

## EDUCATING ELIZABETH HARRIET GRAVES

When Caroline Graves moved in with Wilkie Collins – probably around 1858 – he cared for her young daughter Elizabeth Harriet and treated her as his own. New evidence has come to light which shows that from Autumn 1860 to Summer 1868 Wilkie paid for Elizabeth Harriet to go to boarding school with one gap when she accompanied her mother and Wilkie on a long trip to Europe.

The 1861 Census records four people in Wilkie's household at 12 Harley Street.<sup>1</sup>

| Name             | Relation to Head | Condition | Age | Rank, profession, or occupation                             | Where born                 |
|------------------|------------------|-----------|-----|---|----------------------------|
| Wilkie Collins   | Lodger           | Mar.      | 36  | Barrister-at-law not in practice author of works of fiction | London                     |
| Caroline         | Wife             | Mar.      | 26  | Author's wife   | Gloucestershire Cheltenham |
| Mary Wilding     | Servt            | Un.       | 26  | House Servant   | Cambridgeshire             |
| Harriet Montague | Servt.           | Un.       | 16  | — do —  | London                     |

Wilkie was described as a Lodger because he lived in the top floors of a house owned by George Gregson, a dentist aged 41, whose only other companion was Mary Stockwin, aged 38, described in the Census as an unmarried servant.

At least one biographer has assumed that 'Harriet Montague' was a false entry for Caroline's daughter Elizabeth Harriet, then aged 10. If so, it would not have been the only lie on this form. Every single box of Caroline's entry is false. She was christened Elizabeth; she was not Wilkie's wife; she was not married but a widow; her age was 31; and she was born in the village of Toddington which was 12 miles from the market town of Cheltenham. That led William Clarke to write in his book *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*

"Caroline was described as his wife and Harriet, her daughter, was nicely disguised as Harriet Montague, a sixteen year old house servant (she was then ten years old)."<sup>2</sup>

But we now know that is wrong. Elizabeth Harriet was not at home on 31 March, the night when the Census was taken. She was 45 miles away at a boarding school in Surrey.

The Census records her as a Boarder and Scholar at the Ladies Boarding School in Church Lane, Farnham. Its proprietresses are Suzanne Milne, a widow aged 65, and her 34-year-old unmarried daughter Ann Margaret Milne. Nine pupils are listed aged from 9 to 15 including Elizabeth H. Graves aged 10 and born in Islington.<sup>3</sup> The entry fits Caroline's daughter perfectly. She was born Elizabeth Harriet Graves on 3 February 1851 in Clerkenwell, part of Islington.<sup>4</sup>

The school's household was completed that night by an unmarried 19 year old assistant teacher Susan Downing, described as an annuitant, one 15 year old visitor and two servants aged 15 and 17. All are female.

Further evidence comes from Wilkie's bank account.<sup>5</sup> It shows that on 16 January 1861 he paid £15-8s-6d to a Miss Milne, the first entry for anyone of that name. Further payments to her follow every half year (one labelled School Bill) until August 1863 when Harriet was aged 12½. By then he had paid a total of nearly £100. No more entries appear with the name of Miss Milne and the entry 'school' does not reappear until January 1867, when Elizabeth Harriet was almost 16. The last of three payments to 'School' was made in July 1868, when she was 17½. They certainly refer to Harriet's schooling as the first of Wilkie's own children with Martha Rudd was not born until 1869.<sup>6</sup>

The gap between the two sets of payments may be filled by four entries made half-yearly at school term times to a Miss Cresswell. Few payments are made to a 'Miss' and no others, apart from those to Miss Milne and Miss Cresswell, of this size or regularity. Neither the school nor its location has been identified.

Altogether Wilkie Collins spent £426-16s-9d on Elizabeth Harriet's education.

| Date         | Recorded payee        | Amount              |
|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 16 Jan 1861  | Miss Milne            | £15- 8s- 6d         |
| 25 Jul 1861  | School Bill           | £15- 9s- 3d         |
| 23 Jan 1862  | Miss Milne            | £16- 4s- 6d         |
| 15 Aug 1862  | Miss Milne            | £17-17s- 6d         |
| 2 Feb 1863   | Miss Milne            | £18- 2s- 6d         |
| 14 Aug 1863  | Miss Milne            | £15-14s- 6d         |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>Farnham school</b> | <b>£98-16s- 9d</b>  |
|              |                       |                     |
| 31 Jan 1865  | Miss Cresswell        | £56-19s- 3d         |
| 6 Sep 1865   | Miss Cresswell        | £45- 4s- 6d         |
| 13 Feb 1866  | Miss Cresswell        | £49- 7s- 9d         |
| 5 Sep 1866   | Miss Cresswell        | £44-11s- 3d         |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>Miss Cresswell</b> | <b>£196- 2s- 9d</b> |
|              |                       |                     |
| 31 Jan 1867  | School                | £16-17s- 3d         |
| 16 Dec 1867  | School                | £40 — s — d         |
| 15 Jul 1868  | School                | £75 — s — d         |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>unknown school</b> | <b>£131-17s- 3d</b> |

The discovery that Elizabeth Harriet attended the boarding school in Farnham explains two puzzling references to that town in Wilkie's letters of this time. On October 5<sup>th</sup> 1860 he writes to his friend Charles Ward

“The train returns at such an inconvenient time, and takes so long about it, that we have given up the Farnham notion on Sunday.”<sup>7</sup>

And on a Friday in May 1861, probably 17<sup>th</sup>, he writes to Ward again

“The weather obliges me to keep this week open for going to Farnham”<sup>8</sup>

Previously the editors of Wilkie's letter had speculated that the reference to Farnham related to people with whom his mother stayed in 1844.<sup>9</sup> That explanation now seems unlikely.

