

BRADFORD MADE
Heritage Brought to Life
Stories from Bradford's Communities

KS 2/3 (AGE 9-14)
Activity Pack

BEHIND THE BRONTËS

The Life of Nancy de Garrs



LOCAL STORIES

FOR LEARNERS



BRADFORD 2025
UK City of Culture

PACK AT A GLANCE

Using research from the Brontë Parsonage Museum, this resource uncovers the life of Nancy de Garrs, who started working for the Brontë family at the age of thirteen as a Nanny and later as a housekeeper. Despite her connection with this famous family in her youth, her life was a difficult one, and she died in poverty in the Bradford Workhouse.

Through her story and her close connection to the Brontë family, learners will explore themes such as the invisibility of working-class women's labour within broader histories and the power of the Yorkshire landscape.

This pack includes a specially commissioned short story by writer Kristina Diprose, with sketches by Bradford-based illustrator Scarlett Bunting. Using these as a source of inspiration, learners will be invited to create their own piece of creative writing that engages with the themes that emerge from Nancy's story.

Recommended for: Ages 9-14 (Upper Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 learners)

Includes: Discussion prompts / Creative investigations / Short story / Creative writing activity / Art activity

Links to: History / Heritage / English/ Creative Writing / Local learning

NANCY'S TALE

A Hidden Life with the Brontës

Introducing Nancy

Most people won't have heard of Nancy De Garrs, but her life was closely connected to the most famous writing family in Yorkshire: the Brontës. The Brontë sisters – Charlotte, Emily, and Anne – wrote novels in the 1800s that are now considered English classics. Living alongside them, caring for them, and playing with them during childhood was another girl, Nancy, whose life took a very different path.

Nancy Meets the Brontës

In 1816, not long after the birth of his third daughter, Patrick Brontë, a Vicar from Thornton, Bradford, contacted the Bradford Industrial School. He asked if there was a suitable girl to help care for his wife and three young children. Nancy de Garrs, a 13-year-old, was recommended for the position. She was the eldest of 12 children and had lots of experience caring for her younger siblings. Nancy was employed and moved in with the Brontës – a moment that connected her with what would become one of England's most iconic families.

School and Early Life

We know an awful lot about the Brontë family, but what do we know about Nancy? Records show she was born in 1803 in Westgate, Bradford. Like most ordinary working-class families of the time, we have little information about the Garrs. Local records tell us that Nancy attended the Bradford Industrial School along with her younger sister, Sarah. The school was a place where the sisters would have learned the hard work of domestic chores and drudgery. It is likely the De Garrs family was struggling, as usually only children from families with parents in the workhouse or living in poverty were sent there, as it was such a harsh place. Families who had enough space and income would often keep children at home in these times. These 'schools' were unrecognisable from what we have now, punishments were severe, food was scarce, and skills were taught to girls such as sewing, knitting, and reading – in that order!



Patrick Brontë © Brontë Parsonage Museum

A Growing Family

Nancy was sent to live with the Brontës in their small Thornton home, leaving her school and her sister behind. Her role was to cook, clean, and care for the children – Mariah, Elizabeth, and baby Charlotte. Soon, two more children were born: Branwell in 1817 and Emily Jane in 1818. The Brontës then asked for Nancy's sister, Sarah, to join the household too, a sign that they must have been pleased with Nancy's work and how she settled into her role. With Sarah's arrival, Nancy became a cook and assistant housekeeper. The last child, Anne, was born in 1820.

Off to Haworth

In April 1820, the Brontës moved to Haworth, where Patrick had taken a new job as Minister of St Michael and All Angels Church. The new parsonage was bigger than their previous house and is now the Brontë Parsonage Museum. Sadly, just 18 months after moving, their mother, Mariah Brontë, died from cancer. Nancy and Sarah cared for her during her illness and supported the children through their grief when she died.



