

'I did not aggravate you': Historic records of domestic violence

QS30/65, Michaelmas 1888 (Regina vs Thomas Yates)

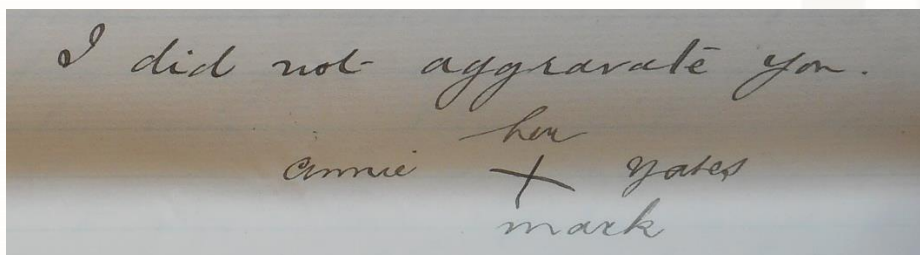
Archives don't just record weddings, births, and celebrations. They record the whole spectrum of human experience; pain, fear, uncertainty, loss. But there are some areas of human experience which are difficult to talk about as archivists or historians. They can be hard to understand, or it can be hard to find the right words. Sometimes it seems easier to just avoid them altogether.

Domestic violence is one of those topics.

A short while ago, a 19th century witness deposition was brought to our attention by a woman who has experienced domestic abuse herself. When she read the testimony, it resonated deeply with her. The document was about a woman who had been attacked by her husband, and at the end she says that she didn't want to prosecute him, she just wanted it to stop.

The researcher said 'it was physical when I read her statement about wanting it to stop - because that was how I had felt, but never articulated it.'

Fortunately, the woman is now free from that situation and living a happy and independent life. Hearing her speak about the impact the testimony had on her, we felt it was important to try and write about this difficult topic. That is why we have chosen the witness deposition of Annie Yates, heard at Warwickshire Quarter Sessions in 1888, for our Document of the Month.¹



I did not aggravate you.
Annie Yates
mark

The final line of Annie Yates' testimony, QS30/65

The testimony of Annie Yates

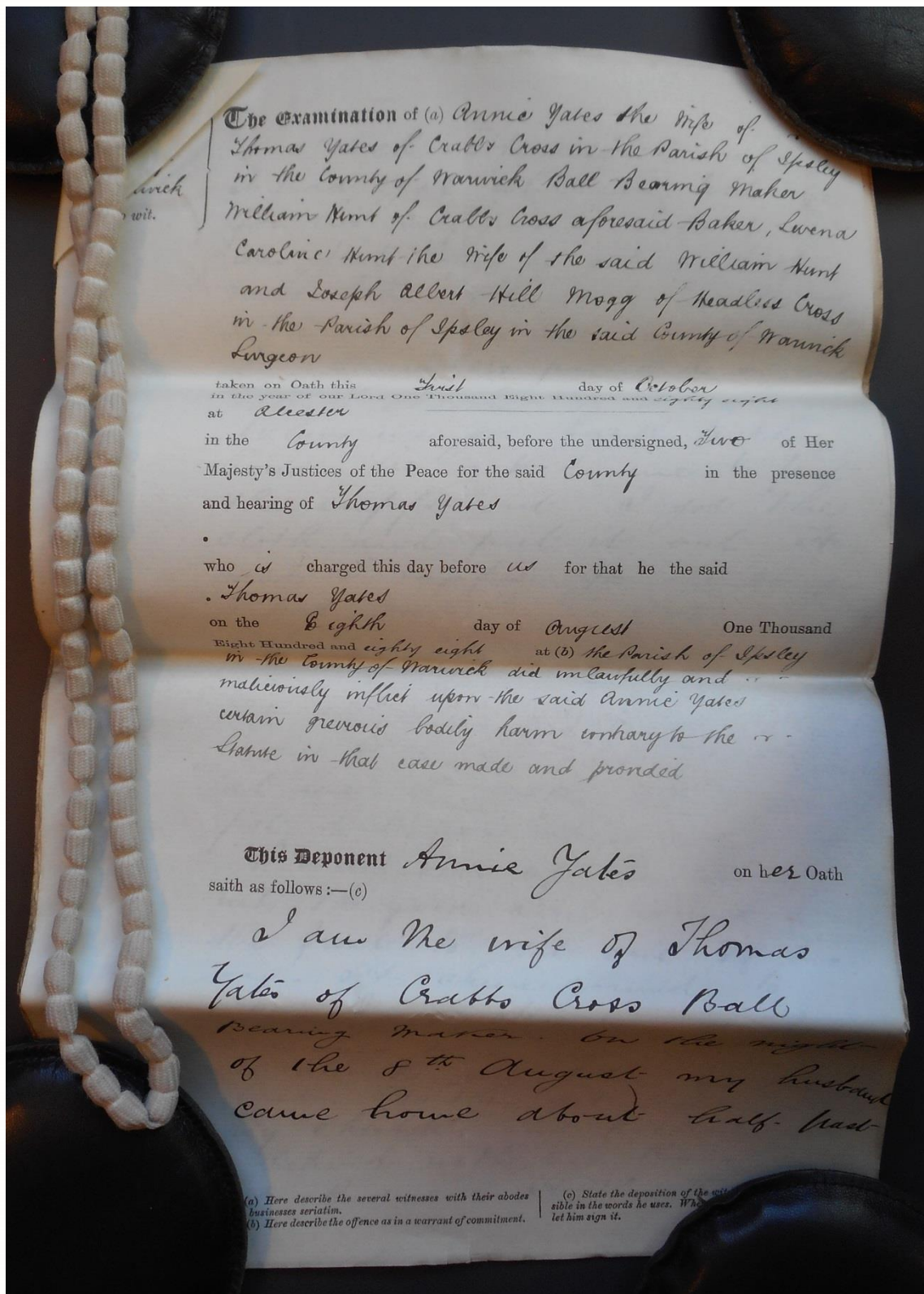
*(This section contain descriptions of domestic violence which may be distressing – if you would prefer not to read them, please skip to the following section entitled ‘**Common Experiences**’)*

