

More Than Oliver Twist: Biography Examples

These example biographies have been selected from the National Dictionary of Biography to show the different lengths and styles of writing appropriate.

[Parker \[née Masgreave\], Ellen \[Helen\]](#)
(*bap.* 1790, *d.* 1828)

Alannah Tomkins

Biography completed: 23 September 2004

Parker [née Masgreave], Ellen [Helen] (*bap.* 1790, *d.* 1828), pauper and letter writer, was baptized on 7 June 1790 at Alton in Staffordshire, sixth of the eight children of John Masgreave (1749–1817), farmer, and his wife, Ann Jenkinson (*bap.* 1755, *d.* 1829/30). Ellen was married on 23 April 1810 to Stephen Parker (*bap.* 1789, *d.* 1818), a surgeon apothecary of relatively low status from Doveridge, Derbyshire, who practised medicine in the parish of Colwich, Staffordshire. They had four children, of whom the fourth, their only daughter, was born posthumously. After Parker's death in February 1818 Ellen travelled to Bramshall, apparently in order to be near her eldest sister, Lydia Warner, but she was effectively destitute by April when she applied to Colwich, her parish of settlement, for poor relief. By the close of 1818 Ellen had been awarded a regular cash payment and she remained a pauper until her death. In the period December 1818 to March 1828 she lived in Uttoxeter and therefore was compelled to communicate by letter with Colwich, approximately 10 miles south-west of Uttoxeter. She wrote over thirty letters, of which twenty survive, wherein she queried the relief she was receiving and urged that more might be paid. During 1824 she entered a sexual relationship with John Smith (*fl.* 1824–1828) of Uttoxeter, and in 1825 she gave birth to an illegitimate, fifth child. She fell ill in 1827, died in March 1828, and was buried in Bramshall, 2 miles west of Uttoxeter, on 31 March 1828.

[Bakewell, George](#)
(1805–1883)

Chris A. Williams

Biography completed: 23 September 2010

Bakewell, George (1805–1883), police officer, was born at Kingstone, Staffordshire, where he was baptized George Webb Bakewell on 26 February 1805, one of ten children of James Bakewell (1765–1826), size manufacturer and (in 1815) likely insurance fraudster, and his second wife, Elizabeth. From the mid-1820s George Bakewell was in business in north-west England with his elder half-brother, also James Bakewell, in trades largely connected with bone dealing and glue manufacture. He worked, on his own admission with

little success, as a size manufacturer, hide merchant, brewer, farmer, hop merchant, and victualler. He also claimed to have served briefly as a parish constable in the parish of Stowe, Staffordshire. In the early 1830s he spent sixteen months imprisoned for debt in Lancaster.

This experience inspired his first and most successful pamphlet, *Observations on the Law of Debtor and Creditor* (1836), a commentary on proposed reforms of the bankruptcy laws to abolish imprisonment for debt, which also described how those in debt could best negotiate the complex laws and processes that applied to them. It went through several editions and appears to have sold more than 16,000 copies. In 1836 he successfully supported his half-brother in legally complex court proceedings: James Bakewell, who was active as a radical in Manchester's local politics, had gone bankrupt for the third time with debts in excess of £50,000 when the settlement from his second bankruptcy was still in dispute. Always inclined to sudden bursts of temper, George fell out with James in 1838 over a minor business deal in Manchester.

In 1840 Bakewell was reduced to joining the Birmingham police force as a constable. As an educated man (as indicated by his publications, though nothing is known of his schooling) he was unusual in a new police force, especially one like Birmingham's, formed by central government in 1840 specifically to cope with the Chartist threat, and run on militaristic lines. In his pamphlet *Observations on the Construction of the New Police Force* (1842), an account of his experiences in Birmingham, Bakewell complained about the force's close discipline, not merely in barracks and on parade, but also on the beat, where the men were given very little discretion to act independently to uphold the law. Seeing himself as a cut above most of his comrades, he was prepared to use his initiative even in conflict with the rule book. Twice—when he overpowered two thieves on the outskirts of Birmingham, and when he arrested two robbers—this led to rewards and plaudits, but at other times, for instance when he arrested the respectable landlord of a coaching inn on the mistaken word of a drunken farmer, it led to reprimands, and a block on promotion. In late 1841 he was dismissed from the Birmingham force for drunkenness. In his *Observations*, published in 1842 to coincide with the debate in Staffordshire on whether or not to reform that county's police, he condemned the hierarchical nature of the job, and compared it unfavourably to the traditional role of the autonomous parish constable.

