In times gone by, bearing an illegitimate child could mean disgrace and poverty following a woman throughout her life. Similarly the child could carry a stigma.

Our Parish Registers show many illegitimate children were born here; the old Castleton names come tumbling out – Barber, Hall, Eades, Royse and Dakin to name but a few.

Named at Baptism

Many different terms were used by our old vicars for a child being born out of wedlock when they were christened.

In the 1700s words such as “bastard”, “base-born”, “natural”, or just “illegitimate” were used;


“Barbara daughter of Sarah Mortin (illegitimate)” and “Mary daughter of Margaret Dakin (illegitimate)” baptised in 1792. Register of baptisms & burials 1783-1812. D1432 A/PI 1/3.

St Edmund’s Church circa 1870 - wherein hundreds of old inhabitant’s baptisms have taken place. ©Castleton Historical Society.
Illegitimate, buried and poor.

Sadly, even when your child died her birth status could be noted as she was buried;

“Mary daughter of Hannah Eades (illegitimate).” Mary was buried in Castleton Churchyard on 10th September 1797 – around 18 months old. Hannah herself had been illegitimate too – baptised 18th October 1772 to mother Anne Eades.

If you were illegitimate and also poor this could be recorded, such as the baptism of “Mary daughter of Elizabeth Heely (illegitimate of pauper)” in 1789. They may have been forced to live in the Poor House, sometimes their only refuge in these circumstances. Poor Houses in Castleton around this time stood off Back Street where the school and yard are today.

Mary D. of Elizabeth Heely (illegitimate of pauper) baptised 15th February 1789.
Register of baptisms & burials 1783-1812. D1432 A/Pl 1/3.

Mothers named and shamed.

In the 1800s the terms “spinster” and “single woman” would be applied to the mother at her child’s Baptism.


Baptism of Hannah
Elizabeth, daughter of Ann Dane “single woman” on 25th November 1866.
Current in-use Baptisms Register.

Ann Dane of Castleton (above) was a 17 year old servant when she gave birth to her illegitimate daughter, Hannah Elizabeth, in 1866. The child lived with Ann’s parents, Arnold Dane, a blacksmith, and his wife Hannah at Cave (Dale) End.
Filiation and Bastardy Papers – making the fathers pay.

Sometimes the name of the “supposed” father would be written in the parish register, using terms like “putative” and “spurious”.

An early fragment from the Baptism Register; 1650 – Jacoby Bredbury, son “putat” (supposedly) of Roger Bredbury. Register of baptisms, marriages & burials 1647-1650. D1432 A/PI 1/2

When the name of the father was known he could be made to pay for the upkeep of the child, by a Court if necessary, to ensure he accepted his responsibility.

Bastardy Papers would be served by the Overseers of the Poor, otherwise the Parish would have to pay.

Derby Mercury 15th October 1795. Image ©The British Library Board. All rights reserved. http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000052/17951015/004/0001
Jane Bullock of Castleton had an illegitimate son, Isaac. He was baptised 14th October 1781. The child’s father was John Hyde; he was served with Bastardy Papers in 1782. The couple married in Castleton Church in 1783; Jane died five years later in 1788.

If the father didn’t pay up he would be sent to prison. James Dakin of Castleton found himself likely to spend three months in Derby Gaol in 1845 for “bastardy” if he didn’t settle up;

Joseph Beverley of Castleton was made to pay two shillings a week for the maintenance of his illegitimate child in 1864;

Clarissa Hall took John Hibbert to Court to ensure support for her child – he had been promising to marry her after she gave birth to his illegitimate child, Mary, in 1871. They finally married in 1872.
Alice Amelia Barber

Alice Amelia was born in 1857 to twine spinner Edward Barber, and his second wife, Mary. The family lived at The Walk, Castleton.

This house has also been referred to as Primrose Hill, but “Walk” refers to it once being a Rope Walk, reflecting the family trade.

The Barber family at home at “The Walk”. Hannah (left), Alice Amelia (right) and Edwin circa 1900.

By 1881, twenty three year old Alice Amelia was still unmarried and working as a laundress. She had also given birth to her first illegitimate child – Henry Barber, baptised in January 1881.

Henry Barber baptised in Castleton Church 16th January 1881 to Alice Amelia Barber “single woman”. Current in-use Baptisms Register.


Still unmarried, Alice Amelia had a second illegitimate child, Margaret Ann, born in 1885.

Margaret Ann Barber circa 1911. ©Castleton Historical Society.
Henry Barber married Sarah Partington; their daughter, Winnie Barber, many of us may remember well. She was a tall elegant lady known for her singing in the church choir.

Winnie records that her father, Henry, was brought up by Mary Barber, and that Alice Amelia Barber (Mary’s half-sister) was his “real” mother.

This was borne out by the Baptisms Register.

Mary Barber (daughter of Edward Barber and his first wife Barbara Dakin) circa 1900 - she brought up young Henry Barber.

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The Schoolmaster and Hannah Hall

John Essex was our Schoolmaster from January 1883; he resigned in January 1885.

During his time here he made the acquaintance of Miss Hannah Hall. Hannah bore an illegitimate child which was alleged to be his.

The only record I can find of the baptism of a child to “single woman Hannah Hall” is that of Isaac Reynolds Hall; baptised in July 1885, which fits John Essex in the time-frame.

Castleton School early 1900s. ©Castleton Historical Society.
At the Chapel-en-le-Frith Petty Sessions the following year he was called to show why he should not contribute to the upkeep of the illegitimate child.

Neither Hanna Hall nor John Essex turned up at the hearing but Sergeant Gray of Castleton told the Court the couple had settled the matter between themselves.

The child died in December 1888, aged 3.

**The Reeve Family**

John and Martha Reeve lived in Little Hucklow; however they appear in the 1851 Castleton Census staying in the Market Place. They had connections with the Whittingham family, rope makers of Castleton. The Reeves had two daughters, Hannah* and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth married Samuel How, boot and shoemaker of Castleton, in St Edmund’s Church in 1875; Samuel at 57, being some twenty years older than Elizabeth.

They lived at Townhead in Castleton.
Elizabeth had already had an illegitimate daughter, Mary Reeve, born around 1858. The family believed John Hadfield to be her father. Elizabeth died in 1884, aged 46, and is buried in Castleton Churchyard.

Mary Reeve worked at the Cheshire Cheese Inn as a domestic servant and barmaid when her uncle, George Whittingham, was landlord in the 1870s/1880s.

She too went on to have an illegitimate child of her own, Alice Ann Reeve, who was baptised here in Castleton Church in 1881. Mary would never say who the father of Alice was.

Both Mary and her daughter Alice went on to have successful marriages and families. Alice’s grandson, Mr Harry Lees, has kindly allowed us to share their photographs and story.

*Hannah Reeve married George Whittingham in 1861; they were the grandparents of Castleton’s well-known Dolly Medwell of Russett Well who died in 2003 aged 101 – more on this family another time.
In conclusion, it seems that if a woman bearing an illegitimate child had the support of her family, the child’s father, or even a husband, then all could be well; unlike the sad story of Alice Brocklehurst in 1832.

Alice worked as a servant at the Nag’s Head Inn - finding herself pregnant and rejected by lead miner Robert Eyre, she took her own life instead of facing an uncertain future and disgrace.

Today, of course, it simply wouldn’t matter.

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Kay Harrison, July 2015.