The Great Bog Burst of Crow Hill

A dramatic scene in the children's lives that we know Nancy was involved with was the great Crow Hill Bog burst of 2 September 1824. Nancy and Sarah had taken the three youngest siblings, Branwell, Emily, and Anne, out up onto the moors for some fresh air. They were about 2 miles from home when a storm blew up, and they heard a thunderous sound, rumbling and roaring. Terrified, the Gars sisters saw Ponden Hall in the distance and dashed with the children there to shelter. A vast amount of rain had saturated the peat in the bog at nearby Crow Hill, causing a natural disaster, a landslide of peat and mud that destroyed bridges, walls, and uprooted trees. Patrick, two miles away, heard this as a 'deep and distant explosion' which made the house tremble and the glass in the windows shake. It was so loud in fact, that it was heard as far away as Leeds. Patrick ran out in search of his children and found them sheltering with Nancy and Sarah in the porch at Ponden Hall; they had potentially saved the children's lives, thanks to their quick thinking! The landscape was a great inspiration for some of the novels the Brontës went on to write, and this must have been a core memory, as it was such a rare and unusual event, upsetting the entire local community and farmlands.

Imaginations Running Wild

Life wasn't always as dramatic as the Great Bog Burst, so the young Brontës would use their imaginations to make their own fun at home. Years later, Sarah recalled Charlotte telling stories about a fairy she believed she saw on her young sister's cot. All of the children often created long, imaginative tales inspired by their father's Irish stories or even adverts in newspapers. Nancy and Sarah usually joined in their games, helping act out characters and adventures.

Losing a Job and Starting a Family

In 1824, Patrick Brontë replaced Nancy and Sarah with a single older servant to save money. After eight years with the family, it must have been difficult for the sisters to leave and adapt to an independent life. Nancy became a dressmaker, a likely next step after making the Brontë children's clothes. In 1830, aged 27, she married John Wainwright and had two children, naming the first Emily Jane, most likely after Emily Brontë. Sadly, her second child, Hannah, died in infancy.

Losing a Husband

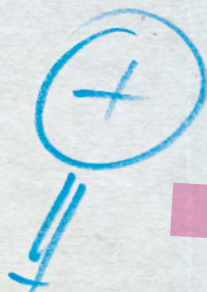
John worked at Titus Salt's Union Street Mill as an Engine Tenter. In 1838, he suffered a fatal accident at the mill and died tragically the next day. Nancy was left a widow with no real income. Titus Salt paid for the funeral, and a small payment came from a Friendly Society, only worth around £75 today. The 1841 census shows Nancy living again with her sister Sarah and her children, supporting one another.

Later Life

In 1844, Nancy remarried, this time to John Malone, an Irish wool warehouse worker. They lived in Bradford until he died in 1881. Like many working-class people of the time, Nancy became poorer with age. In 1884, at the age of 81, she entered the Bradford Workhouse, where she died in poverty, despite her once-close connection to the famous Brontë family.

A Legacy

Nancy and Sarah were far more than just servants – they were key figures in the Brontë children's emotional development, especially after losing their mother. They were kind, dependable, and playful influences in the household. While they were lucky to find a family that appreciated them, perhaps the Brontës were even more fortunate to have had the De Garrs sisters in their lives?



Now let's

'Investigate': →



INVESTIGATE



Nancy in the spotlight

- Work in pairs to pick out the six most important events in Nancy's life – feed back and justify your choices.
- What different roles did Nancy have over the course of her life? E.g., Sister, servant...
- What three questions would you ask Nancy if she walked into the room right now? E.g., How did it feel to start work at age 13?

Hot-seating Nancy:

Ask your questions and improvise Nancy's responses (Educator in role as Nancy or learner in role or in pairs or small groups – a shawl would be a simple and effective way to help 'bring Nancy to life'). Think carefully about how she might have responded and what she might have felt deep down about her different experiences. Remember, she was living around 200 years ago – how might her identity as a working woman from a poor background have shaped her?

What information is missing? What else would we need to know? Why do we think there are lots of 'gaps' in Nancy's story? How are the details of people's lives from 200 years ago usually recorded and remembered?

Working Women

Some people think that women did not work outside the home until the 20th century and that their roles were limited to wives and mothers, but this isn't true!

Women have had jobs throughout history. From ancient Rome to the Viking era, medieval England to Victorian Britain, women have worked in a range of industries, including trade, agriculture, service, and textile production.