After a period during which he tramped to London and back, staying in workhouses, Bakewell joined Sheffield's police force in 1846. His service here appears to have been meritorious until, in May 1847, he fell out with his landlord and fellow constable William Richardson and accused him of stealing his trousers. After threatening Richardson he was dismissed from the police and paid by the mayor to leave the town, but returned to argue that since his dismissal had followed irregular procedure it ought to be reversed. He pleaded his case though a series of four pamphlets published in 1847 in conjunction with Sheffield's radicals, who were keen to point out what they saw as oppressive conduct by officials, who had bypassed the elected watch committee. But during the committee's inquiry the fact that Bakewell himself had staged the 'theft' emerged, and his public support ebbed away. In 1849 he returned to Sheffield in a doomed attempt to sue its police chief for false imprisonment.

In 1848, when local agitation against the death penalty was being fed by the controversial conviction of two men for murder at Mirfield, Yorkshire, Bakewell published in Sheffield *Observations on Circumstantial Evidence*, a pamphlet written with the ostensible benefit of his police experience, which described several cases of the execution of allegedly innocent persons. His final original pamphlet, on the unfairness to the parish of the new poor law, was published in Liverpool in November 1848, although he published what appears to have been a modified version of *Circumstantial Evidence* under a new title in 1857. By 1851 he was described as a widower, though no further details of his marriage are known. He spent the last years of his life as an inmate of the Bolton union workhouse, Fishpool, Farnworth, Lancashire, where he died of apoplexy on 20 January 1883.

Bakewell was the first rank-and-file member of a uniformed 'new' police to write about his experiences. Although fate cast his lot in with radicals, his political views were more overtly traditional, venerating a past in which the common law was taken seriously, and the élites had a sense of obligation to their inferiors. This was unfavourably contrasted with a utilitarian present wherein, as he complained, poverty was considered a crime and the freeborn artisan, in the shape of the parish constable, had been replaced by the regimented and disciplined policeman. Bakewell's obstinacy, combined with his consistent inability to fit into the world in which he found himself, doomed him to failure, but in railing against all comers he also provided a rare example of an articulate man who was losing his social standing.

[Batty, Thomas](#)

(c. 1832–1903)

John M. Turner

Biography completed: 23 September 2004

Batty, Thomas (c. 1832–1903), animal trainer and circus proprietor, was a nephew of William Batty, the lessee of Astley's Amphitheatre, London. Celebrated as a lion tamer, he is also said to have been the first to train an elephant to stand on its head. He had many life-threatening struggles with the lions he 'tamed': he had so many scars on one side of his body that, it was said, a half-crown could not be placed between them. He would enter the ring, clad in Lincoln green and long leather boots, with a short whip in his hand. The lions would spring at the bars of their cage with fierce snarls, and he would strike at their paws with his whip, provoking their fury. Someone in the audience would always entreat him not to enter the cage, but he would slip in and have a lively ten minutes or so. From about 1859 he performed on the continent. On one occasion, in Hamburg, he entered the cage wearing a glittering spangled costume, whereupon one of the lions mauled him badly, tearing off the costume and scoring his back. He escaped by using the butt of the gun which he carried at that time; another tamer, Lucas, was killed by the same lions in Paris in 1869. Batty returned to Britain in 1874 and began a provincial tour with his own circus, which enjoyed a reputation for grandeur and excellence. He claimed to pay more in wages to his performers than any two other travelling circuses.

Batty and his first wife (whose name is unknown) had ten children who were brought up in the circus. Their son George became a famous jockey act rider and proprietor. Mrs Batty died in 1875 and Batty later married Sarah Footit, *née* Crockett (c.1836–1923). His fortunes declined in his later years, and he entered the workhouse at Newcastle upon Tyne. He died in the Newcastle City Lunatic Asylum, Gosforth, on 22 September 1903.