

The Life of Marian Julia James of West Down, Hindhead Author and Philanthropist

Marian Julia James (1830-1910), who lived at West Down, Hindhead, from 1890 until 1910, was a generous philanthropist who supported many local initiatives including the building of Grayshott Church and early land acquisitions for the National Trust.



A walk across land at Nutcombe that she gave to the National Trust was named **Miss James' Walk** in recognition of her generosity. Some of this land had to be exchanged as part of the A3 Tunnel Development so a bridge over the road at the southern portal has been named *Miss James' Bridge*.

From the only photograph we have of Marian it would be easy to assume that she led the dull life of a late 19th Century spinster. The truth is rather different: after a difficult period as a young adult, her resilience, enterprise and charm gave her a life many young women of the era might have envied.

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Marian was born on 7th August 1830, the only child of William and Mary Anne James. Mr James produced a monthly publication, *Pianista*, of musical scores and the family lived at his business premises in central London. This location and the nature of his business gave him wide publishing contacts. Marian was a very accomplished young woman who had had some of her musical compositions published as early as 1846 – and to some acclaim.

In February 1851, however, Marian's secure life changed: Mr James became embroiled in a legal challenge over musical copyright brought by the well-known music publishing family, the Novellos, which resulted in an injunction. Marian, therefore, needed a new and reliable way to supplement the family income.

In the mid-19th Century, other than governess positions, there were very few 'acceptable' options through which an educated, middle-class woman could earn a living. Writing, music or prose, was one, however, with prose far more in demand. Demonstrating both enterprise and literary flair, Marian started to write fiction and had her first novel, *Ethel*, published in November 1854 to warm reviews.

In another event which shaped her life, at the end of 1852 Marian was introduced to the poet, Sydney Dobell (1824 – 1874), and his wife, Emily (1822 – 1900). Sydney had become known in

literary circles following the publication of his epic poem, *The Roman*. Both Sydney and Emily suffered poor health but in 1852 it was Emily's health that was causing concern. The Dobells had spent the earlier part of the year in Malvern, where they had met a friend of the Jameses, the London-based playwright, Dr Westland Marston (1819 – 1890). The Dobells had then come to London to try a mesmerism cure for Emily and in what was initially probably a paid job arranged by Marston, Marian started to visit Sydney and Emily to play the piano and nurse Emily. Through her warmth and charisma, Marian quickly became their very close friend. The Dobells returned home to Gloucestershire in April 1853 and were joined for most of the summer by Marian, where she seems to have charmed the whole family, becoming great friends with Sydney's nine younger siblings. ^{Note 1}

The Novello v/s James court case dragged on. Eventually on 13th December 1854, Mr James won the case and the injunction was lifted but he was awarded legal costs only, despite estimating his damages at £3,000, (£300k at 2025 values). Tragically Mr James died unexpectedly just days later.

By that time the Jameses had moved to a cottage in Kilburn which became Marian and her mother's home until 1860. Through the rest of the 1850s Sydney's increasingly affectionate letters to Marian suggest a romantic element to their friendship and, given Emily's precarious health, Marian might have thought that she might become the second Mrs Sydney Dobell. She certainly turned down at least one other suitor's offer of marriage. ^{Note 2}

Commendably, however, and showing immense resilience, Marian managed to pull through the trauma of losing her father and its resulting financial insecurity. Encouraged by Sydney as well as by the critical success of *Ethel*, she had five more novels published 1855-57, the most successful of which was *Diamond on the Hearth*, and she secured a commission to write two columns a week for a new periodical. Together these would have provided financially for Marian and her mother. Although her novels seem to have been uncomplicated stories, albeit with a strong moral undercurrent, Marian established herself as a respected author.

Her success paved the way for the 1860s to be a stable period in Marian's life. In July 1860 Sydney's first cousin, Emily Coates (1821 – 1888), took the lease on a fine Hampstead house, Upper Terrace Lodge, and, in a move almost certainly brokered by Sydney, she invited Marian and her mother to be her lodgers. Like the Dobell family, the Coates were wine and spirit merchants but by 1860, Emily, as sole survivor, owned and ran the business. Once more demonstrating her considerable charm, Marian soon became far more of a friend than a lodger to Emily.

In these pleasant Hampstead years Marian was part of a close local social circle which included Emily Coates, the author, Dinah Mulock (1826 – 1887), who was a friend from childhood, Westland Marston, the artist, Laura Herford (1831 – 1870) whose niece, Helen Paterson (1848 – 1926) and became the famous watercolourist, Helen Allingham. Interestingly, Marian, Dinah Emily and Laura were all unmarried women who needed to earn their own living and managed to do so without being governesses. This would undoubtedly have fostered a strong bond between them as well as giving them unusual freedoms for the time. ^{Notes 3 and 4}

There were three events of significance during these years: in 1866 Helen Paterson came to London to study art under the guardianship of Laura Herford and would have met Marian.

