

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written, in April 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who can be found as prisoners or staff in Dorchester Prison in the census returns, or who appear in the prison's admission and discharge registers.*

## **Mary Elizabeth Johnson's Story**

It's 1870, and 47-year-old Mary Elizabeth Blundell is behind bars at Dorchester Prison. She's just been convicted of pawning a veil entrusted to her care – a petty crime on the surface, but one that suggests desperation<sup>i</sup>. She is well-educated<sup>ii</sup>, probably well-spoken, and seems very out of place among the other inmates. A woman like Mary does not end up in gaol for no reason.

So, what happened?

Mary was not born to obscurity. She came into the world on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1822 as the eldest child of the Reverend John Johnson, vicar of Little Houghton since 1817<sup>iii</sup> and his wife Maria Catherine (née Armytage). Baby Mary was baptised five days later<sup>iv</sup> by her father.

When Mary was seven, her brother Augustus William<sup>v</sup> was born, followed six years later by her sister Louisa Caroline<sup>vi</sup>.

Reverend Johnson was a man of considerable standing. By 1838, he had been appointed Chaplain to His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge<sup>vii</sup> and was serving as Clerk of Leamington Priors in Warwickshire. Mary grew up in the Rectory House, Outwell, a large, comfortable home with three servants and a governess. The 1841 census shows her at home, aged 15, with her mother, younger siblings Augustus and Louisa, and all the trappings of a prosperous household.

When her father died in December 1848, the contents of Rectory House were sold at auction<sup>viii</sup>: mahogany dining tables, rosewood chairs, a harp by Erard, a child's shower bath, hundreds of books, a well-stocked wine cellar, and even a neat gig with lamps. This was a family of refinement, education, and material ease.

And yet, curiously, when the Reverend John Johnson made his will<sup>ix</sup>, he mentioned his wife, his son Augustus, and his daughter Louisa - but not Mary. Her absence is striking. Had she already fallen out of favour, or out of touch? Was she seen as independent, or somehow excluded?

Whatever the reason, by 1851<sup>x</sup>, Mary is still unmarried at twenty-eight – a little unusual for the time – but living respectably with her mother, who was described as an annuitant, and siblings in the fashionable, if fading, spa town of Leamington Priors. Her brother Augustus is a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery,

probably home on leave, but Mary and her sister Louisa, now sixteen, have no occupation recorded. But something soon changes.

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1853<sup>xi</sup>, Mary marries Bezer Blundell, a forty-five-year-old solicitor<sup>xii</sup> and fourteen years her senior, at All Saints Church, Lower Marsh in Lambeth. The witnesses include her brother and sister. Bezer is described as a 'gentleman', but the reality is more complicated – and far less genteel.

Bezer was in fact newly out of prison following bankruptcy<sup>xiii</sup> resulting from a libel case<sup>xiv</sup>. At his bankruptcy discharge hearing, the Commissioner commented he was *"a very lucky man"*<sup>xv</sup>. Perhaps Mary thought so too - or perhaps she was lonely, vulnerable, or under pressure. She had been left out of her father's will, for reasons unknown, but it's possible her mother provided her with some kind of financial support or settlement after selling the lavish contents of Rectory House. In Victorian England, any money a woman brought to her marriage instantly became her husband's property. Whether it was affection, pragmatism, or opportunism that brought Mary and Bezer together, the union would prove fateful.

The couple had one son, Charles James Pern Blundell, who was baptised on 25 Sep 1855 at Barton Seagrave, Northampton<sup>xvi</sup>.

For a while, things seem settled. By 1861 the family is living comfortably enough with servants. But Bezer is slippery. That same year he is again sued for libel<sup>xvii</sup>, declared bankrupt<sup>xviii</sup>, and imprisoned on 23<sup>rd</sup> November. He is released on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1862<sup>xix</sup>.

