

How Newcastle helped bring Mothers' Union to light.



Historic Tales of a Grandmother, a Bishop and a Vision

150th Anniversary 1876-2026

A Grandmother, a Bishop and a Vision

Stories round the founding of Mothers' Union on its 150th Anniversary 1876-2026

1876 A grandmother's vision is born in a country parish.

1876 Parliament considers the vision for a new Diocese.

1876 The Swing Bridge is opened

Foreword by Revd. Anne Marr (Chaplain) December 2025

These historical notes are compiled mainly from a book jointly published in 1921 by Mary Porter, Mary Woodward and Lady Horatia Erskine entitled 'Mary Sumner, Her Life and Work'; also from stories sent by members.

Information about the Creightons in Embleton is from a book about the life and work of Revd Mandell Creighton. Notes about Bishop Ernest Wilberforce are from 'Memoirs of Ernest Wilberforce' by Emily Wilberforce.

I thoroughly enjoyed researching and hope you may enjoy reading some of the memoirs included and maybe find a few things you did not know.

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1876 The Swing Bridge is opened on the site of the original Roman bridge to allow ships further up-river, a sign of changing times.

Mary Sumner

Mary Elizabeth Heywood was born in 1828 at Hope End in Lancashire. Hers was a happy childhood / also a very happy marriage.

Mary married George Sumner in 1848, shortly after he was ordained. They lived in Old Alresford Rectory for 34 years, where they brought up three children – two daughters and a son. (*Heywood Sumner became an artist in the arts and craft movement and was a friend of William Morris. The Bee Garden is a well-known painting of his.*)

In 1885 they moved to Winchester when George became Archdeacon. He later became Bishop of Guildford.

Mary was very musical and had a beautiful voice. She led the church choir and played the organ. Horatio Erskine described Mary as having ‘a positive dispossession, who took ills as well as joys without self-pity.’ “*She never inflicted on herself or others the poisonous misery of unkind thoughts*”. One of her daughters said of her: ‘*The Rectory was always a cheery place for no grumbling was ever allowed. My mother would not permit it.*’

1876 The First Meeting. Mary Sumner, as a grandmother, held her first ‘Mothers’ Meeting’ to encourage young mothers, across all the social classes, to support each other in the challenges of parenthood and to bring up their children to know the blessings of Jesus Christ, and to be the Fathers and Mothers of the future on which the nation depends. In days when women had no legal rights, this was life-changing. She was so shy that her husband had to speak for her at the first meeting – but after that she found her courage. He reassured her with the words: ‘*Just share your heart – God will do the rest.*’

She designed a simple Membership Card for her group giving a message of encouragement, counsel on keeping the sacraments, and a prayer. Mary would say to them the words she told herself when she was a young mother: ‘*Be yourself what you would have your children be.*’

The Men’s Meetings. The weekly meetings for mothers were so much enjoyed that a request was made for a men’s meeting also. These were arranged – about 35 men met every Sunday evening and engaged in Bible study and home duties.

Mary recalled of these meetings, *“I ventured to speak to the men about their married lives and I told them, with a smile, that they doubtless said many pretty things to their wives before they were married, and they ought to show love and courtesy to them afterwards. I urged each one to give a little present to his wife on her birthday. The hint was taken and the wife of one of them told me when I next called on her, that her husband had bought her a lovely shawl on her birthday and put it round her shoulders and gave her his good wishes with a kiss. She said, ‘I couldn’t help crying for joy, because he had never done such a thing or spoken so lovingly to me since we were married.’” ‘Although I was intensely alarmed at taking such a meeting of men, I soon found it a real pleasure. They were so kind, grateful and responsive.’*

It was nine years before an opportunity came for Mary to widen her vision for a ‘Union of Mothers’ – at a time when they were moving from Alresford to Winchester where George was made Archdeacon.

Another key player in the story was **Revd Ernest Wilberforce**, grandson of William Wilberforce. He was a canon in Winchester and a close friend of the Sumners. He knew of Mary’s meetings. Ernest was to become the first Bishop of Newcastle, and later Bishop of Chichester.

Embleton

Meanwhile in Embleton, Northumberland, which was then still part of Durham Diocese, **Revd Mandell Creighton** was appointed Vicar (from 1875-1884). His wife, **Louise**, was a strong personality and as a ‘don’s wife’ in Oxford, she helped to organise lectures for women. She was very passionate about giving education rights and social respect for women.