By the eighteenth century, historians estimate that up to 90% of women worked outside the home before and after marriage, including women who ran their own businesses independently of their husbands!

Charlotte Brontë – A Biography

*"I'm just going to write
because I cannot help it,"*

Charlotte Brontë's journal entry, 1836

Charlotte was born in the village of Thornton, Bradford, in April 1816. One of six children, she grew up in the nearby town of Haworth, where her Father, Patrick Brontë, was the vicar at the church. Charlotte's mother, Maria, died of cancer when Charlotte was just eight, and soon after that, Charlotte and some of her sisters were sent to board at the 'Clergy daughters' school in Lancashire. The Brontë sisters were badly mistreated at the school, and conditions were very harsh, with not enough food or warmth. Sadly, Charlotte's two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, died of Tuberculosis there.



Charlotte Brontë © Brontë Parsonage Museum

Charlotte then returned home, and her father encouraged her and her siblings to read widely, draw, paint, write stories and poetry, and spend lots of time playing outside and exploring the moors near their home in Haworth. Charlotte read a vast variety of books and loved writing. By the time she was a teenager, Charlotte (along with her siblings Emily, Anne, and Branwell) had written hundreds of stories and poems.

The Brontë family had a secure home in Haworth, but they were not rich, and Charlotte had to work to help support the family. She spent some time working away from home as a teacher, but she did not enjoy it and longed to return home and work on her stories.

In 1846, Charlotte and her sisters published a book of poems, but they used the names 'Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell' instead of their real names. They also sent the book to London by post rather than taking it in person to avoid attention. Charlotte (under the name Currer Bell) was then able to publish *Jane Eyre*, which became a huge bestseller and has been massively popular ever since. Many people think that the fact that 'Currer Bell' could have been a man's name helped Charlotte to get her books published at a time when there were a lot of negative attitudes about women expressing themselves creatively. Emily and Anne Brontë also became successful writers, and the sisters were able to make enough money from their writing that they did not need to do other jobs. Eventually, they all started to use their real names on their work.

Sadly, all of Charlotte's siblings died very young, and Charlotte and her father were left alone, living in Haworth. In 1854, Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls, who had been working with her father, but she died from pregnancy complications in 1855.

Nancy and Charlotte

- What similarities are there between Nancy and Charlotte?
- Were there any experiences they both shared?
- What were the main differences between their lives?
- Charlotte wasn't wealthy, but what opportunities did she have that Nancy didn't?
- Do you think Nancy might have helped Charlotte become a writer in any way?

In her famous book *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë writes from the point of view of a poor young woman who needs to work as a governess (a sort of cross between a teacher and a servant) to survive. Jane says:

"Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart!"

"Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, to absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags."

- How do these quotations from *Jane Eyre* connect to Charlotte's story and to Nancy's?

Create A Poem

Use the above quotes (printed out on A4 sheets or larger) and create a piece of 'blackout' or 'cut up' poetry about Nancy or Charlotte.

Blackout Poetry Examples and Inspiration here:

[What is Blackout Poetry? Examples and Inspiration | Writers.com](https://www.writers.com/what-is-blackout-poetry-examples-and-inspiration/)

Cut-Up Poetry here:

[Cut-up poems - National Saturday Club](https://www.national-saturday-club.com/cut-up-poems)



GET INSPIRED



Watch the following video before you read the story:

BBC Two - Being the Brontes, The Crow Hill Bog Burst. →

What happened? / Where did it happen? / Who was involved?
When did it happen? / Why is it interesting?

Now read the story about the Bog Burst
by Kristina Diprose: →



The Shadow on the Moor

**An original short story by Kristina Diprose
with sketches by Scarlett Bunting**

Nancy de Garrs recalls the day of the Crow Hill bog burst

The bairns had been mithering for days. It doesn't suit any of us to be cooped up. A dust settles on your soul if you're too long indoors — like you're not really here.

That summer, the eldest three had left us — packed off to school, just like me and our Sarah were once, when Mam and Dad had too many mouths to feed. Only difference is, these Brontë lasses will get a finer sort of learning — proper genteel, with books and all. They're sharp 'uns too, already scribbling by candlelight. Here's hoping they learn something more than drudge work. The little 'uns were sick with missing their sisters. So I promised: first fine day, we'd go walking on the moor. After a whole week of downpour, I'd gotten ahead of all my chores — hands rough from scrubbing and kneading. When sunlight finally came sneaking through the kitchen window one day after dinner, I took my chance.