The first reference to Farnham could have been a visit by her mother and Wilkie before their trip abroad. Or she may have started there at that time. And clearly they visited again in May 1861.

The bank accounts indicate six fairly equal half-yearly payments ending in August 1863. So it seems likely that Elizabeth Harriet started the school aged 9½ in the Autumn term of 1860 and left at the end of the summer term in 1863 aged 12½.

The fact that Elizabeth Harriet was at boarding school from the age of 9½ to 12½ left Wilkie and Caroline free to holiday together. On Saturday 14 October 1860, to celebrate finishing final work on *The Woman in White* in book format, Wilkie took Caroline to Paris for a fortnight. He wrote to his mother

“I am going abroad next week (probably). Only to Paris – first class all the way, with my own sitting-room at the best hotel when I get there – and every other luxury that the Capital of the civilized world can afford. No horseflesh for me – unless in the form of cookery, in which case (with a satisfactory sauce) I see no objection to it.”<sup>10</sup>

Wilkie paid £4 each for their 1<sup>st</sup> class return fare.<sup>11</sup> The “best hotel” was the Hotel Meurice in the rue de Rivoli and among the luxuries of Paris they ate at Les Trois Frères Provençaux, one of Dickens's favourite restaurants.<sup>12</sup>

Wilkie made no mention of Caroline, nor even used the pronoun ‘we’, in his letter to his mother. But a reply by Dickens to a lost letter of Collins's which was written from Paris shortly after they arrived shows that Caroline did go with him. She was very seasick, unlike Wilkie who never was. Dickens refers to “her gallant conduct on the ocean” and adds “I hope she will be able to report to me that you came up to the Parisian Scratch like a man.”<sup>13</sup>

The Farnham school confirms that Wilkie and Caroline holidayed alone in Paris to celebrate the end of fifteen months of very hard labour. It also explains how Caroline was free to accompany Wilkie on his trip to France and Germany from 13 April to 23 June 1863<sup>14</sup> without her daughter who was still at the boarding school.

Once that came to an end Elizabeth Harriet was free to accompany her mother and Wilkie<sup>15</sup> on a six-month trip to France and Italy from 3 October 1863 to the last week of March 1864.<sup>16</sup> She was just the age Wilkie had been when he went to Italy with his parents in 1836. It seems that she then returned to school with Miss Cresswell for the autumn term of 1864.

At the end of 1866 Wilkie went to Europe without Caroline or Elizabeth Harriet. It is possible that the small school fee in January 1867 is due to her staying at home with her mother while Wilkie was away. She eventually left school at the end of the summer term 1868 aged 17½.

On 9 March 1869 Wilkie paid Miss L Graves £30 – which could indicate Harriet Elizabeth – either for secretarial work or, rather late, for her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday on 3 February.

Paul Lewis  
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<sup>1</sup> RG9/72/146 p. 33

<sup>2</sup> William M. Clarke *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*, London, 1988, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> RG9/432/10 p. 13

<sup>4</sup> Birth Certificate of Elizabeth Harriet daughter of George Robert Graves and Elizabeth formerly Compton, at 11 Cumming Street, Clerkenwell, 3 February 1851.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkie opened his own bank account with Coutts on 23 August 1860 and kept it for the rest of his life. The accounts have been transcribed thanks to the kindness of the Coutts archives and Wilkie's great grand-daughter Faith Clarke.

<sup>6</sup> Marian Dawson born 4 July 1869 – see Wilkie Collins's will <[www.wilkiecollins.com](http://www.wilkiecollins.com)>, menu item 15.

<sup>7</sup> [0376] to Ward, 5 October 1860 *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins*, Baker, Gasson, Law and Lewis, London 2005 [BGLL], vol. I, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup> [0416] to Ward, [17] May 1861, BGLL, vol. I p. 233

<sup>9</sup> see [0021] to Harriet Collins, 28 August 1844 and [0022] to Harriet Collins, 4 September 1844, *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, Baker and Clarke, London 1999 [B&C], vol. I, pp. 22-24.

<sup>10</sup> [0375] to Harriet Collins, 3 October 1860, BGLL, vol. I, pp. 189-190.

<sup>11</sup> see [0378] to Ward, 10 October 1860, [B&C], vol. I, p.190.

<sup>12</sup> see Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, 24 October 1860, *Pilgrim*, vol. IX, p. 331.

<sup>13</sup> as footnote 12.

<sup>14</sup> see B&C and BGLL for that period and William Baker *A Wilkie Collins Chronology*, London 2007, p. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Most of the extant letters from Wilkie are to his mother and no mention is made of Caroline or her daughter. However, Wilkie refers to "Caroline and Carry" – which was by then the family name for Elizabeth Harriet – in [0558] to Ward, 2 November 1863, BGLL, vol. I, pp. 308-309. He also refers to Caroline and Caroline junior in [0566] to Ward 14 January 1864, B&C, vol. I, pp. 244-246. Both are also referred to in the final paragraph of a letter from Dickens to Collins on 24 January 1864 as "the Butler" and "the Missis" – *Pilgrim*, vol. X, p. 349.

<sup>16</sup> For the departure see [0555] to Harriet Collins 29-30 September 1863 "the arrangements for my departure on Saturday are all made." BGLL, vol. I, p. 305. And for the return, Dickens wrote to George Russell on 22 March 1864 "Wilkie was expected home yesterday, but has not yet reported himself." *Pilgrim*, vol. X, p.374. Wilkie wrote to W S Emden from Harley Street on 28 March 1864 "I have only just got back from abroad." [0569] BGLL vol. I, p. 314.