We don't know how Mary and her young son coped during those six months. Under Victorian law, a married woman's legal existence was merged with that of her husband's – a concept known as *coverture*<sup>xx</sup>. In keeping with society's expectation that her husband was to provide for and protect her, a married woman could not own property, sign contracts, or earn money independently without his permission, unless a marriage settlement had been put in place. In Mary's case, that seems unlikely, given her exclusion from her father's will.

Perhaps Bezer's family stepped in to help, or her own - if they had the means, and the will to do so. But Victorian family dynamics could be complicated. If Mary had defied family expectations by marrying Bezer, or was seen as 'tainted' by scandal, she might have been cut off or helped only reluctantly.

She may have had to rely on former connections, social acquaintances, retired servants, or old friends from better days - or even pawned belongings to get by. The crime for which she was eventually convicted - pawning a veil entrusted to her - suggests she was accustomed to handling second-hand goods or valuable personal items. It's possible she was working quietly as a genteel companion, housekeeper, or go-between for wealthier women trying to preserve appearances.

But by around 1863, something seems to snap, and Mary is on her own. Later, Bezer claims she 'voluntarily separated from him'<sup>xxi</sup> - but did she really leave him, or was she abandoned? Either way, without legal rights to income or property, no profession and a husband perpetually on the brink of ruin, what options did she have?

Mary vanishes from the records for some time, but in 1868 their son Charles is enrolled at Elizabeth College in Guernsey, listed simply the 'son of Bezer Blundell'<sup>xxii</sup>. The school, a well-regarded boarding establishment, often catered for the sons of British families serving across the Empire. The absence of Mary's name in the register – where both parents are usually listed, even if deceased - raises yet more questions.

On 30<sup>th</sup> March 1870, Mary Elizabeth Blundell reappears in the public record – twice on the same day – when she stands in the dock in Weymouth<sup>xxiii</sup>. She is acquitted of obtaining a quantity of bacon by deception, having allegedly posed as the wife of the local stationmaster, when in fact she was only his lodger. Fortunately for her, the prosecutor, Mr James Spooner, conceded that she had never *explicitly* claimed to be Mrs Reynolds.

But her luck didn't hold. She was convicted of *larceny as bailee* – having pawned a veil entrusted to her for approval - and was sentenced to six months' hard labour<sup>xxiv</sup>. That's where I first found her, in Dorchester Prison.

Mary's mother died in 1871, and her will was proved that April. Her estate was valued at under £12,000<sup>xxv</sup> – a considerable sum.

By the time of the 1871 census<sup>xxvi</sup>, Mary was lodging in a respectable household in Richmond, Surrey. Her landlady was the wife of a naval officer, with two servants in attendance. Mary styled herself as a 'fund holder'.

Then in October 1872, she reappeared in court, charged - this time with her charwoman, Elizabeth Wise - with an '*extensive system of defrauding*

*tradesmen*' and 'robbing furnished lodgings'. The case drew attention in the Lambeth Police Court and local newspapers<sup>xxvii</sup>. Mary, described as '*a well-educated and exceedingly plausible person*', had moved from South Norwood to furnished lodgings in Chaucer Road, Dulwich.

She operated a scheme whereby she would order household items on approval, then pawn them almost immediately. One landlord discovered four antimacassars missing - pawned, it turned out, by Wise at Mary's request.

When police searched her rooms, they found over 60 pawn tickets for property ranging from cloth, china and glass, to ornaments and vases. Detective Warr testified that she had carried out similar offences across London, targeting gentlemen's protection societies and a range of tradesmen. One victim, Mr Croft, a china and glass dealer, reported that she had requested a pair of vases by note, then denied receiving them. They were found to have been pawned the same day.

Mary's defence argued that she had never intended to defraud anyone, believing she would soon receive money and be able to redeem the items. She claimed to have an income of between £80 and £100 per year, with £30 from another source, and spoke of wealthy friends and relations. She also cited expenses for a son at college as a cause of temporary financial embarrassment.