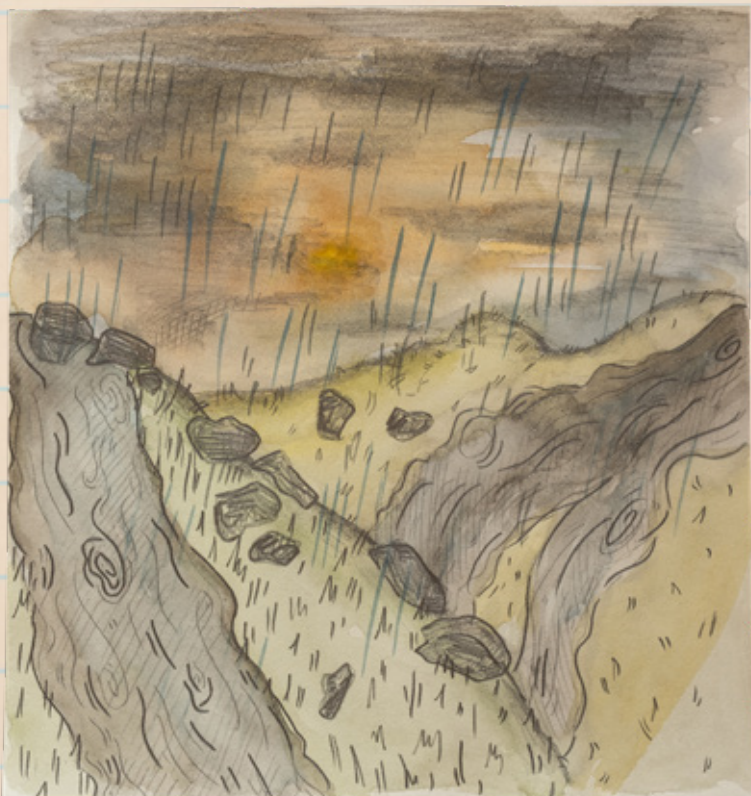
Sarah fetched jackets and shawls while I wrestled their feet into sturdy boots, still caked in last week's mud. We bolted out the door like ferrets loosed from a sack. And wasn't it miraculous? To step out into the wind and let it blow right through you.

Branwell shot straight off, sword-fighting shadows with a stick, yelling he was Wellington. Emily Jane and little Anne trailed behind, whispering of fairies by the waterfall in that faraway way of theirs. It was a long trek for such tiny legs, and boggy besides, but we all needed a bit of wild.

The hills rolled out in deep purple folds, soaked rich from rain. I love coming here in all weathers — but September's best, when the heather is in full flower and the light gleams golden.

I brought them here when we lost their poor mam, not knowing what to do but walk. It soothed me then, and it still does, when I feel in over my head. I was a child myself when I came to work here. Now I'm nursemaid to six little 'uns who look to me for stories and lullabies. Well, was six. Now it's three. And Master says Emily's to go to school soon as well.

I was lost in such thoughts when Annie tugged my sleeve. "Look, Nancy!"





I snapped back to my senses, and all was transformed. The sky burned an ominous copper, and the air had gone dead still. Then a sudden crack as a thunderhead broke! Rain came pounding down, pooling under my boots. I hoisted Anne in my arms and shouted for Sarah. She was up ahead at the crossroads, skirmishing with Bramwell.

"We need to turn back!" she cried.

"We're too far from home!" I choked, trying not to let the fear show. "We need to find shelter."

I looked round, heart pounding. Where were we? Nothing looked familiar in the eerie gloom. The paths were drowning.

With a deafening boom, the sky cracked again and Emily exclaimed: "Gytrash!"

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. She and Charlotte had been fascinated by the fabled black dog of the moor ever since I made the mistake of telling an old wives' tale one night by candlelight. The memory of their eager questions rushed through me like a sudden gust: Where does it live? Can it really shape shift? How big are its teeth? What does it want with travellers?

