Margaret Waters: The Role of the Baby Farmer in Victorian Society

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The infamous Brixton Baby Farmer Margaret Waters was the perpetrator of a crime that is little known in the modern age: baby farming. The practice of baby farming in Victorian England involved paying a surrogate to take care of a child under the guise of an informal adoption. The money given to the surrogate was almost always not enough to support the child, therefore it was more profitable for the surrogate to pocket the money and let the child die. Using the case of Margaret Waters, we can study this phenomenon. However needlessly cruel this crime seems to be, this essay will attempt to discuss the issue of baby farming and will argue that the practice of baby farming was born from the needs of the unwed mother, the need and greed of the baby farmer, the consequences of the New Poor Law, and the lack of alternatives such as adoption.

To understand the Brixton Baby Farmer, we must analyze her case and crime. Waters took payment from individuals to take unwanted children. These children would often end up starving to death, or being abandoned. To ply her trade, she would put ads in the classified sections of newspapers and use a false name to pose as a married woman seeking a very young child to raise as her own. She would meet any interested parties in a neutral location in order to make the exchange. To keep the children docile during starvation, she used liberal amounts of laudanum, which also had the effect of suppressing appetite.

The Brixton Baby Farmer’s most well-known victim was the infant John Walter Cowen. He was an illegitimate child who was placed in Water’s care by his grandfather, Robert Tassie Cowen.[[1]](#footnote-1) His daughter, Janet Tassie Cowen, 17, had become pregnant out of wedlock. He had answered an advertisement seeking a child. In the ad, Waters posed as a well-off married couple seeking a young child to raise as their own.[[2]](#footnote-2) Waters received the child without payment and later spoke with Mr. Cowen after the exchange, expressing her delight with the young John.[[3]](#footnote-3) During this conversation, Cowen gave £2 to Waters for clothing she claimed that she was making for the child, and offered her more if he could visit John, a suggest to which Margaret was evasive.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On June 11, 1870, Cowen was brought to the residence of Waters by the police. Eleven children were found, many were in various states of neglect.[[5]](#footnote-5) Upon seeing the child Cowen, he remarked that it was nearly dead. Waters remarked that Cowen had only given her £2.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the instructions of the doctor at the scene, Cowen fetched a wet nurse in an attempt to save the child. An officer at the scene left to fetch a doctor. When both men returned, they found that Waters and Ellis had attempted to hide their crime by cleaning and dressing the children.[[7]](#footnote-7) After being removed from Waters’ custody, John Walter Cowen died two weeks later, on June 24.[[8]](#footnote-8) Four other infants did not survive.[[9]](#footnote-9) Waters was charged with the death of John Walter Cowen and her sister, Sarah Ellis, was charged as an accomplice to the crime.[[10]](#footnote-10) Waters was found guilty of murder and was hung on October 11, 1870.[[11]](#footnote-11) Sarah Ellis was tried a second time for fraud related to baby farming. Ellis plead guilty and was sentenced to 18 months’ hard labour.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It may seem strange in the modern era that women would be open to placing their children with these shady characters, but we must remember that the stigma of being an unwed mother was much greater during this period, and the options to resolve an illegitimate child were few. Although the Victorians were not as obsessed with denying sexual urges as is often portrayed in popular culture, they still deeply frowned upon sexual activity outside marriage. Women were at a severe disadvantage when it came to views on pre-marital sex. While men were expected to show restraint, they also faced little to no accountability for their sexual behaviour (so long as it was not considered ‘deviant’). Women, on the other hand, were thought of as gatekeepers to male sexuality; they were supposed to be able to lead men away for temptation, and if she had been sexually active before marriage, regardless of her consent in the act, she had failed in the role of gatekeeper and had tempted men to sin.[[13]](#footnote-13) Having a child out of wedlock was concrete proof that the mother had been sexually active. It was thought that “the infant at her breast was her stigma, her burden, her curse”[[14]](#footnote-14) for the sin of premarital sex. Therefore, unwed mothers were considered to be promiscuous and lacking in morals by nature by the Victorians. The Cowens faced this situation. Robert Tassie Cowen had sought the services of Margaret Waters because his daughter, Janet Tassie Cowen, had become pregnant out of wedlock at 17.[[15]](#footnote-15) Clearly he thought that Waters would adequately provide for the child, but the fact remains that he sought to conceal his illegitimate grandson so that his daughter would not face public scrutiny.

