

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.

Family

The 1861 Census records four people in Wilkie’s household at 12 Harley Street.¹

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 on two 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 conclude 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).”²

But we now know that is wrong. Elizabeth Harriet was not at home on Sunday 7 April 1861, the night the Census was taken. She was 45 miles away at a boarding school in Surrey.

Farnham

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.³ The entry fits Caroline’s daughter perfectly. She was born Elizabeth Harriet Graves on 3 February 1851 in the parish of Clerkenwell, which is part of Islington.⁴

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.

The discovery that Elizabeth Harriet attended the boarding school in Farnham explains two puzzling references to that town in Wilkie's letters around this time. On October 5th 1860 he wrote 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.”⁵

Previously the editors of Wilkie's letter had speculated that the 'Farnham otion' referred to a visit to people with whom his mother stayed in 1844.⁶ That explanation now seems unlikely.

Instead it seems probable that this trip refers to the start of Elizabeth Harriet's education. The motivation for sending her away to school at this time may well have been that Wilkie and her mother wanted to go away together to Paris to celebrate the completion of fifteen months of almost continuous work on *The Woman in White*.

The Wednesday before the aborted trip to Farnham 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.”⁷

Wilkie says '(probably)' because he could only go away if Elizabeth Harriet was settled in her new school. That presumably happened on a weekday when the trains were more convenient. And on Saturday 14 October 1860 Wilkie took Caroline to Paris for a fortnight. He paid £4 each for their 1st class return fare.⁸ 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.⁹

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 from Collins 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.”¹⁰

One other reference to Farnham is found in Wilkie's letters. On a Friday in May 1861, probably 17th, he writes to Ward again

“The weather obliges me to keep this week open for going to Farnham”¹¹

No other visits are recorded. However, we know that Elizabeth Harriet spent two years at the Milnes' school from entries in Wilkie's bank account.¹² 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.

The Farnham boarding school explains how Caroline was also free to accompany Wilkie on his journey to France and Germany from 13 April to 23 June 1863.¹³ The trip was partly a celebration of the end of the hard work on *No Name*, the novel which followed *The Woman in White*. But both he and Caroline had been ill and Wilkie particularly was seeking a cure for various ailments. They headed for watering places, stopping at Aix-la-Chapelle and then travelled to Wildbad – which was to give him the scene for the opening of his next novel *Armada* – before returning via Strasbourg and Paris.

Further education

No more entries appear with the name of Miss Milne and it seems that Elizabeth Harriet was taken from the school for a rather special educational trip of her own. On 3 October 1863 she accompanied her mother and Wilkie¹⁴ on a six-month trip to France and Italy returning in the last week of March 1864.¹⁵ She was just the age Wilkie had been when he went to Italy with his parents in 1836.

When they returned it seems that Elizabeth Harriet went to another school run by a Miss Cresswell. No evidence has been found of the school or its location. But Wilkie's bank account records four entries made half-yearly at school term times to a Miss Cresswell. In all his entries over thirty years few payments are made to a 'Miss' and no others, apart from those to Miss Milne and Miss Cresswell, of this size or regularity. The payments are rather more than those to Miss Milne and the two years from late in 1864 to the summer of 1866 cost Wilkie nearly £200.

Although no more payments to Miss Cresswell are recorded three entries specifically labelled 'School' are found in 1867 and 1868. That could have been Miss Cresswell or another establishment.

The first payment to School appears in January 1867, when Elizabeth Harriet was almost 16. It is much smaller than the payments before and after it, perhaps because at the end of 1866 Wilkie went to Europe with his friend Edward Pigott leaving Caroline and Elizabeth Harriet behind. It is possible that the reduced fee in January is because she stayed at home with her mother while Wilkie was away.

The last of three payments to 'School' was made in July 1868, when Elizabeth Harriet was 17½. They still refer to her schooling as the first of Wilkie's own children with Martha Rudd was not born until 1869.¹⁶

Altogether Wilkie Collins spent £426-16s-9d on Elizabeth Harriet's education. Comparing prices in Victorian times with those of today is always difficult. But using the latest Long-term Indicator of Prices from the Office for National Statistics that amount represents almost £38,000 in total or £4,750 a year over the 8 years of her schooling.

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Payments for schooling from Wilkie Collins's bank account 1861-1868

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
TOTAL	Farnham school	£98-16s- 9d
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
TOTAL	Miss Cresswell	£196- 2s- 9d
31 Jan 1867	School	£16-17s - 3d
16 Dec 1867	School	£40 — s —d
15 Jul 1868	School	£75 — s —d
TOTAL	unknown school	£131-17s- 3d
GRAND TOTAL		£426-16s-9d

¹ RG9/72/146 p.33

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

³ RG9/432/10 p.13

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

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ [0375] to Harriet Collins, 3 October 1860, BGLL, vol.I, pp.189-190.

⁸ see [0378] to Ward, 10 October 1860, [B&C], vol.I, p.190.

⁹ see Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, 24 October 1860, Pilgrim, vol.IX, p.331.

¹⁰ as footnote 12.

¹¹ [0416] to Ward, [17] May 1861, BGLL, vol.I p.233

¹² 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.

¹³ see B&C and BGLL for that period and William Baker *A Wilkie Collins Chronology*, London 2007, p.123.

¹⁴ Most of the extant letters from Wilkie on this trip 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.

¹⁵ 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, .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.

¹⁶ Marian Dawson born 4 July 1869 – see Wilkie Collins’s will www.wilkiecollins.com, menu item 15.