

Heritage Statement re Mary Taylor Blue Plaque at The Red House Gomersal

Mary Taylor was born in the Red House in 1817, into a family of prosperous textile merchants who had pioneered textile production on the site since the sixteenth century. The family were intelligent Non-Conformists, and Mary's father was well-travelled. Mary was educated in Mirfield at Roe Head School (now Hollybank School) where she met Charlotte Brontë, and later Charlotte's sisters and father. They became lifelong friends and Mary was Charlotte's confidante, giving her crucial advice at several stages of her life. Unlike Ellen Nussey, Mary refused to disclose the content of Charlotte's letters to her and is thought to have destroyed them to preserve confidentiality. Charlotte visited the Red House many times and was deeply influenced by the lively political and religious debate in the Taylor family, which contrasted sharply with her own family life in Haworth. Taylor family members were to be immortalised as characters in Charlotte's novel *Shirley*. It could be argued that without Mary's encouragement and advice, Charlotte would never have ventured abroad to teach in Brussels, or persisted to become a published novelist.

Mary deserves to be honoured because aside from her friendship with Charlotte Brontë, she was a trailblazer and radical feminist. She refused to accept the constraints of 19th century middle class females. Unlike Anne Lister at Shibden Hall, whose actions were based on satisfying her own needs, Mary tried to advance the position of women from an altruistic perspective. She advocated that women should retain their assets on marriage and be able to conduct their own financial affairs. She became a teacher and taught boys, which was unusual at the time. She travelled widely, led climbing expeditions in the Alps, and lived in Belgium and Germany. She emigrated to New Zealand where she lived for many years and set up her own business, which gave her financial independence. She eventually returned to Gomersal where she resided at Gomersal Lodge on Spen Lane until her death in 1893. Her grave is in St Mary's churchyard in Gomersal. Mary Taylor wrote regularly for feminist publications and also published one novel. In New Zealand she is celebrated as a lesbian pioneer of women's rights.

Mary's birthplace and childhood home is Listed Grade II*. See Historic England Listing ref 1135404. Four reasons for listing are recorded: architectural, functional, literary (Charlotte Brontë connections) and historic (Mary Taylor, radical feminist). Hence Mary Taylor is recognised as significant nationally, but not celebrated locally.

The Red House is owned by Kirklees Metropolitan Council. It was closed as a museum in 2017 and is currently empty. A planning application ref 2021/94366 to convert the house into holiday accommodation with facility for small wedding ceremonies is undecided. Whatever function the building fulfils in future, a blue plaque on the gable wall facing the A651 will not intrude structurally or visually; will be publicly accessible; and will inform all passers-by about Kirklees' very own feminist pioneer. The plaque's fixings will be into mortar joints, not drilled into any stone/brickwork.

Spen Valley Civic Society

July 2022