It's only a story, I murmured under my breath as I followed Emily's gaze to the hilltop. But there it stood, real and unmistakable, a hulking beast with eyes like coals.

My blood turned to ice. I was almost overcome with dread — but it was my job to keep us safe. Something in me steadied. I met its glare — not cruel, but warning. A low growl came from the belly of the earth.

I nodded, gripped the girls tight, and ran.

"Where are we going?!" Sarah yelled above the storm as hail lashed our cheeks.

"Pondens" I barked back. I had no breath to explain how an image of the porch at Ponden Hall had flashed through my mind when I locked eyes with the Gytrash, or how I suddenly knew the way.

The girls were quiet and clinging now, quick to sniff out danger. I hauled them down the hill with a strength I didn't know I had, barely keeping us upright as my feet slid through the mud. Even Bramwell's high spirits were quelled: he followed Sarah without argument, pale as a ghost.

From high on the moor behind us, I heard a new kind of thunder — deeper and louder, and closer than the sky. An earthquake? I had heard of such things, but not here — impossible. And yet, my bones shook with the rumbling of it. I dodged boulders of tumbling gritstone wall as I hastened us towards the foothills.

It was then that I sensed the creature at my side. Its fur bristled against my skin, and I caught the scent of burning peat — a hint of moss and smoke. It leapt forward, shadow on shadow advancing. I sped after it with all the fury of the wind.

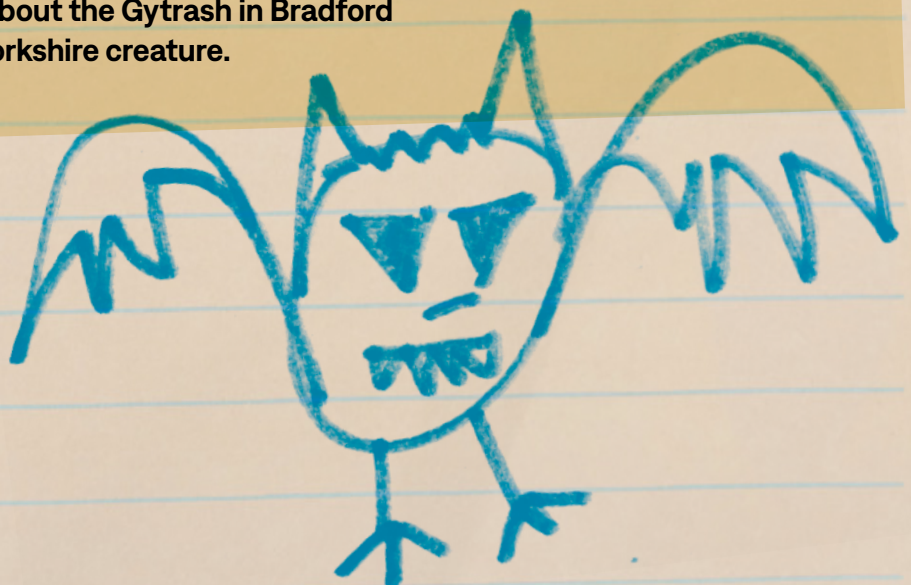


"This way, lass!" a voice called. I ran towards it, and at last the farmstead emerged through the murk. When we reached the doorway, the five of us collapsed in a relieved, sodden heap. I looked back in horror at the pitch-black river that had chased us here, the scar it had torn through the landscape, and the uprooted trees, trying to make sense of how my world was upending.

What is a Gytrash?

A Gytrash (pronounced GUY-trash) is a terrifying beast found in many stories in the North of England. People believed the Gytrash could be found in lonely, deserted places - especially the moors of West and North Yorkshire and it is said to have chased and sometimes killed people walking these isolated routes. The Gytrash usually appears as a huge black dog with fangs and red eyes, but sometimes takes the form of a black horse and, in some stories, can even shapeshift. There are many tales about the Gytrash from the villages surrounding Bradford, and there is even mention of one in *Jane Eyre* by Emily Brontë.

You could write a scary story about the Gytrash in Bradford or design your own mythical Yorkshire creature.





