

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.

Rachel Virtue Barnes' Story

Unlike many of the women researched for this project, Rachel was not a prisoner at Dorchester Gaol but a member of staff there. She started as a servant in the household of the gaoler, and later worked as a warder / matron. Little is known about her life beyond that captured in the Census of Population.

Rachel was baptised on 11 January 1818 in the village of Tarrant Monkton, near Blandford Forum; her parents were Harry and Youera Barnes.¹ When the 1841 Census was taken Rachel was a servant at Dorset County Gaol and House of Correction, to give it its full title.² The gaoler was Robert Andrews; his wife Frances was also recorded there, along with their son George, a solicitor. Rachel was one of three servants; the other staff consisted of a matron, eight 'turnkeys' and a miller.

¹ Dorset, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1906, accessed via Ancestry. Original record held at Dorset History Centre; Reference: PE/TTM, RE 1/1 - 1/2, 2/1, 3/1-3/2, 4/1.

² 1841 England Census. HO107, Piece 294, Book 7, Folio 28, Page 1, Line 4. Accessed via Ancestry.

In 1850 Rachel's father died, and was buried in the churchyard at Tarrant Monkton.³ The vicar, Robert Farquharson, recorded causes of death in his burial register in addition to the standard details required. This indicates that Harry died from a 'break up of constitution'.

The following year (1851) Rachel was recorded in the Census back in Tarrant Monkton.⁴ Whether she was living with her mother or just visiting we don't know. Her mother, Youera, was aged 68, a widow, and described as a pauper. Rachel herself was aged 33, unmarried and shown as a domestic servant. A year later, Rachel's mother Youera died, and buried in Tarrant Monkton on 25 June 1852.⁵

In 1855, with the Crimean War raging, Rachel was one of many citizens who 'did their bit' for the country and made a financial contribution to the 'Patriotic Fund'. The Salisbury and Winchester Journal published a subscription list to the fund, listing donors from the Blandford Forum area.⁶ More than 20 people are named as contributing a shilling or more in a collection at Tarrant Hinton, including Rachel. While both her parents had passed away by this point, Rachel's elder sister lived in the area so she may have been visiting or may have lived back at home for a time.

In the 1861 Census Rachel was once again enumerated at Dorchester Gaol. The records show a much clearer demarcation between women staff and prisoners and the men. This time Rachel is shown as one of two female warders.

Our next encounter with Rachel is a newspaper announcement of her marriage:⁷

October 30, at St Peter's Church, Dorchester, by the Rev. E. W. Pears, Mr William Curtis Raynold, deputy governor Dorset County Gaol, to Miss Rachel Virtue Barnes, matron at the same establishment.

³ Dorset, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2010, accessed via Ancestry. Original register held at Dorset History Centre; Reference: PE/TTM.

⁴ 1851 England Census. Class HO107, Piece 1853, Folio 483, Page 18.

⁵ Dorset, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2010, accessed via Ancestry. Original register held at Dorset History Centre; Reference: PE/TTM.

⁶ Salisbury & Winchester Journal, 6 January 1855, page 2. © British Newspaper Archives, accessed via FindMyPast.

⁷ Weymouth Telegram, 31 October 1867, page 3. © British Newspaper Archives, accessed via FindMyPast.

Rachel was aged around 49 by this point, and William was about 65. He was a widower with grown up children. Having checked back through the Censuses, William was working at the prison in 1841 (he was the miller already mentioned), 1851 and 1861; Rachel may well have known him for twenty years.

In 1870 we learn that William had resigned his post at the prison (there would have been no fixed retirement then, nor a state pension). The Easter Quarter Sessions for 1870 records that the 'Report of the Visiting Justices of the Prison of this County' was received and adopted.⁸ It included a recommendation that a Superannuation Allowance of £135 13 shillings and 4 pence per annum be granted to William, late deputy governor of Dorset County Gaol. This sum represented 11/12ths of his salary.

In 1871, William and Rachel were living at 16 Wollaston Villas (probably now what is called Wollaston Road) in Dorchester.⁹ They are both described by their former occupations, indicating that they are no longer working: William as former deputy governor of the prison, and Rachel as former matron. They also had a domestic servant. William died on 10 January 1879 aged 77.¹⁰ The probate calendar entry for William shows that he died at 14 Wollaston Villas and left an estate of below £450.

In 1881 the Census records Rachel at 'Shire Hall' in Dorchester.¹¹ This was initially a little puzzling since at this time it was a fully operational court.¹² (The Tolpuddle Martyrs were tried there in 1834 before being transported to Australia, and the author Thomas Hardy also sat as a magistrate there.) I'm grateful to the staff and volunteers of the Shire Hall Museum who were able to solve my puzzle. Shire Hall itself was never used as residential accommodation, but the next property along the High Street is called *Shire Hall House*. A quick look on Google Streetview shows this to be a substantially sized property of sufficient age to have existed in 1881. What is more, the small side-road that divides this house from Shire Hall proper is shown as Shire Hall Lane on an

⁸ Dorset, Quarter Sessions Order Books, 1625-1905, accessed via Ancestry. Original record held at Dorset History Centre: Quarter Sessions Minutes Order Book 1865-1873. Reference Q/S/M/1/21.

⁹ 1871 England Census. RG10, Piece 2009, Folio 34, Page 38. Accessed via Ancestry.

¹⁰ England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995; record for William Curtis Raynold. Accessed via Ancestry.

¹¹ 1881 England Census. RG11, Piece 2110, Folio 56, Page: 40. Accessed via Ancestry.

¹² Shire Hall is now a museum: <https://shirehalldorset.org/>

1880s map; this therefore seems the likely building in which Rachel was living. Several households are recorded in the property; Rachel is aged 63 and a lodger in the household of Henry and Mary Martin. Her occupation is shown as annuitant.

In 1891 Rachel was in Fordington, on the eastern edge of Dorchester. She was a boarder in the household of John Vine, a railway guard, and his wife Jane.¹³ She is recorded as a widow, aged 73 and a retired matron.

Rachel died in early 1892 and was buried in Dorchester Cemetery.¹⁴

¹³ 1891 England Census. RG12, Piece, 1653, Folio 22, Page 1. Accessed via Ancestry.

¹⁴ https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/233006671/rachel_virtue-raynold