On the evening of 8th August 1888, Annie and her husband Thomas had returned from the pub, having had two pints of ale, and sat down to dinner. Thomas said ‘I suppose you are going to put your b--- grandson the best bit’. Annie replied ‘the boy does not want any, hold your noise’. At this, Thomas picked up the carving knife and threw it at her. He missed, and she ran from the house. He caught her, kicked and beat her, and broke her leg. He then dragged her into the house, bolted the door, beat her further and left her in bed, daring her to speak or make a noise. All the while, he was threatening to break her other leg, throw her out the window or kill her.

The neighbours heard the initial screams but could not get into the house through the locked door. In the morning, they came over and Thomas told them he was sorry for his actions. They offered to drive Annie to the station so she could get to hospital, but Thomas refused to let her leave. Instead, a doctor was called who found her leg to be broken, her spine and ribs severely bruised, and that she was suffering from shock. She had been left in pain without medical treatment overnight. The following night Thomas threatened her again, and she had to have her son and daughter sit with her through the night for protection. Two months later, her leg was still not fully recovered.

The final sentence of her testimony is the most moving. Directly addressing her abuser before she signs her mark, Annie’s states: ‘I did not aggravate you’.

Thomas’ only comment to the court was: ‘it was her daughter’s fault’. He was sentenced to two months in prison with hard labour; only twice as long as his previous sentence for stealing a pair of boots.²



The first page of the deposition in the case against Thomas Yates, QS30/65

Common experiences

The story is one which arises time and again in the court records and newspapers.³ Many of these historic cases involve elements which are common to current-day abusive situations; for example, alcohol, jealousy and financial control. Often, the records show a cycle of abuse where the perpetrator shows remorse and affection towards the victim, or tries to rationalise their actions, but eventually ends up repeating the violence.

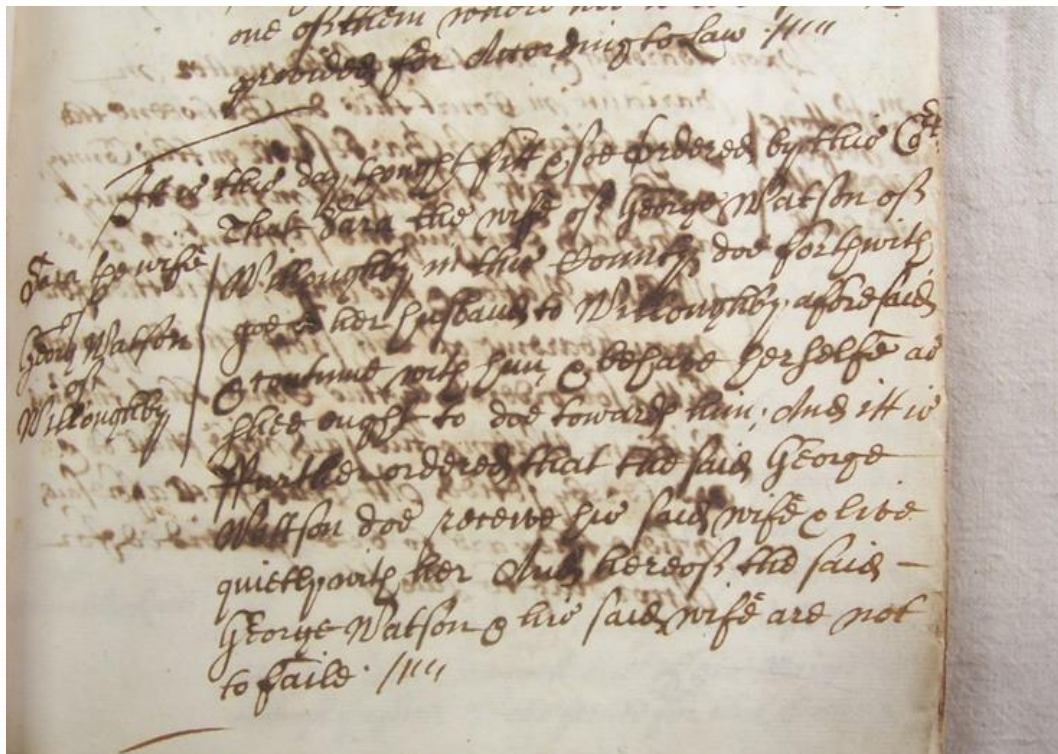
The women who were victims in these cases relied upon their abusive partner for financial stability, particularly if they had children. If the partner was sent to prison or fined too heavily, it would impact on the family as a whole. At that time, it would have been immensely difficult for them to leave the situation and live independently, especially given the social attitudes towards marriage and the duties of a wife.