In **1879**, Louise called her first **‘Mothers’ Meeting’** in the parish – in a similar style to those of Mary Sumner. She recorded that 10 women attended though it was very difficult to get them to talk. Her experience at these meetings helped her develop new skills as a speaker. Mandell and Louise later reflected that, *‘in coming to know the Northumbrians, they learned more about themselves.’*

Mandell Creighton left in 1884 to become Bishop of Peterborough and in 1897 became Bishop of London. In 1885 Louise co-founded the National Union of Women Workers and later became a strong supporter of the women’s suffrage movement.

Ernest Wilberforce

1882 Newcastle Diocese was formed, and City status granted.

Ernest Wilberforce became the first Bishop of Newcastle. He was also the youngest appointed bishop in the Church of England. St Nicholas Church was consecrated as the new Diocesan Cathedral in 1882. The adjacent parish – All Saints – was the poorest community in the town.

The Lantern Tower, which for generations had been a beacon to guide ships up the Tyne, and also through the new Swing Bridge, was now a symbolic beacon of light to guide the new Diocese through the mists of challenging development, and subsequently the growth of Mothers' Union.

Ernest had been deeply concerned about accepting Gladstone's call to become Bishop of a new Diocese of Newcastle. Not only had he and Emily become settled in their home in Winchester but fierce opposition to the proposed new bishopric had been given in the House of Commons by Joseph Cowen (Newcastle Chronicle) in 1876, on the grounds of the CofE records of wealth and neglect of the poor and needy. Only 4% of the population across the region were CofE.

It was said at the time 'Of the nine new dioceses which had been created since the year 1877 there was not one in which the initial difficulties were greater or the prospect less alluring than the see of Newcastle-on-Tyne.'

Yet, Gladstone's choice of Canon Wilberforce of Winchester was received well. The name in itself was enough to secure him a welcome in the North of England, where his grandfather's devotion to the cause of slaves was unforgotten by Englishmen of every creed and party.

It became the daunting task for Ernest Wilberforce to teach the people of Tyneside that the Church of England was no '*ring of parsons and bishops rolling in wealth and the privileges of the State but was capable of fulfilling Mr. Cowen's own ideal as 'a place of refuge for the weary, of shelter for the poor, of solace for the sick, of help for the desolate, and of tribuneship for the oppressed'*'. Long before his death Joseph Cowen acknowledged that his opposition to the Newcastle Bishopric had been a grave mistake, and he was as outspoken in his retraction as in his initial assault.

Raising funds for the living and work of the bishop was a daunting task, but with help from local benefactors, the see was eventually secured in 1882.

The enthronement was in Durham Cathedral, near St Cuthbert's tomb – the first time ever in Durham for such a ceremony.

Bishops House: Benwell Towers (aka 'Byker Grove') was gifted as a home for the Bishop by its owner, a Quaker (Mr JW Pease), and the two men remained firm friends. It was originally the summer residence with a chapel for the Priors of Tynemouth. It remained as 'The Bishop's House' for 6 bishops until after WW2 (during which it was used for Fire Service).

Given the poor standing of the Church of England in the region, Ernest Wilberforce worked hard to engage with and encourage clergy and parish communities. He had a free and easy manner, surprising many clergymen by conversing with them on an equal level, and was keen to foster good relationships with non-conformists.

During his daily walk to town and back, like St Aidan, he would speak with workmen along the way and became well known and respected. Ernest wrote about Northumbrians: 'The Northumbrian nature is strong and stubborn, but of all qualities that reach the heart of a north-country man, manliness and straightforwardness stand pre-eminent.'

*There is a local tale from Archdeacon Henderson: – 'Walking up from the cathedral one day with the Bishop, we passed a miner in Benwell Lane whom he saluted with a friendly 'Fine day !' The man turned, said nothing, but gave the Bishop a stolid stare by way of reply. 'There,' said the Bishop, 'that's what in Northumberland they call independence, and in the south rudeness!' I attempted explain that it was only surprise and astonishment - that the man was only shying at the Bishop's attire, which he probably had never seen before. 'All very well for you to make excuses,' he replied, 'but if that man's look meant anything, and it meant a good deal, it meant **'Who said it war'n't ? D'ye want to argify ?' ****

* English translation: 'Who said it wasn't (a fine day)? Do you want to pick an argument?'

The first Diocesan Conference was held in 1865 with the help of Revd Mandell Creighton of Embleton, who was made an Honorary Canon. The Bishop always referred to Newcastle as a 'Re-established Diocese', mindful of the history of the Bishops of Lindisfarne. Four key centres were recognised – Newcastle / Alnwick/ Hexham and Berwick.

