

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in July 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were born in the same year as Queen Victoria, 1819 in the parishes of Wem, Shropshire and Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk.

Emma Shaw's Story: A Life in Full

Emma Shaw's story begins in the baptismal register for the parish of Wem, Shropshire:

No. 388. 1820, Jany. 7th, Emma, daughter of John & Eleanor Shaw, of Wem.¹

John is described as publican of the Crown Inn, which was located on the High Street, Wem.² Although Emma's birth date is not stated, the absence of any entries in the baptism register for December 1819 suggests she was born late 1819 or early 1820.

Family & Social Background

According to Garbett's 1818 'History of Wem', the town enjoyed good air, quality water, and was renowned for its excellent malt liquors."³

Pigot's & Co.'s Directory for 1828-9 lists twelve taverns and public houses on Wem's High Street, including the Crown, then run by Timothy Parker, implying that John

¹ 1820 Baptisms for Wem, Shropshire, p. 49, no. 388.

² The Inns of Wem, *The Pubs of Wem from 1800* <http://wemlocal.org.uk/wempast/industry/pubs.htm> (accessed July 2025).

³ S. Garbet, *The History of Wem* (Wem, 1818), p. 230.

Shaw was no longer the landlord by that time. Wem was described as a small market town, consisting of six streets and four lanes, and, in 1821, had a population of just 1,555.⁴

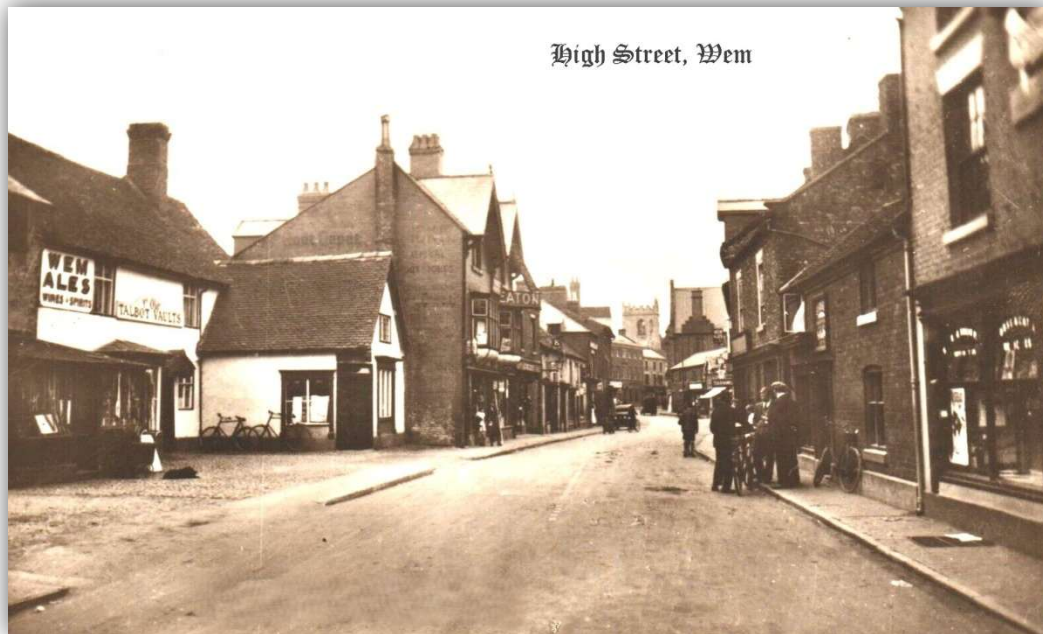


Figure 1: Postcard of High Street, Wem (c. early 1900s)

John Shaw and Eleanor Briscoe married on 5 June 1818, at Wem. It is possible John had a previous marriage, in 1814 at Wem, to Jane Hales, with whom he had a son, John, in 1815. Jane died in 1817.

John and Eleanor had four children:

1. Eleanor, baptised 8 January 1819, Wem;
2. Emma (subject of this paper), baptised 7 January 1820, Wem;
3. Jane, baptised 11 June 1823, Wem; and
4. William, baptised 3 April 1825, Bilston, Staffordshire.

Bankruptcy

Just months after Emma's baptism, an advertisement appeared in *The Shrewsbury Chronicle and North Wales Advertiser*, dated June 2, 1820:

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION, BY G. FRANKLIN.

On the Premises (without the least reserve) the Crown Inn, in WEM, in the county of Salop, on Monday the 5th day of June, 1820:

⁴ Pigot's Directory (1828), p.698.