LEARN AND CREATE

Kristina writes about the bog burst in the **voice** of Nancy de Garrs; she tells the story from Nancy's **point of view**. We have very few records of Nancy's thoughts and feelings about the events of her life and no recordings of her voice, so Kristina had to **imagine** how Nancy might have told this story.

Re-read the story and think about how the writer brought Nancy's voice to life – Which words reveal where Nancy was from? What sense do we get of Nancy's personality from her voice in the story?

You are going to create a piece of writing in the voice of an 'invisible' person from Bradford history – A child at the industrial school? A servant? Someone living in the Bradford poorhouse? A mill worker? A mill worker who has an accident? A ghost speaking from a pauper's grave in Undercliffe cemetery? Or any other ideas you have!

What might that person's life have been like? What experiences (positive and negative) might they have had? How might they have wanted to be remembered? You might want to use the links and ideas in this pack to help you research your character.

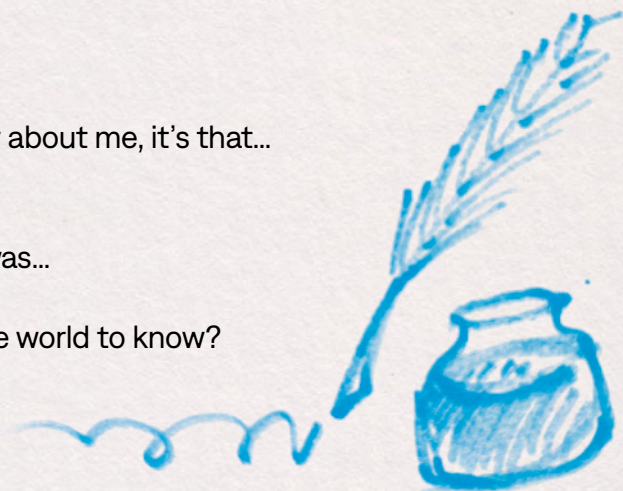
Write a 'Letter to the future' in the voice of your character

Try to capture their voice – Don't worry about using 'old-fashioned' language, but think about how their words might express their life in Bradford. What local words and place names might they use?

Dear future,

- If there's one thing I'd like you to know about me, it's that...
- Maybe you think we were all... but...
- The most important event in my life was...

What else would your character want the world to know?





DIG DEEPER

Find out more about the lives of the Brontë family here:

The Brontë Parsonage Museum Official Website:

[The lives of the Brontës | The Brontë Parsonage Museum](#)

Find out more about the campaign to mark Nancy's grave here:

Bradford Telegraph and Argus Article:

[Undercliffe Cemetery grave for Bronte nanny who died in Bradford Workhouse | Bradford Telegraph and Argus](#)

Yorkshire Post Article:

[Bronte sisters: Gravestone will finally mark the spot where family's loyal nursemaid was buried after dying in the workhouse](#)

YouTube Video Tour of Thornton and the site of the unmarked grave:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgbllZAoZNE>

Learners could investigate and compare the differences between Charlotte's grave and Nancy's. They could then design a memorial for an 'unsung hero' or an 'invisible' person from the past.

Find out more about the Bradford Poorhouse here:

Workhouse Information:

[The Workhouse in Bradford, Yorkshire, W. Riding](#)

Article on the Bradford Workhouse Food Strike:

['Not Fit for Pigs' - The Bradford Workhouse Food Strike - Traditional Yorkshire Recipes](#)

Investigate Emily Brontë's poem 'High waving heather'

The poem 'High waving heather' could well have been inspired by the bog burst of Crow Hill. Explore the words she chooses to represent the dramatic impact of the weather on the Yorkshire landscape. Look especially closely at her use of verbs – make a list, what effect do they have? You could use some of Emily Brontë's words and some 'weather words' from 'The Shadow on the Moor' to create your own wild weather poem.

Read the Poem at:

<https://allpoetry.com/High-waving-heather-'neath-stormy-blasts-bending>



BRADFORD 2025

UK City of Culture



This resource was co-created by the Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture Cultural Learning Team and The Brontë Parsonage Museum.

The short story was written by Kristina Diprose.
Artwork was created by Scarlett Bunting.

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