Secondly, in 1867, Mary-Alice Dobell (1844 – 1931), the youngest Dobell sibling, married the artist, Briton Riviere RA (1840 - 1820) and the couple moved to Finchley. ^{Note 5}

Thirdly, in 1868 Hampstead Heath was threatened with development. It was saved thanks to the efforts of The Commons Preservation Society's brilliant solicitor, Robert Hunter (1844 – 1913), who

later co-founded the National Trust. Whether she was involved or not, Marian would have been aware of his efforts which may have been an influence on her later generosity towards the National Trust. ^{Note 6}

While the 1860s was probably her easiest decade, the 1870s proved much tougher for Marian. In October 1870 Laura Herford took an accidental overdose of chloroform and died – aged just 39. Her death left her niece, Helen Paterson, without a guardian or career-mentor. Laura's closest friends, Marian and Dinah, rallied round to support Helen, establishing life-long friendships with the young artist. Further, by 1870 Sydney Dobell's health was in remorseless decline. Marian is recorded as a regular visitor to his Gloucestershire home from 1871 until 1874 but, after an unexpected and sudden decline, Sydney died that August aged just 50. (Ironically, his chronically unwell wife, Emily, lived until 1900!)

Helen Paterson married the poet, William Allingham (1824 – 1889), in 1874 and became a professional watercolourist. Either Marian or Emily Coates bought at least two of her early paintings, *The Sand Martins' Haunt*, painted in 1876, and *The Clothes' Line*, painted in 1879, probably at the time these were painted as a way of supporting Helen's early career.

It was the late 1880s, however, that really changed Marian's life: her mother died in 1886, her oldest friend, Dinah Mulock, in 1887 and Emily Coates in 1888. In a move that probably surprised even close friends, Emily Coates left almost her entire estate, worth £13m in 2025 values, to 'her friend and executrix', Marian James, rather than to either her Coates or Dobell cousins.

Equally surprisingly, and again demonstrating extraordinary enterprise and resilience, Marian decided to build herself a large house in the country. London had been her home all her life, so why she wanted to leave or why she chose Hindhead (although it was very fashionable at the time) remains a mystery. In 1889 Marian bought 15 acres of Hindhead land between the Portsmouth Road and Headley Road, including a house named The Chalet, as well as a larger site just south of The Old Portsmouth Road where her new home, West Down, was built.

Her choice of George Faulkner Armitage (1849-1937) as architect at first appears another unlikely choice because he was Altrincham-based and, by 1889, had only designed a few country homes in the Northwest of England. Armitage was, however, almost certainly known to Marian personally because he had been brought up in Altrincham, Cheshire, and is known to have known the Paterson family well.

By 1891 Marian had moved into West Down Cottage while West Down was completed. It was to be a magnificent house of exceptional quality and there is an excellent description given on the Grayshott Heritage website. It is clear, however, that Marian didn't intend to live alone at West Down: the initials of those who were to live there were carved into the main mahogany mantelpiece, MJJ (Marian) AMB (Annie Margaret Bulley) SMB (her husband, Samuel Marshall Bulley) and FMB (Felix Marshall Bulley, their son). Annie Margaret (1852 – 1947) was Armitage's younger sister. Annie Margaret had married Samuel Bulley (1850 – 1908) in 1876 and their only child, Felix, was born in 1877. The Bulleys, like the Armitages, were a large family of cotton merchants from the Manchester area. Samuel, originally a cotton trader, is thought to have suffered from a weak chest which may have accounted for the move south but while at Hindhead he became a keen horticulturist, amateur artist and philanthropist.

The 1901 census, however, shows that Marian had not abandoned her longest standing friends. One of Sydney's sisters, the widowed Nora Williams (1841 – 1924), was living at The Chalet with her three daughters, one of whom was the artist, Juliet Williams (1872 – 1957). Marian and the Bulley's

were also known to have had numerous visitors to stay including many of Sydney's siblings, their offspring and various members of the large Bulley and Armitage families. ^{Note 7}

During her West Down years Marian became one of the area's most generous philanthropists. She contributed generously to the building of St Luke's Church, the village hall and the library at Grayshott. She was also a very generous supporter of the National Trust. In 1908 she contributed towards a their local effort to acquire Ludshott Common and in the same year gave them 38 acres of Bramshott Chase and Nutcombe. Her most ambitious project, however, completed in 1907, was to provide a hostel for people working in the arts 'to have a timely holiday' in the country to stave off 'over-strain', something close to her heart, perhaps, after her experiences in the 1850s. She called it The Hostel and funded it entirely herself. The Hostel, which Marian made over to The Hostels Company run by trustees operated until 1954. It is now known as Shannon Court and is a nursing home run by the Freemasons.