All the Household FURNITURE, Brewing VESSELS, ALE, and SPIRITS, and other effects, Belonging to Mr. JOHN SHAW, consisting of 4 feather beds with bolsters and pillows, 1 chaff bed, 5 pair of tent and stump bedsteads, with cotton and other hangings, blankets, sheets, coverlets, 2 linen chests; about 20lbs of hops; dressing tables, 2 chests of drawers, looking glasses, 8-day clock, 2 oak dining tables, several small tables and stands, several half-dozens of oak and other chairs, writing desk, screen, dresser and shelves, fender and fire irons, pewter ale and spirit measures, ale glasses, earthenware, corner cupboard, firescreen, tea tray, 2 coolers, 2 stone cisterns, pig-troughs, &c. &c.; 9 standing hogsheads, 4 half-hogsheads, and 7 small barrels; about 170 gallons of good Ale, small quantity of Cider and Porter, several gallons of Gin, Rum, and Brandy.

☞ Sale to commence at 11 o'clock.⁵

A further advertisement on 16 June 1820 explains the reason for the sale:

WHEREAS a Commission of Bankrupt is awarded and issued forth against JOHN SHAW, of Wem, in the County of Salop, Victualler, Dealer and Chapman, and he being declared a Bankrupt, is hereby required to surrender himself to the Commissioners in the said Commission named, or the major part of them, on the twenty-seventh day of this instant June, at five o'clock in the afternoon, and on the twenty-eighth day of the said month of June, and the twenty-second day of July next, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, at the White Horse, in Wem aforesaid, and make a full discovery and disclosure of his Estate and Effects, when and where the Creditors are to come prepared to prove their debts, and at the second sitting choose Assignees, and at the last sitting, the said Bankrupt is required to finish his examination, and the creditors are to assent to or dissent from the allowance of his Certificate: All persons indebted to the said Bankrupt, or that have any of his Effects, are not to pay or deliver the same, but to whom the Commissioners shall appoint, but give notice to MR RICHARD GRIFFITHS, Solicitor, Southampton Building's, London; or Mr JOHN WALFORD, Solicitor, Wem, Shropshire.⁶

Bankruptcy in the early 19th century carried significant social stigma and could lead to imprisonment. The loss of his business would have devastated the family's social and financial standing. There is no information on the sum of money, or to whom, John Shaw was in debt. The episode likely prompted the family's eventual move to Bilston, Staffordshire, by 1825.

⁵ To Be Sold by Auction, *The Shrewsbury Chronicle & North Wales Advertiser*, Friday, June 2, 1820, p.2.

⁶ Whereas a Commission of Bankrupt, *The Shrewsbury Chronicle & North Wales Advertiser*, Friday, June 16, 1820, p.2.

A burial record exists for a John Shaw, at Bilston, Staffordshire, on 21 May 1825, age 34, just a few weeks after son, William's, baptism, which probably records his demise.⁷ John does not appear on the 1841 census so was presumably deceased by this time.

Later Years and the Search for Emma

By the 1841 census, Eleanor Shaw was living on Cripple Street, Wem, with her daughter Eleanor (Ellen) and son William. Emma was not included in the entry prompting uncertainty about her fate - whether she could have succumbed to a childhood illness, was employed in domestic live-in employment, or had married. Despite wide-ranging searches for Shropshire and Staffordshire, Emma could not be found and her story almost came to an early conclusion.

As Eleanor with two of her other children were known to exist in 1841, exhaustive searches were made to find them in later censuses to see if these would provide any clues to finding Emma. Sometimes lateral rather than direct searches, can provide answers to genealogical conundrums. Eleanor was eventually found in 1851 living with her son, William, at No. 3 Prospect Cottages, Hackney, Stoke Newington, Middlesex:

William Shaw, head, mar, 26, Cabinet Maker, Staffordshire, Bilston
Emma Shaw, wife, (marital status blank), 25, Dress Maker, Shropshire, Wem
John Shaw, son, 1, (occ. blank), Shropshire, Wem
Eleanor Shaw, mother, widow, 55, (occ. blank), Shropshire, Wem.⁸

(William Shaw married Emma Eaton, in 1849 at Wem.⁹)

As Eleanor appeared to be relying on the support of her family it seemed relevant to continue searching for her in case it led to any information on Emma, widening the search area from Shropshire and Staffordshire to include Middlesex.

Eventually, the search of the 1861 census for Eleanor at Stoke Newington, Middlesex, proved successful when she was found living with a couple, William and Emma Shepherd at Prospect Cottage, Finsbury, Stoke Newington:

William Shepherd, head, mar, 37, Coach Builder, Middlesex, Stoke Newington
Emma Shepherd, wife, mar, 37, (occ. blank), Wem, Salop

⁷ 1825 Burials for Bilston, Staffordshire, p.161, no. 1285.

⁸ 1851 Census for Stoke Newington, Middlesex: Class: HO107; Piece: 1503; Folio: 27; Page: 3; GSU roll: 87837,

⁹ Marriages, Wem, (March) 1849, Vol. 18, Page 281.

William J. Shepherd, son, 13 (occ. blank), Hackney
Charles Ford, apprentice, 20, (occ. blank), London
Ellenor Shaw, wife's mother, widow, 68, (occ. blank), Wem, Salop¹⁰

As the census stated Emma's birthplace was Wem, Salop, and birth registration records for William J. Shepherd (born 1847, Hackney), confirming Emma's surname as Shaw, her story at last reliably continues.

