

# MARY WHEATLAND

With Mary Wheatland (1835-1924), we come close to home and I imagine many of you will know more about her than I. If with Wilfrid we suffer because one of the sources of our knowledge did not like him from the outset, we have with Mary Wheatland the problem that she is known as someone much-photographed "Bognor's mermaid", a picture not false but distorted, not by an historian but by a photographer.

She is no founder of monasteries, no defender of the church, no figure standing out across the centuries.

"A little old woman stands on the parade of Bognor looking out to sea was the legend on a postcard which may still be on sale – it was when I went to Bognor as a small boy in the 1960s. When it was taken Mary Wheatland was 72 years of age and it shows her clad in a rough blue serge costume on the bodice of which two lifesaving medals are pinned. She is smiling amid a mass of wrinkles.

This is the famous bathing lady who is credited with saving more than thirty lives, possible as many as 34. She loved the water and was diving off Bognor pier until she was 71. She remarked that "the saving of life was as much the work of a bathing woman as the rinsing of a bathing dress". It was part of her "regular business". When she died in April 1924 she was taken to her grave by the Bognor fishermen in Bersted churchyard

Born in Aldingbourne, she was born to poverty. She could never really read or write and her husband and many of her ten children died young. When only 14 years of age, she went to Bognor, three to four miles distant, to work for a Mrs Mills of Culver Cottage, Aldwick Road, who at that time was the owner of the bathing machines on the Esplanade. In her first summer, the youngster saved the life of one of the bathers - the first of many. This was a fat London brewer and then there was a nurse and then a French lady – it was a heavy sea, but Mary just went in, caught hold of the lady's clothes and pulled her to safety. When the lady asked how she might give a thank you to the young girl, her employer simply said that she needn't give *her* anything. Sometimes it was different but that did not seem to matter to her; though that there was an element of exploitation by some seems undeniable.

It was not an easy life; she married George Wheatland and they had oodles of children; often in debt and often with not enough to eat herself, she remained a figure of good spirits and clearly courage which became natural to her. For nearly six decades, Mary - the first woman to give swimming lessons in Bognor Regis - would operate the machines, with their distinctive red and yellow stripes, from a seafront office opposite the Beach Hotel, alongside the pier.

Her life saving sometimes brought her a little more; on one occasion an old man gave her £20, although a woman gave her no more than 3d. Other occasions underline how much her natural courage was true courage and what risks her job as she saw it involved her in. It is not uncommon I gather for people who are at risk to panic – and on occasion there was one who gripped Mary by the arms and would have drowned them both had not Mary been able to grab hold of a groyne. On another occasion she saved six girls who were out of their depth, swimming around them to keep them calm and bringing them in one by one.

Mary spoke about her work with reluctance – she did not want to talk about the rescue of the six because "they were very good to me, they gave me £2 towards back rent and sent me a bit of beef at Christmas". Most of what we know about her is due to her vicar, for she attended church and was a regular communicant, a straightforward Christian lady. When she was retired she much appreciated someone coming to read the bible to her.

Mary was what we would call a water baby and she loved the water. It is worth recalling that in her day people swam fully clad and she rescued people fully clad; she would also love to do a hand stand in the water, in full blue serge, with her sea boots waving above the waves. A keen swimmer, she relished diving off the pier and would swim for an hour and a half at a time. All this when people swam in heavy clothes – not the skimpy wear we go in for nowadays.

She was featured in the national press and she did not resent the attention. She was just being who she was Mary Wheatland. We have no great saint – she did not go to Mass each day nor was she noted for her devotion, but we have someone who found a great grace, to put one's life naturally and without too much thought at risk for the sake of others. This was someone for whom as I said "the saving of life was as much the work of a bathing woman as the rinsing of a bathing dress". Virtue is not at its best if we have to struggle to find it; it is when love is second nature, that one sees the real meaning of holiness. It is beyond what we think we could have done, yet in these simple lass it



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became something she did, knowing that that she would be at risk. Holiness, a reflection of the loss of the life for our sake by the Lord of this week, but arising in the poverty and injustice of nineteenth century England, and at the altar rail of a Victorian church.

This week we mark the One Who naturally did just that, love being what He is about, risking all for those at drift in the sea of this world. And we see that reflected in the life of Mary Wheatland, something here and local, something to be found in a job and on a beach.

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