

Mary Herrin: A Century of History

There are at least three ladies buried in the Lye & Wollescote Cemetery who lived to be one hundred years old: Florence Robins died in 1981 at the age of 101 years and Reta Mary Bellamy died in 1994 at the age of 100. Mary Herrin, however, died in 1917, also at the age of 100 years but more than half a century before the other two.

Of all the people who are buried in the cemetery Mary Herrin, nee Foxall, is perhaps the one who would have been the most fascinating to talk to. She lived through a century of history and the reigns of six monarchs from George III to George V.

Mary Foxall was born in Lye in 1817, two years after the Battle of Waterloo and in the same year that Jane Austen died. At the time of her birth George III was still on the throne. George III died in 1820 and his son became King until 1830 when William VI was crowned.

In 1829 the 'Agenoria' engine, built at the Foster Rastrick works in Stourbridge, was towed from the works to the newly-constructed railway at Shut End where, over the next three decades, it would run to the Ashwood canal basin. Could Mary, then around 12-years old, have been among the crowds to see the sight of this fantastic engine being towed along the streets to its destination?

A few years later, in 1837, a young woman of eighteen years ascended the throne of Britain in the same year that Mary celebrated her 20th birthday and married Henry Herrin. In 1842 the Penny Post was introduced and in 1845 the potato famine in Ireland caused massive emigration to the US.

In the 1850s, as Mary moved through her thirties, the Great Exhibition was held at the Crystal Palace, the Crimean War took place, Edward Elgar was born and Charles Darwin wrote the 'Origin of the Species'. The following decade saw the death of Queen Victoria's beloved Albert in 1861, the same year that the American Civil War began on the other side of the Atlantic. The first traffic lights were installed in London in 1868 and the Suez Canal opened in 1869.

In the 1870s, as Mary reached her half century, William Gladstone became Prime Minister of Great Britain and electric light was invented. Towards the end of that decade the Zulu Wars took place with the Battle of Rorke's Drift etched into Victorian history. As progress continued, in 1891 an Act was passed forbidding children under eleven from working in factories. A year later, in October of 1892, Mary Herrin's husband, Henry, died at the age of 75 years and was buried in the Lye & Wollescote Cemetery. When Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Mary Herrin celebrated her 80th Birthday.

As the 20th century dawned Queen Victoria died in its second year and Edward VII became King. Local doctors, Hardwicke and Darby, were now visiting their patients in newly acquired motor cars heralding the arrival of that phenomenon on the streets of Lye. As Mary Herrin reached her 95th birthday, possibly the two greatest disasters of the new century took place: the sinking of the 'Titanic' on her maiden voyage in 1912 followed, two years later, by the start of the First World War, the 'war to end all wars', its carnage seared forever on the century's memory.

Mary Herrin died on the 18th of December 1917, less than a year before the end of the Great War. She had lived through a century of evolution, invention and progress and through it all, her obituary stated, *'she had retained her vigour and mental faculties to an extraordinary degree'*.

When Mary Herrin was born the main form of travel was by horse and when she died there were motor cars on the roads and airplanes in the skies. A truly remarkable century of life.



Grave of Mary and Henry Herrin in Lye Cemetery