



# The Marriage of William Wordsworth and Mary Hutchinson

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**W**illiam Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of England's greatest poets. A lifelong walker and passionate lover of the countryside, especially his native Lake District, his ideas about the spiritual value of landscape and natural beauty still drive the worldwide concept of national parks.

Much of the emotional intensity and profundity of his greatest work came from the extraordinary relationships he had with two women - his sister Dorothy and his wife, Mary Hutchinson.

Twenty-one months younger than William and separated from her brother as a child after the death of their mother when she was seven, Dorothy lived first with an aunt in Halifax and, later, grandparents in Penrith until her early twenties. When re-united with William in 1794 they immediately formed a deep emotional bond which lasted for the rest of their lives. Dorothy, highly sensitive and intelligent, became both inspiration and muse to her gifted brother. Mary Hutchinson, an orphan whom Dorothy met when she was a pupil at a 'Dame School' in Penrith, became her lifelong friend.

Like many comfortably-off young men of his time, after graduating from Cambridge University William travelled in Britain and mainland Europe, a freedom denied his sister. He took walking tours in Italy and Switzerland

and became obsessed with the radical ideas of the French Revolution. In 1791 he met and fell in love with Annette Villon, and, promising to marry her, fathered a child, Caroline. But the Reign of Terror in France forced him to return to England.

In 1795 William and Dorothy set up home together, first in Somerset, later in Grasmere. Mary, who now lived with her brothers and sister at Gallows Hill, near Brompton-by-Sawdon, was a frequent visitor.

With strong ties of love and friendship between the three, marriage between William and Mary seemed a natural step. It legitimised what was to be a platonic ménage-a-trois, in which sister, wife and poet shared a household.

In August 1802, when the international situation temporarily eased, William and Dorothy took what must have been a tearful, guilt-ridden trip to Calais to explain their forthcoming marriage and say farewell to Annette and Caroline, to whom William gave a small annuity. They then travelled to Mary's home at Gallows Hill for the wedding, arriving on 24th September.

Dorothy's journal gives a moving account of their wedding day on 4th October. The ceremony took place in Brompton's beautiful little church of All Saints, where a copy of the certificate can still be seen. Dorothy looked after the wedding ring, bought in France, keeping it safe on

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her own finger until the morning of the wedding, but was not present in church to witness the event. When the news reached her that the marriage had taken place she recalls: “I could stand it no longer and threw myself on the bed neither hearing nor seeing anything till Sara came upstairs to say, ‘they are coming’”.

Dorothy describes in detail the journey by carriage the threesome made ‘straight after breakfast’ from Brompton to Kirkbymoorside, where an official announcement was posted to the York Herald and time was spent deciphering gravestones, before continuing to Helmsley, where they spent the night. Descriptions of Helmsley Castle, Duncombe Park and Rievaulx Abbey follow. It was dusk when they reached Sutton Bank the next day and enjoyed views across Gormire Lake before arriving in Thirsk in darkness to find a bonfire in the Market Place to celebrate the local squire’s birthday, and every bed taken at the inn. They had to continue to ‘Leming Lane’ to find

a bed – at 11pm. The experience of the twilight ride down Sutton Bank inspired Wordsworth’s sonnet “Dark and more dark the shades of evening fell”.

It was a long, probably happy, marriage, despite the loss of William’s brother John in 1805 in a shipwreck, and the early death of two of their five children. Dorothy suffered a major debilitating illness in 1829 and remained an invalid for the rest of her life, but she outlived her brother, only dying in 1855. Mary died a few years later, in 1859.

Cynics have suggested that after his marriage, Wordsworth’s poetry never had the same intensity, radicalism and passion. But Dorothy and Mary undoubtedly made massive contributions to Wordsworth’s greatness as a poet – one his muse, the other his emotional anchor: a strange yet dynamic relationship which produced some of the greatest poetry in the English language. The relationship was at least formalised, if not celebrated, on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors.



### Find out more

All Saints Church, Brompton-by-Sawdon, has a copy of the marriage certificate of William Wordsworth and Mary Hutchinson.

Wordsworth’s life and contributions  
<https://wordsworth.org.uk/>

‘The Life of Wililam Wordsworth: A Critical Biography’,  
by John Worthen (Wiley & Sons, 2014)



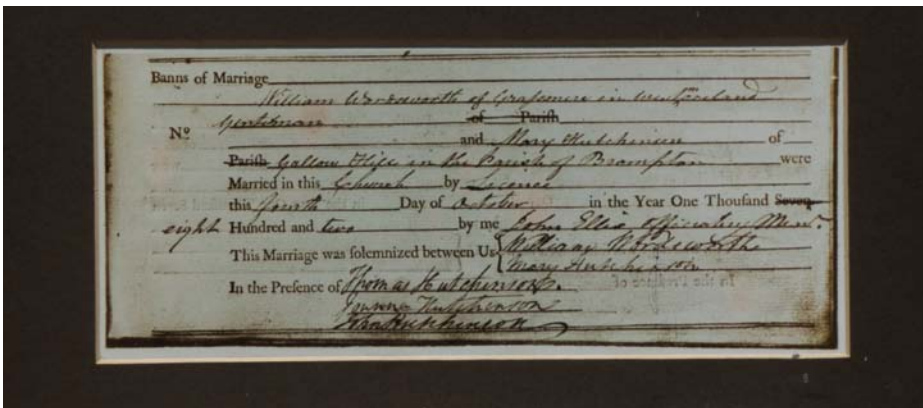
*All Saints Church, Brompton-by-Sawdon*



*William Wordsworth in 1798*



*The Nave, All Saints Church*



*William Wordsworth and Mary Hutchinson's Marriage Banns, All Saints Church*



*The view from Sutton Bank*