Changing attitudes

While some experiences might be familiar from across the span of time, there has also been a great deal of change. In particular, attitudes towards domestic abuse and the people involved (survivors and abusers) have changed dramatically for the better. When we look at records like this court order book from 1684, we can see how far times have moved forwards.⁴ It was ordered by the court that:

‘Sarah the wife of George Watson of Willoughby in this county do forthwith go to her husband to Willoughby aforesaid and continue with him, and behave herself as she ought to do towards him; and it is further ordered that the said George Watson do receive his said wife and live quietly with her...’

It seems clear that the couple were not in a happy situation together. The fact that they had to be ordered to ‘live quietly’ suggests that there had been arguments and potentially violence. Instead of allowing the couple to live safely apart, the woman was forced by law to return and ‘behave herself as she ought to do towards him’. The words are heavy with judgement and social expectations.



The court order against Sarah and George Watson, QS40/6

Thankfully, there is now an increased awareness of the types of abuse⁵, more resources available for people in abusive situations, and an understanding that the victim is never to blame. In the 21st century, with the right support, people can change their circumstances, not be tied to them. With greater social and work equality women can support themselves and their families. And with organisations such as [Refuge](#), [Warwickshire Against Domestic Abuse](#), and the [Domestic Abuse Counselling Service](#), victims of abuse of all genders can find help, protection and shelter.

24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline: 0808 2000 247 (run in partnership between Refuge and Women's Aid)

Warwickshire Against Domestic Abuse: 0800 408 1552

Domestic Abuse Counselling Service: 024 7635 1137 or 024 7632 7647

¹ Warwickshire County Record Office, document reference QS30/65, Michaelmas 1888, Regina vs Thomas Yates, assault.

² Warwickshire County Record Office, document reference QS 26/2/bundle 09, Michaelmas 1888, case no. 1.

³ For example, in 1862, shopkeeper Timothy Hancox of Wolston was charged with assaulting his wife Mary. She 'had no wish to prosecute, as prisoner was an excellent husband when sober, and committed the assault complained of when drunk.' He was cautioned and dismissed. [*WCRO, reference QS 26/2/bundle 06, case 16; Rugby Advertiser, 6th Dec 1862*] Six years later, he appears in court again, having been seen 'in front of his house flourishing a knife... soon after he began to beat his wife very badly... there was a feeling of jealousy between defendant and his wife; he was drunk. Witness said defendant had... expressed sorrow for his conduct'. He was fined and dismissed. [*Leamington Spa Courier, 9th May 1868*] Twenty years later, he attempted to throttle a woman who rushed to the defence of his wife. [*Rugby Advertiser, 3rd Nov 1888*] The Hancox's stayed together until Timothy's death in 1899, aged 83.

In 1851, Henry Hobbis was charged for assaulting his wife and children; 'the wife and little girl had their heads bandaged, and the little boy his arm in a sling.' Again, the wife did not wish to press charges, as 'he never assaulted her unless he had had some beer'. [*Leamington Spa Courier, 6th Dec 1851*]

In 1894, Benjamin Barr stabbed his wife with a table fork and threatened her with a knife. She said that she would 'go home to her father and take the children with her'. He replied that if she took away the children she would 'have the knife'. Again, she did not want to press charges as 'she did not want her husband to go to gaol'. Benjamin 'had been a teetotaller, but 'broke out' on this particular day.' [*Leamington Spa Courier, 28th July 1894*]

⁴ Warwickshire County Record Office, document reference QS40/6, Order Book, Sarah Watson and husband, 1684.

⁵ Including physical abuse, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, psychological and emotional abuse, financial and material abuse, discriminatory abuse, organisational abuse, and neglect - see <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/safeguardingadults> for more information.