



Hannah More

Hannah More was a remarkable woman in an age when women were meant to be seen but not heard.

She was born on 2 February 1745 into a deeply religious family. Her father, Jacob More, was the local school master in the village of Fishponds a few miles north of Bristol.



A young Hannah More © courtesy of Cheddar Parish Council

In 1758 he founded his own girls' boarding school in Trinity Road, Bristol. Hannah and her sisters not only attended but went on to teach (Hannah taking charge of classes by her late teens).

At this time it was unusual for women to be educated beyond the means to entertain their men, to sing, recite poetry and play a musical instrument. However, not only was Hannah a gifted student but she also developed a passionate belief that a good education would lead a young woman (or man) to live a more fulfilled and moral life.

Hannah was becoming a writer, and she set out these ideas in her first major work; a pastoral poem entitled *The Search After Happiness*, which she wrote at the age of 17.

In 1767 Hannah accepted a proposal of marriage from William Turner of Wraxall but he then kept postponing the wedding, on the first occasion jilting her at the altar.

It is said that Turner had become concerned about Hannah's 'indifferent temperament'. Hannah was a lively, quick witted and charming young woman. However, from an early age she had periods of depression and 'gave herself up to headaches, colds, bilious attacks and other functional illnesses'.

If Turner was having second thoughts though, he could not just withdraw his offer as he would be in 'breach of promise'.

The law in the 1700s said that if a man proposed marriage, acceptance made a legally binding contract. If he then withdrew the offer he could be sued for damages. However, in practice the law did not work the other way round and a woman could break off an engagement without fear of consequence.

In 1773 Hannah broke off the engagement and in return Turner paid her a pension of £200 a year for the rest of her life (a considerable sum in those days). Whilst this allowed Hannah the financial freedom to pursue her literary career, it also triggered a bout of depression, and the resolve never to marry (Hannah refused several subsequent proposals).

After breaking with Turner Hannah More, clearly in some distress, came to stay at Rose Cottage in Uphill (today part of Weston-super-Mare) to recover 'from an ague'.

Once in better spirits Hannah resumed her literary career. She became a regular visitor to London where she met the actor David Garrick, Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson, and Edmund Burke. In September 1774 she helped Burke get elected MP for Bristol.

Garrick staged her first play, *The Inflexible Captive*, at the Theatre Royal in Bath in April 1775. Her second play, *Percy*, was a great success when performed at Covent Garden in December 1777. Hannah made nearly £600 from the rights to the play. However, her third and final play, *The Fatal Falsehood*, was far less popular and closed after a few nights.

After her friend Garrick died in 1779 Hannah lost interest in writing for the stage and turned her attention to politics.

In 1787, she met the anti-slavery campaigners John Newton (the writer of the hymn *Amazing Grace*) and William Wilberforce and became determined to end the trade.

Hannah set out to give the abolition movement a public voice. In 1788 she wrote *Slavery*, a poem which graphically described a poor female slave torn apart from her children and also questioned Britain's role in the slave trade.



Hannah More Cottage in Cheddar, the site of her first school ©Mark Charlesworth

In 1789, Hannah bought a small house at Cowslip Green, Somerset (between Wrington and Blagdon). Visiting Cheddar she was disgusted to see the condition of the poor "...plunged in an excess of vice, poverty, and ignorance beyond what one would suppose possible in a civilized and Christian country". Encouraged by Wilberforce, she set up a Sunday School in Cheddar where poor children could be taught to read.

Although passionately devoted to the cause of enabling the poor to read the Bible, Hannah thought that teaching them to write as well was a step too far. To be able to read was to open the door to good ideas and sound morality, writing however was to be discouraged as it would open the way to rising above one's natural station.

Soon she and her sisters had set up similar schools throughout the Mendip villages.



Hannah More as an older woman

Hannah continued to support the abolitionist cause into her old age. She moved to Clifton, where people came from all over the country to visit her. Often in poor health she lived just long enough to see slavery abolished in the British Empire. Hannah died on 7 September 1833.

She left over £30,000, most of which was given to charities and religious institutions.

It was been argued that she was the first woman to make a fortune from writing alone.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council