

John Dowling

(b.1870)

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John Dowling was born in Ripon in the last quarter of 1870 (1). As all too common at the time, the death of his mother, Margaret Dowling, was recorded in Ripon in the same quarter (2). Her burial took place at Ripon Cathedral on 3rd October 1870; she was 21 years old (3). A few months later in the 1871 census, John was 6 months old and living with his grandmother, also Margaret Dowling, in Priest Lane, Ripon, along with Margaret's son, then aged 18 (4, 5). Both Margaret and her son were born in Kilkenny, Ireland. We know from the registration of John Dowling's birth that his mother Margaret's maiden name was Kiernan, and parish records for Sandymount in Dublin record a marriage between Michael Dowling and Margaret Kiernan in October 1869 (6). It appears, then, that the couple came to Ripon shortly after their marriage, where as we know, Margaret died following John's birth at the end of 1870.

By the time of the census in April 1881, John Dowling was resident in the Ripon Union Workhouse, having been admitted there just a month earlier on the 2nd March 1881 (7, 8). According to the census, his grandmother Margaret and her son were no longer to be found in Ripon, but records of other members of the Dowling family in Ripon give more clues to John's early life and the reasons for his admission to the Workhouse.

In 1872, an Irishwoman named Ann Bresnahan married Michael Dowling in Ripon, some two years after the death of his first wife, John's mother, Margaret (9, 10). In 1881, Ann was living in Garbutts Court with her children, Mary Ellen (b. 1875) and Edward (b.1877), and her mother, Bridget Bresnahan (11). Her husband, Michael, however is not resident with her at the time.

On March 5th 1881, the Knaresborough Post reported a case at Ripon City Court involving John Dowling (12):

"A little boy, aged 10 years, named John Dowling, was charged with stealing two bread loaves from the shop of John Atkinson Scott, of Westgate, Ripon, (of the value together of one shilling), provision dealer."

The report goes on to describe how Mr Scott heard a noise in his shop and noticed that 2 loaves were missing. He chased John, who threw down the loaves. John later admitted that he had also stolen a loaf on a previous occasion. His stepmother, who we know to be Ann Dowling, stated that when he had brought a loaf home before, John had told her that he had taken in some coals for Mr Scott and received the loaf in payment – she had believed his story. The report continues:

“Her Husband had deserted her and she believed he was now in America. She was now in receipt of 3 shillings a week from the Union, but as she had no work, she could not afford to keep this boy, as she had two children of her own.”

The report ends with The Bench reprimanding the defendant and discharging him, directing his stepmother to apply to the Relieving Officer if she could not maintain him. John had indeed been admitted to the Workhouse a couple of days before this report appeared in the newspaper.

Subsequent newspaper reports provide further information about John’s early life experiences.

An article published in the Bradford Observer on 9th January 1882, entitled ‘An Unpromising Lad’, details how John’s father had run away to America in 1880, leaving his stepmother with several children. John had been “cast adrift” by her prior to his admission to the Workhouse. The report also reveals that having been in the Workhouse for about a month, John was sent to Shibden Industrial School which had been founded in 1877 by John Lister (a later relative of Ann Lister, known as ‘Gentleman Jack’). The establishment was close to Shibden Hall in Halifax, and provided accommodation and training for Roman Catholic boys who had been detained by the Courts.

Mr Gosling, superintendent of the school, reported that John been responsible for 120 counts of misconduct including *“a series of acts impossible to describe in decent language, and which filled the court with laughter and disgust”*. In recent days, John’s father had again been seen in the area of the school evidently with the intention of taking John away, and this is thought to have partly accounted for John’s behaviour. John was sentenced to prison for fourteen days in prison with hard labour and thereafter, to be sent to a reformatory school (13).

On 21st March 1889, in the York Herald, a report from Ripon City Court recorded that John Dowling, then aged 18, a labourer, was charged with stealing a hen, the property of Charles Beck (14). John had two accomplices in this incident – Kate Hevican, age 14, and Mary Ann Jarvis, aged 10. The report notes that John had previously been to an Industrial School and a Reformatory. The Bench committed John to one month’s hard labour whilst acquitting the two girls.

Some two years later, at the time of the 1891 census, John, aged 20, was resident in Manningham, Bradford, boarding with and apprenticed to George Dunn, a chimney-sweep, also a native of Ripon (15).

In 1901, John was to be found in Grimsby, working as a Glass Dealer, and lodging with a man of the same trade named Thomas Leighton (16). By 1906, however, he was back in Bradford where he married Margaret Reynolds, a widow (17). In the 1911 census, John and Margaret were living in St Margaret’s Road, Bradford, along with Margaret’s two adult children - John Reynolds, a plush weaver, and Hannah Rudden, a worsted spinner, who was married with a 2-year-old son, James (18). Also in the house were a family of boarders – Florence Spurr, and

her 3 children.

At this time, John is recorded as a Chimney Sweeper, working on his 'Own Account', and he also appears in the Post Office Bradford Directory for 1912 and 1913 with this profession (19, 20). Given the evidence from his early life - a gratifying outcome for 'An unpromising lad'.

Reference List

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- (4) 'John Dowling' (1871) *Census return for Ripon, Yorkshire*. Public Record Office: PRO RG10/4276; p.9 (1871). Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 13/10/2019)
- (5) 'Margaret Dowling' (1871) *Census return for Ripon, Yorkshire*. Public Record Office: PRO RG10/4276; p.9 (1871). Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 13/10/2019)
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- (9) 'Ann Bresnahan' (1872) *Certified entry recording marriage on the Civil Registration Index*, Apr-Jun 1872. Available: <http://ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 13/10/2019)
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- (12) 'John Dowling' (1881) 'Ripon – City Court'. *Knaresborough Post*, 5 March, p.5 (1881). Available at: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> (Accessed 13/10/2019)
- (13) 'John Dowling' (1882) 'Ripon – City Court – An Unpromising Lad'. *Bradford Observer*,

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- (14) 'John Dowling' (1889) 'Ripon – City Court'. *York Herald*, 21 March p.3 (1889). Available at: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> (Accessed 13/10/2019)
- (15) 'John Dowling' (1891) *Census return for Manningham, Bradford*. Public Record Office PRO RG12/3635; Folio: 81; p. 1. Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 13/10/2019)
- (16) 'John Dowling' (1901) *Census return for Great Grimsby*. Public Record Office PRO RG13/3089; Folio: 87; p. 4 Available at: <http://ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 13/10/2019)
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- (18) 'John Dowling' (1911) *Census return for Manningham, Bradford*. Public Record Office PRO RG14; Piece: 26759 Available: <http://ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 13/10/2019)
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