Unwed mothers faced more than just societal hurdles, if they had been deserted, they had no financial support. Passed in 1834, the New Poor Law’s most famous product was the Victorian workhouse.[[16]](#footnote-16) A common assumption made by Victorian society was that poverty was the product of idleness.[[17]](#footnote-17) Therefore, those in need of relief had to work for it. The law stipulated that those in need of relief that were able-bodied could only receive assistance if they went to the workhouse.[[18]](#footnote-18) The prospect of entering a workhouse was considered a great humiliation and to be avoided at all cost.[[19]](#footnote-19) The New Poor Law also divested a woman of the ability to seek aid from the father of her child if the child was illegitimate, consequently the entire burden of caring for and financially supporting the child fell to the mother.[[20]](#footnote-20) Terminating the pregnancy was also not an option for working class women, as abortion was illegal and, if one sought to have the procedure preformed secretly, both costly and frequently deadly.[[21]](#footnote-21) Therefore, it is not surprising that drastic measures were taken by the destitute to avoid such a fate, such as reducing the number of mouths one had to feed, or finding less honest means of income. Baby farming was an answer to both problems, and the unwed mother became their most common customer. Another answer to the problem was infanticide, which will be discussed in more detail later. Although the sentence was not used after 1849, if convicted of murdering her child, a woman could still technically receive the death penalty. Placing the child in someone else’s care was not illegal, even if the child died. The combination of these factors created a uniquely Victorian answer to the problem of illegitimate children: If unwed mothers faced social persecution and financial destitution, the simplest solution was to get rid of the child. Baby farming offered an affordable solution for the mothers of the age.

Next, we must examine the motives and means of the Victorian baby farmer. The rise of baby farming can be addressed from an economic perspective as well through the laws of supply and demand. The price of caring for an illegitimate child in terms of finances and social consequences was too much for many women to bear. This created a demand for a solution to this hardship; the practice of baby farming was merely a response to this demand. Individuals such as Margaret Waters took advantage of this need to conceal illegitimate children and made a profit. However, one could not expect to make a profit if they were adequately caring for these children, therefore infants were often neglected, starved and killed. In terms of supporting herself, Margaret Waters was a woman with very few options. Her husband had died, leaving her a widow.[[22]](#footnote-22) Widows did not receive any type of financial aid under the New Poor Law.[[23]](#footnote-23) She had trouble supporting herself, there was no means of financial aid that Waters could access without having to enter the workhouse, which was painstakingly avoided by most everyone. Therefore, we can make an educated guess that Waters likely turned to baby farming as a means of income to avoid destitution.

Another factor that allowed baby farmers to practice their trade was the prevalence of infanticide during the Victorian period. The crime of infanticide was on the rise in Victorian England. For most of the 1800s, half of the recorded infanticides in the United Kingdom took place in London.[[24]](#footnote-24) This was likely due to factors such as the large population and the ease of concealing a crime in a place where a person could be easily overlooked, such as the London slums. Many argued that the rise of infanticide was a direct result of the New Poor Law, as the law limited a woman’s right to seek aid from the child’s father and made it so the only government aid that could be received by an unwed mother was contingent on her entering a workhouse.[[25]](#footnote-25) Due to this, the death rate for illegitimate infants was two times higher than the mortality of legitimate children.[[26]](#footnote-26) And the supply of illegitimate children never ran low. The belief that those who cannot afford a child or are not married is an idea that prevails to this day, but although such beliefs are widely applied, they are rarely practiced. Quite simply, it was easy for a baby farmer to find a customer. Once the farmer had the payment for the child, it was more profitable to murder the baby through neglect and starvation rather than spend the money for its intended purpose. Due to the high mortality rate, the death of a young child was not as suspicious. Newborns and young infants were most likely to become the victims of a baby farmer, as it was more plausible for a very young child to die naturally.[[27]](#footnote-27) As infant mortality was not unusual, baby farmers could quietly work for years. These conditions led to the creation of an industry of child neglect and abuse for unwanted children.