Marian's final few years were, sadly, marred by tragedy. In 1908 Samuel Bulley died unexpectedly following an operation. Perhaps worse, Felix, now a doctor and newly married, died just a year later, of a brain tumour. Both events must have been devastating for both Marian and Annie Margaret. It is not known whether Marian intended to make either man a trustee for The Hostel but in 1909 she set up a company, The Hostel Company, and revised her will to appoint legatees to run it from the residuary of her estate .

Marian died on 10th November 1910 aged 80. She appointed Aneurin Williams (1849 – 1924), a Liberal party MP and Surrey JP (unrelated to Nora Williams), and Evelyn Riviere (1876 - 1945), Briton Riviere's barrister son, as executors. Her estate was valued at £92,240, (£10m at 2025 values). She left Upper Terrace Lodge to Briton and Mary-Alice Riviere and the lifetime use of West Down and its contents to Annie Margaret. Her estate also provided Annie Margaret with a generous annuity with the residual put into a separate trust for the benefit of The Hostel Company. Proving again that she had not forgotten her oldest friends, Marian made generous bequests to various members of the Dobell and Riviere families. ^{Note 8}

In addition, therefore, to her accomplishments, enterprise, resilience and charisma, Marian's generosity toward both friends and causes close to her heart should also be remembered.

Notes:

Note 1: Westland Marston

In his will Westland Marston (1819 – 1890) asked that some of his closest friends should be allowed to choose for themselves a set of his books. Amongst those friends was Marian James.

Note 2: Sydney Dobell

The Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell was published in two volumes in 1878. In these there are many of the letters he wrote to Marian who is always referred to as 'M'. Marian's letters to Sydney have not survived.

Note 3: Dinah Mulock

Dinah Mulock (1826 – 1887) was an author best known for writing *John Halifax Gentleman*, published in 1856. She came to London in 1839, aged 13, with her parents and two younger brothers. After a brief period of mental stability, in 1845, her father, Thomas, suddenly left the

family and, seven months later, her mother died. Dinah and her two younger brothers had to fend for themselves; Dinah did this by writing.

The elder of her two brothers died in an accident in 1847 but the younger one, Ben, became a civil engineer, frequently working overseas. While he was away she would write to him weekly and many of these letters survive giving an excellent insight into her life and that of her closest friends, including Marian. Dinah married George Craik, a publisher, in 1865.

Note 4: Laura Herford

Laura Herford (1831 – 1870) was the youngest daughter of John and Sarah Herford and youngest sister of Helen Allingham's mother. Laura's father was a wine merchant and her mother an artist who died the year of her birth. Aged 18 she went to London to study art alongside Eliza Fox (1823 – 1903) who brought her into contact with women who would now be described as the pioneer women's rights campaigners.

Frustrated at the lack of proper art tuition for women, in 1859 Laura was amongst a group of these women who organised a petition to the Royal Academy to accept women students, but to no avail. In 1860 Laura (unilaterally) applied to the RA, submitting her work signed 'L Herford' and duly received an offer of a place addressed to Mr L Herford. Her arrival at the RA caused quite a stir. Laura, therefore, was well-known in art circles by the time Helen Paterson came to London.

Note 5: Briton Riviere RA

Briton Riviere (1840 – 1920) was brought up in Cheltenham which was probably where he met the Dobell family. He had a brilliant artistic career focusing on painting domestic animals, especially dogs, and becoming a Royal Academician in 1881. Briton could have met Marian as early as 1856 but is likely only to have become a close friend after his marriage to Mary-Alice Dobell and subsequent move to London in 1867. While there are no references to his friendship with Marian in any surviving literature, it is clear from her will that the Rivieres were long-standing, trusted friends of Marian's. Riviere was also a close friend of Helen Allingham's from the early 1870s.

Note 6: Sir Robert Hunter

Robert Hunter (1844 – 1913) moved to Haslemere in 1882 and in 1895 was one of the three founders and first Chairman of the National Trust. In 1905 Hunter led a successful local effort to save 750 acres of common land at Hindhead Common and the Devil's Punch Bowl which was given to the National Trust in 1906. Although there is no evidence Marian met Hunter in 1868, she will have met him sometime after 1890.

Note 7: Juliet Williams

Juliet Williams (1872 – 1957) was a professional artist who exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1902 and 1905 and whose career focused on teaching art. She exhibited at the Haslemere Society of Artists exhibitions from 1897 until 1910, by which time she had moved to Chelsea. Some of her works are in Haslemere Museum's art collection.

Note 8: Annie-Margaret Bulley

Annie Margaret (1852 – 1947) continued to live at West Down until her death aged 94 in 1947, 37 years after Marian died. Helen Allingham's painting, *The Sand-martin's Haunt*, was given to Haslemere Museum in the year of her death although it is not certain whether it was a bequest or a gift from her executors. Helen's other painting, *The Clothes' Line*, is in an unknown private collection.

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A fuller version of this research is available from Grayshott Heritage on request.

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