The magistrate, Mr Ellison, acknowledged that she was a woman of education - but said that did not excuse her actions. She was fined £5 and twice the value of the pawned property, or six weeks in prison if she defaulted.

In 1878, Bezer Blundell was named as a beneficiary in his late uncle's will and inherited £14,000 – an absolute fortune by today's standards. News of the bequest was reported in several newspapers, including *The Illustrated London News*<sup>xxviii</sup> and it's likely this change in his circumstances would have come to Mary's attention.

Not long afterwards, she made a legal move of her own, instructing a solicitor to apply to the Divorce Court for *restitution of conjugal rights* with her estranged husband<sup>xxix</sup>.

*"That for some time past the said Bezer Blundell has refused and still refuses to live and cohabit with the Petitioner or to render her conjugal rights."*

Victorian law made it difficult for women to divorce. To succeed, a woman typically had to prove her husband's adultery, and in cases of abuse or neglect, she often needed prove additional grounds. Filing for restitution of conjugal rights may have been a strategic move – either as a precursor to divorce, or to secure financial support. If the court order granted the order and Bezer refused to comply, it could potentially pave the way for full divorce – and perhaps a share of his recent windfall.

An affidavit was submitted stating that Mary had asked him to resume married life with her, specifically by a note dated 28<sup>th</sup> June 1879, addressed to him at the York Hotel, York Road, Surrey - but he still refused.

Bezer responded on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1879 via his solicitor, asserting that:

*“On or about 1 June 1863, the Petitioner voluntarily separated herself from him, but that he has always been ready and willing to make the Petitioner a suitable allowance, and that by reason of the premises, the Petitioner is not now entitled to require the Respondent to take her home again and render her conjugal rights.”*

The case was never concluded. Mary died just weeks later, on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1880, at 44 York Street, Marylebone. She was 57 years old. Her occupation was recorded as *wife of Bezer Blundell, Esquire*. The cause of death was *congestion of the lungs, six days’ duration*, certified by Penning Baker MRCS. The informant was S. A. Giles, of the same address, who registered the death on 26<sup>th</sup> January.<sup>xxx</sup>

Mary Elizabeth Blundell does not appear to have left a will. If she had any estate at the time of her death, the law of the day meant it would have passed automatically to her estranged husband - the very man she had spent her final months pursuing through the courts. It’s a bitter irony she might not have appreciated.

Yet in spite of the scandal, the setbacks, and the systems stacked against her, Mary emerges as a woman of remarkable tenacity. Time and again, she adapted to her circumstances with boldness and ingenuity - whether as a solicitor’s wife, a convict, a fund-holding lodger, or a woman taking on the legal machinery of Victorian England. Her story offers a remarkable example of the resourcefulness required of women in a world where so few rights were truly their own.



Call her what you will - con artist, survivor, strategist, or early feminist - Mary learnt how to navigate the gaps in the system, and for a while, at least, she did it with flair.

Footnote: Bezer Blundell died in 1890, leaving his entire estate, which amounted to less than £40, to his son Charles<sup>xxxii</sup>. Like his maternal grandfather before him, Charles became a clerk in holy orders. Charles never married, and upon his death in 1922 at the age of 67, he bequeathed his estate, valued at nearly £1,120, to his gardener and longtime companion<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Ancestry.co.uk UK, Calendar of Prisoners, 1868-1929> Anglesey-Gloucestershire > 1870 > Mary Elizabeth Blundell

<sup>ii</sup> Ancestry.co.uk UK, Calendar of Prisoners, 1868-1929> Anglesey-Gloucestershire > 1870 > Mary Elizabeth Blundell

<sup>iii</sup> British-history.ac.uk: A History of the County of Northampton: Volume 4. Originally published by Victoria County History, London, 1937 >Parishes: Little Houghton

<sup>iv</sup> Northamptonshire Record Office; Northampton, England, UK; Register Type: *Bishops Transcripts via ancestry.co.uk*