In terms of payment, the baby farmer would either receive a lump sum for the infant, or occasionally in the form of regular installments, in order for the farmer to prolong the profitability of the child in her care.[[28]](#footnote-28) The child would generally live longer, but meet the same fate as the lump-sum children; a slow starvation. In the case of Margaret Waters, she had waived her fee of £4 for taking in John Walter Cowen, although she later received £2 at Robert Cowen’s insistence.[[29]](#footnote-29) Baby Cowen was a lump-sum baby, which is likely one of the reasons he did not survive and Waters was reluctant to have Robert Cowen visit; he was deteriorating quickly.

Baby farmers also had tools to make the children in their care less fussy. A so-called ‘tool of the trade’ for a baby farmer was Laudanum. An opium derivative, Laudanum was a common tool of the baby farmer, as it kept babies quiet without needs such as feeding being attended to. The drug was comprised of two components: Opium and alcohol. The usual percentage of opium powder in the concoction was ten percent.[[30]](#footnote-30) The product was readily available to the Victorians until the passing of the Poisons Act of 1868, which was also known as the Pharmacy Act.[[31]](#footnote-31) The act started to set standards and limit the dispensing of opium and opium products to the public. However, by 1870, little effort was needed to obtain the drug. Laudanum was used for many things, with one of the more popular uses for the product being to calm infants. Laudanum, or “mother’s helper” as it was also known, was widely marketed to parents as a “soothing syrup” for their children for many years. However, it was very easy to give a child too much of the drug and doctors cautioned against giving children opium-derived medication. We know that Margaret Waters regularly applied opium to her charges, as the court record states that laudanum was found at the scene of the crime and the children at the scene were in a stupor and the doctor claimed that a contributing factor to the death of the children in her care was Laudanum.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Overall, it was easy for a baby farmer to practice their trade in London. The size of the city gave one more anonymity, the rates of infanticide and child mortality were high, there were always customers, and there were tools such as laudanum to hasten the process. This perfect storm of conditions created a thriving industry based on child neglect profit. Margaret Waters merely took advantage of the system to make a profit and stay out of the workhouse.

Finally, we will address the solution to the problem of unwed mothers being unable to care for their children: adoption. Victorian England did not have a legal adoption system until 1926.[[33]](#footnote-33) Until 1888, no parent could relinquish their rights, and no adult could gain them.[[34]](#footnote-34) This made informal adoption a less appealing option for couples who wanted a child because the birth parent could seek to reclaim the child at any time. The ‘foundling’ system practiced in continental Europe was not used in England.[[35]](#footnote-35) The practice allowed a person to anonymously leave infants at churches, where the child would be cared for. This was likely due to the system being operated by the Catholic Church, which England actively distanced itself from during the Protestant Reformation.

Although informal adoption was more common among the working class, many Victorians who believed in the purity movement opposed adoption, as they thought that children who were born out of wedlock were believed to have inherited the lax morals of their mothers, and therefore would lead immoral lives regardless of their upbringing.[[36]](#footnote-36) They also saw these children as a sort of punishment for the sins of the mother, and that the unwed mother should not be relieved of hardship. The lack of a formal adoption system, the insecurity of the rights of adopted parents, and the stigma against children born out of wedlock made unwed mothers and illegitimate children one of the most vulnerable groups in Victorian society. Baby farmers such as Margaret Waters exploited these groups in order to make a profit and provide a ‘solution’ to the problem of illegitimate children.

In conclusion, baby farming was a product of the Victorian era. The children were easy targets as unwed mothers often received no social or financial relief and child mortality was high. The institution of baby farming was the result of a society that vilified premarital sex, greatly restricted financial aid through the New Poor Law, and did not have a system to care for unwanted illegitimate children. These factors allowed baby farmers to exploit both unwed mothers and babies for profit. The case of Margaret Waters is no different. Her motive was financial so that she would not have to turn to the workhouse for survival. Her methods of silencing and starving her charges with laudanum were characteristic of the crime and she preyed on young women who were desperate. Her arrest and execution led to greater public awareness of baby farming. Thankfully, in the modern era, most single mothers in the western world can find support and have choices, which is the reason that the crime of baby farming is no longer an issue.

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