 1831 Dorothy & William Wordsworth were staying in an inn opposite the Howitt's house when Dorothy was taken ill and so she moved in with the Howitt's to recuperate. Between 1832 and 1836 they regularly lodged at Wilford for the summer. They were members of Bromley House library which she praises for keeping them well supplied with 'fresh stores of literature'. William wrote A History of Priesthood and with Rev Josiah Gilbert – husband of Ann Gilbert- presented a petition from Nottingham for the disestablishment of the church which again indicates their radical views.

In 1837 the couple went on a tour of Northern England and stayed with William and Dorothy Wordsworth. Their work was generally well regarded: in 1839 Queen Victoria gave George Byng a copy of Mary's *Hymns and Fireside Verses*.

William and Mary moved to London in 1843, and after a second move in 1844, counted Tennyson amongst their neighbours.¹

In 1843 she wrote 'The childhood of Mary Leeson' which was largely autobiographical telling of a very good little girl who read and studied so much, she became ill going to a cottage in the country to recover. As well as writing Mary also edited books and was the first to translate Hans Christian Anderson tales into English, as well as the novels of feminist reformer Fredrika Bremer from Swedish which earned her a pension from the Swedish government.

Later in 1870's Mary and her husband travelled in Europe and Mary lived in the Tyrol after William's death and continued to write; she also converted to Roman Catholicism but after permission from the Pope she is buried with William in the protestant cemetery in Rome. They are commemorated with **a double portrait sculpture** in the courtyard of Nottingham castle and at a primary school in Heanor. There is also a painting by Margaret Gillies of the couple in the Castle collection – the younger image above is from that painting.