Mission churches were established to reach people distant from their parish church. Daily prayer in church was urged. The number of ordinations and clergy in parishes were increased. Confirmations became widespread across the diocese, rising from 6,000 per year before the diocese was formed to 13,500 per year in the first 4 years.

Emily Wilberforce was Ernest's second wife, following the tragic early death of his much loved first wife, Frances. Emily proved to be a stalwart supporter of her husband and his work. They had 3 sons and 3 daughters. Emily became the first Diocesan President of MU in Newcastle Diocese.

Ernest and Emily were passionate about social welfare. As well as becoming the Diocesan Patron and President of Mothers' Union, they were the founders and joint presidents of the Diocesan Society for the Protection of Women and Children, and of the Refuge and Home of Mercy. They also founded the first Church High School for Girls.

1885, The Portsmouth Church Congress.

Ernest Wilberforce, as Bishop of Newcastle, was asked to address the women churchgoers. Emily Wilberforce later recorded the event...

'In 1885 the Church Congress was held in Portsmouth... and included a Mass Meeting For Women in the largest hall in the densely populated seaport. My husband (then Bishop of Newcastle) was asked to address this meeting. The hall was packed to overflowing and the sight moved him profoundly. On all sides were rows and rows of women, many of them with sad, anxious faces, or bearing the unmistakable sign of poverty's cold grip. He felt that a woman could speak to them with greater power of sympathetic understanding than even the best of the appointed speakers, who were all men.'

'...Women had not yet taken up the work of public speaking, and it was a sudden and quite unusual resolve that the Bishop took an 'inspiration of the moment' – when he went straight to Mrs Sumner, our friend of many years' standing, and asked her to speak.'

'She held up her hands in horror at the idea and her refusal was prompt and emphatic. Nothing daunted, he pleadingly insisted, and upon her protesting that her husband would dislike her speaking in public, the Bishop undertook to make it all right with him. Finally, placing his hands on

Mrs Sumner's shoulders, my husband gave her his blessing, and said that for that occasion he was her Bishop and therefore able to lay his commands upon her. Her hesitation was put behind her and she set herself to obey the call quite simply, though 'with a trembling heart' – as she herself wrote later.'

'The Chairman told the assembly that a woman who cared for them and wanted to help them in their trials and difficulties of daily life, would speak to them. She spoke with charm and earnestness and those who listened to her felt that the Holy Spirit was manifestly guiding and strengthening her in an undertaking which at that time called for no little courage.'

Some of Mary's address was preserved:

"My friends, as wives and mothers, we have a great work to do for our husbands, our children, our homes and our country, and I am convinced that it would greatly help us if we could start a Mothers' Union, wherein all classes could unite in faith and prayer, to try to do this work for God...."

"With His help and inspiration, we can conquer all difficulties and raise the Home-life of our Nation. Union is strength. United prayer gives miraculous strength, and mothers can be made powerful and successful in their sacred duties by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Let us help one another to come to Him; to lay all our cares before Him, and to look up into His loving Face. He will not send us empty away. He will most surely strengthen, help and comfort us in our Home-life here, and fit us to meet together, when our work is done, in His own Presence, before the Throne of God."

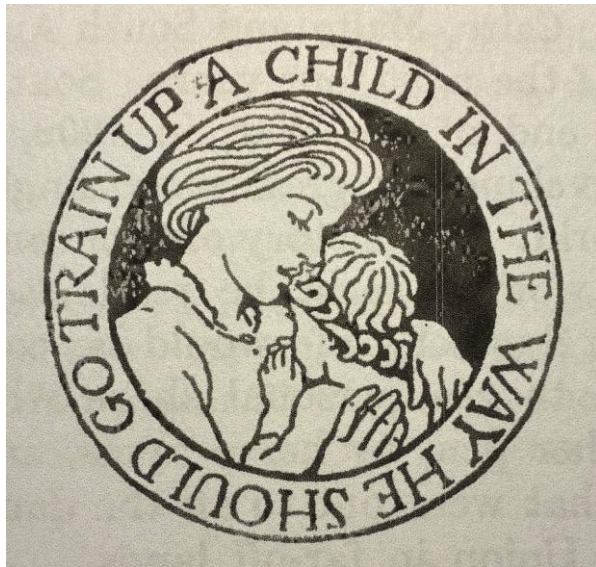
So it was that Mothers' Union was founded. The next day, Winchester Diocese adopted MU as a diocesan organisation. Mothers' Union spread quickly to Newcastle and four other Dioceses (Ely, Exeter, Hereford and Lichfield). Emily Wilberforce became the first Diocesan President of Newcastle MU in 1889 and many branches opened across the region.

