

*A life sketch of*

# Benjamin Roberts

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1826 – 1898

Benjamin Roberts was born May 3, 1826 in Charlton, Kent County, England. He was christened 28 May 1826 in St. Luke's Church in Charlton. Ben was the son of William and Mary Roberts. The 1841 Census shows him as 15 years old and living with his father's family at #4 Grew's Building, Sun Alley, Woolwich, Kent, England.



The William and Elizabeth Everington family lived at #1 on Sun Alley in 1841, with a daughter Ann, age 15. Growing up as neighbors was probably one of the factors that led to the marriage of Benjamin Roberts and Ann Reed Everington on June 15, 1848 in the All Saints Parish Church of Poplar, Middlesex County, England. Ben worked as a blacksmith at the Woolwich arsenals.

Ann described Ben as a sunny, genial, handsome man, proud of his six-feet-and-one-inch height. She told her daughters she had been quite "swept away" by their father. B.H. Roberts remembered his father's "pleasing character and genial good nature," but more especially his physical prowess.

Stories recorded give an insight into Ben's temperament and character. His son Brigham Henry, also known as Harry or B. H., remembered once when his father came home and found no supper prepared. He stood in the pantry door impatiently hurling and twirling their plates across the room. B. H. also remembered one summer Sunday morning when he was sick. His father stealthily opened the window, captured a pigeon, wrung its neck, plucked and dressed it, then dropped it in a pot of soup for him – a gesture remembered with thanks and admiration by his son.

B. H. also recalled that Ben would not tolerate cruelty and told the story of two blacksmith bullies that were verbally tongue lashing and pummeling an apprentice. Ben warned them to lay-off. When he was ignored, Ben knocked first one, and then the other down. Ben then gave them both a sound beating until each promised to leave the apprentice alone.

Another time, Ann was clinging to her husband in the midst of a street riot in Liverpool, when a big fellow approached them and said,

“I believe you are an Irishman.”

“Perhaps I am,” replied Ben. Holding tight to Ann and continuing his stride, he flattened the man with one blow, removing him from their path.

Five years after their marriage, Ann met missionaries from a church professing to have the truth. She studied and prayed to know what she should do. Ben strongly opposed the idea of her joining this church. One night, Ann slipped out after the family was asleep and was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ben was not happy about her decision nor the way she had gone about it.

Ben’s initial shock soon subsided and he was softened by the new happiness and serenity of his wife. Ben moved from mere tolerance to a placating gesture of love for her by submitting himself to baptism in August of 1857.

Conversion to the Church diminished Ben’s wanderings for a time. Mary recalled that they lived a bit more comfortably during this period. He often accompanied his family to church. He paid his tithing faithfully each week in the spirit of consecration.

One week due to illness, Ben had not worked and so he paid no tithing. When he explained his circumstances, the Elders assured him all was right. On successive Sundays, Ben failed to attend church and the anxious local church authorities called on him. Their visit offended Ben, and he drove them out of his house. The gap of misunderstanding widened until an Elder’s Court was held. Ben refused to appear and he was excommunicated. Mary’s recollection of the event was that “from then on father began to grow indifferent and stayed

away from home for long periods and once more our life was made miserable." Alcohol pulled Ben further and more often from his family. Harry wrote, "If my father is alive, he is drunk; if he is dead, he died from drinking."

Ben's work as a blacksmith and ship plater made travel a necessity. He moved from county to county, which often kept him away from home. Shortly before he joined the church he was hired by a nobleman, the Duke of Nottingham, to train the Duke's string of racing horses. His new responsibilities included shoeing, grooming and pacing the horses for many months prior to exhibition at fairs and racetracks. While Ben was away from his family his letters were short in news, but shorter in money. Ann was left for months at a time to hold the family together as best she could. Ben often squandered his earnings on drinking and, Ann suspected, on heavy betting. Several times he returned home with luxuriant racing wins and lavished them on the family, but most times he came home stumbling, penniless, thick-tongued and limp from liquor.

As the children came, Ben's times away from home lengthened and his self-control weakened. Ann's resourcefulness, as well as her endurance, was pushed to the breaking point. She was forced to do fine sewing to earn enough for the bare necessities. To further complicate matters, Ben moved the family often and these moves were equally hard on Ann's purse and her health.

Birth certificates show that between 1849 and 1860, Ben and Ann had seven children in five different towns: Mary Ann Martha 'Polly' was born May 2, 1849 at Woolwich, Kent; Annie on March 26, 1851 at Poplar, Middlesex; Benjamin Jr. was born October 23, 1853 at Woolwich, Kent, twin girls, Emma 'Amy' and Sarah were born December 22, 1855 at Liverpool, Lancashire; Brigham Henry 'Harry' on March 13, 1857 at Warrington, Lancashire; and Thomas on February 4, 1860 at Burslem, Staffordshire. Benjamin Jr. died in 1858, and the twins died the day they were born. Of the four surviving children, only three were healthy: Mary, who was called Polly, Annie and Harry. Thomas, who suffered from hydrocephalitis, was an invalid.

In April of 1862, Ben was again working away from home. He sent Ann a check, the largest check in years, and summoned his family to join him once again. Ann had a great desire

to go to America, and dreamed of joining other members of the Church there, but Ben refused to go. Frustration with Ben's request fueled Ann's desire and she began preparations to immigrate to America. With limited funds, the extremely difficult decision was made to take two of the children and leave the other two with friends and relatives in England until she could earn enough money to send for them. All the plans and arrangements to make the journey were kept from Ben.

Three weeks after Ann sailed on the vessel *William Tapscott*, and having passed the point of no return, she wrote Ben from aboard ship. When Ben received her letter he was devastated to learn of her decision and went to London to visit Ann's sister. A family trunk preserved a letter written by Ann's sister that registered his reaction:

He was in a fearful order. He said he was tricked – and by a woman. If a man had so deceived him he wouldn't mind it. He said he was very sorrowful to think he had sent you so much money as he had done; for if he had known what you were up to he would have stopped your gallop you may depend on it. And you had taken all the children with you. I told him if you had left one child behind you I would never forgive you neither in this world nor in the world to come! He said you had the impudence to write him after you were on board ship and to tell him that he might take another wife. But he thought he had wife enough. I told him he might think himself well off. You had left him no encumbrance to trouble him. I have not seen him since.

The intensity of Ben's wrath may have been the seal of his estrangement, or it may have been the surest token of love, but neither Ann nor her children ever saw or heard from him again.

Although Ben never contacted his family again, they never forgot him. Once Ann had her family united in Utah, she mailed two pieces of a broken portrait of Ben to England. She included instructions with an order to have it expertly repaired. When the touched-up portrait was returned, Ann hung it in a place of honor in her home.

It is interesting to note that when Ben's son Brigham Henry (B. H.) grew and served as a missionary for the Church, and traveled on various assignments throughout the England countryside, he nourished the notion that he might see his father's face and be recognized in return. The portrait Ann had repaired of Ben was handed down to B. H. and this prized wall hanging was hung in his study.

Very little is known of Ben after Ann and the children left England. Ben married Elizabeth Stacey sometime between 1864 and 1871 in England. No actual record of their marriage or possible children has been found.

Benjamin Roberts died October 17, 1898 in Kent, England. He was buried in the Woolwich Old Cemetery, Woolwich, Greater London, England.

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*This Life Sketch of Benjamin Roberts was compiled from documents and other records collected and kept in the Family History Library of K. Oswald.*

*Excerpts taken from "A History of the B.H. Roberts Family" by Richard Roberts and from "Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story" by Truman G. Madsen*

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