<sup>v</sup> Northamptonshire Record Office; Northampton, England, UK; Register Type: Parish Registers; Reference Numbers: 176p/8 via ancestry.co.uk

<sup>vi</sup> Northamptonshire Record Office; Northampton, England, UK; Register Type: Bishops Transcripts via ancestry.co.uk

<sup>vii</sup> Court Gazette & Fashionable Gide 14 Apr 1838 via findmypast.co.uk

<sup>viii</sup> Cambridge Chronicle & Journal 23 Dec 1848 and 30 Dec 1848 via findmypast.co.uk

<sup>ix</sup> The National Archives; Kew, Surrey, England; Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Series PROB 11; Class: PROB 11; Piece: 2086

<sup>x</sup> Ancestry.co.uk 1851 Census Class: *HO107*; Piece: 2072; Folio: 411; Page: 26; GSU roll: 87337-87338

<sup>xi</sup> London Metropolitan Archives; London, England, UK; London Church of England Parish Registers > All Saints, Lower Marsh: Leake Street, Lambeth, Surrey, England Ref 11601287 via ancestry.co.uk

<sup>xii</sup> Ancestry.co.uk Church of England Baptism, Marriages and Burials 1538-1812 Camden > St Andrew Holborn Circus Parish Records 1805-1812

<sup>xiii</sup> London Gazette 9 Sep 1853

<sup>xiv</sup> Evening Standard 27 Sep 1853 via findmypast.co.uk

<sup>xv</sup> Birmingham Journal 1 Oct 1853 via findmypast.co.uk

<sup>xvi</sup> Northamptonshire Record Office; Northampton, England, UK; Register Type: Parish Registers; Reference Numbers: 29p/3

<sup>xvii</sup> TNA Central Criminal Court Depositions Ref. CRIM 1/6/4

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- <sup>xviii</sup> Archive: The National Archives of the United Kingdom; Archive Location: Kew, Surrey, England; Collection Title: King's (Queen's) Bench, Fleet, Marshalsea and Queen's Prisons: Miscellanea; Class: PRIS10; Piece: 156 via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)
- <sup>xix</sup> *The National Archives of the United Kingdom*; Archive Location: *Kew, Surrey, England*; Collection Title: *King's (Queen's) Bench, Fleet, Marshalsea and Queen's Prisons: Miscellanea*; Class: *PRIS10*; Piece: *156* via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)
- <sup>xx</sup> Wikipedia > Couverture
- <sup>xxi</sup> [Ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk) England & Wales Civil Divorce Records 1858-1918 Ref 06469: Blundell
- <sup>xxii</sup> Elizabeth College Register 1824-1873 published 1898 by F Clarke via [archive.org](https://www.archive.org)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> A Calendar of Prisoners Tried At The General Quarter Sessions Of The Peace For The Year 1870 >HO140/9 via [findmypast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk)
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Western Gazette 8 Apr 1870 via [findmypast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk)
- <sup>xxv</sup> [probate.service.gov.uk](https://probate.service.gov.uk) > Maria Catherine Johnson probate granted 3 Apr 1871
- <sup>xxvi</sup> The National Archives; Kew, London, England; 1871 England Census; Class: RG10; Piece: 867; Folio: 51; Page: 8; GSU roll: 827767 via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> 1872 Lloyds Weekly Newspaper Sun 6 Oct 1872 Via [findmypast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk)
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Illustrated London News 9 Feb 1878 via [findmypast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk)
- <sup>xxix</sup> [Ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk) England & Wales Civil Divorce Records 1858-1918 Ref 06469: Blundell
- <sup>xxxxx</sup> GRO digital copy of the death of Mary Ann Blundell registered Q1 1880 Marylebone vol 01A p475
- <sup>xxx</sup> Principal Probate Registry; London, England; Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Principal Probate Registry; London, England; Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England via [ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)