Ernest left Newcastle in 1896 to become Bishop of Chichester. He died in 1907. In 1909 Emily accepted the nomination as MU London Diocesan President and then as MU Central President in 1916-1920.

Mothers' Union grows (the first 50 years)

In 1887 first Diocesan Conference was called in Winchester, at which the principles on which to build the work of Mothers' Union were agreed. MU had also been adopted by 17 other Dioceses.

The earliest badge of Mothers' Union



'The Mothers' Union Journal' was launched in 1888. This was to achieve a circulation of 100,000 by 1900. It later became **'Families First'**, more recently **'Connected'**.

1895. The Central Council of Mothers' Union was established, in London, with Mary Sumner as the Central President.

1897 Queen Victoria granted **Royal patronage** in her Diamond Jubilee Year

By 1900 there were 170,000 members in 28 dioceses. Branches had also been set up across the British Empire.

MU campaigned for social welfare changes, such as stopping children collecting alcohol from public houses and raising the Age of Marriage from 12 to 16. (At a time when unmarried girls with children were condemned and cast out, Mary cared for her niece and her illegitimate son.)

Mary was Central President until the spring of **1909**, when she resigned in order to care for her now frail husband; *'He and our home must come first'*. George died in December 1909, 16 months after their Diamond Wedding.

The role of Central President was taken by The Dowager Duchess of Chichester (1910-1916), then by **Emily Wilberforce** (1916-1920), whose son was killed during the war.

Mary continued her work with Mothers' Union, throughout the war years and after, campaigning for social changes. She encouraged members to have the courage to speak at meetings. Her own beautiful voice and awareness of the need to speak from the heart meant she was called on across the nation to speak to gatherings. In 1913, aged 84, she made an exhaustive tour round the towns in the North of England and spoke to a packed audience in Hexham.

Mary died on August 11th 1921, aged 92 years. 4,000 came to her funeral in Winchester Cathedral, where she is buried.

She is remembered by the church on **August 9th** as August 11th is the date the church remembers St Clare of Assisi. Interestingly it was on the 9th August that Mary, whilst failing rapidly, had a warm and wonderful vision of light and welcome. So it is perhaps appropriate to remember Mary on the day she experienced Christ's welcome home.

Her favourite hymn was Frances Havergal's '**Take my life and let it be**'

In 1925 Mary Sumner House, in Westminster, inaugurated by Emily Wilberforce in 1915, was opened by Princess Mary.

1926 – a Royal Charter was granted, when Queen Mary was Patron.

Changing Times.

Throughout its 150 years, MU members have adapted to the many social, legal and attitude changes in society, responding to increased awareness and understanding, and becoming increasingly project-focussed.

A revision of the **constitution in 1974** allowed MU to be inclusive of men and women, married or unmarried, and no longer excluded divorcees.

In 2000 the United Nations gave Mothers Union consultative status in its Economic and Social Council on issues such as poverty, gender equality, HIV and AIDS.

Today Mothers Union has 4 million members in 83 countries within the Anglican Communion.

Royal patronage has been sustained, with Queen Elizabeth as patron throughout her reign, now HRH Sophie, Duchess of Edinburgh.

In July 2025 the Worldwide President, **Kathleen Snow**, visited Newcastle – walking the streets in Benwell where Bishop Wilberforce once lived. She met people involved in the ‘Something Wonderful’ Community Project.

Mothers’ Union in Newcastle Diocese today

MU worldwide projects include Literacy and Community Building and Health Programmes. The annual ‘**Summer of Hope**’ Programmes – fund support for women in crisis-hit communities.

Rooted in **Prayer and Action**, branches support their local church ministry and mission, and several wider Diocesan projects. We aim to give support where little or no other funding is in place. Projects include **AFIA** (Away From It All), a nationwide initiative begun in 1965 to provide much needed holidays for families whose lives face adversity.

Other initiatives include seasonal support for the homeless, gifts for mothers and children in refuges, toiletry bags for hospital patients, hats for premature baby units, support for prisoners on release, equipment for community groups, grace bags for mothers of school starters, as well as providing warm, safe, community spaces in church and finding outlets for our creative skills for children, mothers, nursing homes, and church events.

Our key Campaigns are against Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Abuse, (in support of United Nations’16 Days of Activism’) and Mothers’ Union’s ‘Rise Up’ initiative. During 2026 MU is working in partnership with the Cathedral, Changing Lives and others to raise awareness of DA & GBV.



Our current theme is ‘**Join Us, Join In**’ and we love welcoming new members.