

# Mary Wheatland

## Bathing Machine Operator and Lifeguard

### 1835-1924

#### Summary

Mary Wheatland was known for many years as an operator of bathing machines in Bognor. She came to Bognor in 1849 and worked as assistant to Mrs Martha Mills, bathing woman. Mary then gave swimming lessons and operated bathing machines in Bognor, before giving up swimming in 1906 at the age of 71 due to rheumatism. She was said to have saved more than 30 people from drowning, and was awarded bronze and silver medals by the Royal Humane Society. She was buried in South Bersted churchyard.

Detailed information is available on the Bognor Regis Local History Information website:

<http://www.bognor-local-history.co.uk/index.html>

<http://www.bognor-local-history.co.uk/article18.html>

Extract:

Mary Wheatland was born in 1835 in Aldingbourne and moved to Bognor and eventually married in 1857. There is an interesting newspaper article from 1864 which reports that Mary had been employed by Mrs. Mills and a Mrs. Pipson since she was 14 years of age, it then continues that Mary 'begs to inform the Ladies and Public generally visiting this town that she is now engaged by Joseph Ragless, whose machines are situated near the Beach Inn where she will pay every attention to those who may favour her with their support.'

Mary Wheatland has been the only Bognor personality to be immortalised on postcards, of which there were many produced. W.P. Marsh, the famous Bognor photographer, produced one such postcard. This card had a copy of an article which discussed 'Bognor's mermaid' when she was 72 years of age. This article reported, 'a little old woman stands on the parade of Bognor looking out to sea. She is clad in a rough blue serge costume on the bodice of which two lifesaving medals are pinned.

A battered sailor hat, bearing her name in gold letters, is tied under her chin with black ribbons. The weather beaten face is crumpled up into a network of smiles.' This is certainly the view seen in all the photographs of this lady.

But what of the bathing machines that could be seen drawn up on the back of the shingle on the beach either side of the Pier. To the east of the Pier were those belonging to Mary and many of the pictures clearly show swimming costumes and towels available for hire, laid on the wall of the promenade drying out. The children I have met recently were quite intrigued as to why anyone should want, or have need to hire a costume, as most of them seemed to have in excess of two bathing costumes. These children also could not really understand that many of the children who used these machines would perhaps only come to the seaside one day a year hence the need for hiring a costume. A far cry from the trips that our children today have to the beach, or even their trips aboard.

<http://www.bognor-local-history.co.uk/article23.html>

The Parish Church of Bognor, St. Mary Magdalene

Another person buried here is Mary Wheatland, the famous bathing lady who was taken to her final resting-place by the Bognor fishermen in April 1924.

Coming from a large family there are still many of Mary's descendants in the town. In 1999 a group of Mary's family had a ceremony to commemorate the seat, which was placed on the outside of the church wall for weary travellers. It is the first permanent memorial to her and was provided by the Bognor Regis Town Council.