Marriage and Family Life

Emma married William Shepherd, a wheelwright and coach builder, on 6 July 1846 at Bishopsgate, East London.¹¹

Unfortunately, the marriage register entry does not provide an address for Emma. With a number of women named Emma Shaw, living in England at the time of the 1841 census, it was not possible to confirm which one is our subject.

The couple were found on the 1851 census, living at 4 Prospect Cottages, Finsbury, Stoke Newington, on the following census return page after the entry for Emma's brother, William and her mother, Eleanor:

William Shepherd, head, M, 27, Coach & Cart Wheelwright, employing 2 men,
Middlesex, Stoke Newington
Emma Shepherd, wife, (marital status blank), 25, (occ. blank), Shropshire,
Wem
William J. Shepherd, son, 3, Middlesex, Old Hackney.¹²

The 1871 census lists the couple at 1 Prospect Place, Finsbury, Stoke Newington:

William Shepherd, head, mar, 48, Master Coach Builder, employing 10 Men &
6 Boys, Middlesex, Stoke Newington
Emma Shepherd, wife, mar, 50, Coachbuilder's Wife, Salop, Wem.¹³

¹⁰ 1861 Census for England and Wales – Stoke Newington, Middlesex, Class: Rg 9; Piece: 152; Folio: 109; Page: 2; GSU roll: 542582.

¹¹ Marriages, East London, (September) 1846, Vol. 2, Page 201.

¹² 1851 Census for England and Wales, Stoke Newington, Hackney, Middlesex, Class: HO107; Piece: 1503; Folio: 28; Page: 4; GSU roll: 87837.

¹³ 1871 Census for England and Wales, Stoke Newington, Hackney, Middlesex, RG10; Piece: 311; Folio: 4; Page: 2; GSU roll: 818891.

W. SHEPHERD & SON,
COACH BUILDERS, WHEELWRIGHTS, FARRIERS
AND SMITHS,
HIGH STREET, STOKE NEWINGTON, AND KINGSLAND.

W. S. & SON beg to inform the inhabitants of the surrounding district, that at the solicitation of several customers they have added the Farriery to their other business, and to state that they have engaged a staff of competent and experienced workmen in that branch of their Trade, and pledge themselves that neither art, skill, or capital shall be spared to render their Farriery Forge one of the very best. Horses shod on the most scientific and improved principles.

Horses having malformed feet will receive the utmost attention in fitting the shoe to the peculiar form required, affording ease and comfort to the animal.

Carriages, Vans, Pantehnicon Vans, Dog Carts, Wagonnets, and any other Vehicle made and repaired on most reasonable terms at the shortest notice.

TYRES, SPRINGS, AXLES, AND SMITH'S WORK IN GENERAL.

1870 Wm. Shepherd & Son Advertisement ¹⁴

A search of newspapers for the time did not reveal any mention of Emma, and, apart from census returns for 1851, 1861 and 1871, little is known of Emma's life. None of the census returns for Emma and William include live-in servants and either she managed the house by herself, or they had servants who lived outside the home.

The couple's son, William John, was their only child, and Emma presumably devoted her life to supporting her husband and son, who followed his father into the family business, and in maintaining the household. Emma's mother, Eleanor, died in 1870 at Islington, London, age 76.¹⁵

Emma's Death and Later Years

Emma died on 4 December 1879 at 104 Boleyn Road, Stoke Newington, age 59 years. The cause of death is given as "rupture of a vessel on brain; paralysis 2 months". Her husband, William, registered the death.¹⁶

As Emma arrived in the world in 1820 to the humiliation and disgrace of her father's bankruptcy, Emma's final years coincided with further family turmoil.

¹⁴ Advertisement – Wm. Shepherd & Son, *The North Londoner*, September 10, 1870, p. 2.

¹⁵ 1870 GRO Death Indexes for Islington, April-June Quarter, Volume 01B, Page 224.

¹⁶ 1879 GRO Death Indexes for Hackney, October-December Quarter, Volume 01B, Page 315.

In 1868, son William John Shepherd married Jane Louisa Milford at Islington, London. On 8 September 1878, at 14 Shacklewell Lane, it was alleged Jane committed adultery with Thomas Barnes. Less than a month later, William commenced divorce proceedings against Louisa, citing the adultery. The final decree was awarded to William on 1 July 1879, when he gained sole custody of the couple's three surviving children.¹⁷

Final Chapter

Following Emma's death, husband William is listed on the 1881 census, at 104 Boleyn Road, Stoke Newington:

William Shepherd, head, widr, 57, Coach Builder, Middlesex, Stoke Newington
Emma J. Marsh, niece, W, 29, (occ. blank), Middlesex, Stoke Newington
Jane E. Marsh, niece, 5, (occ. blank), Hackney, Camberwell.¹⁸



Figure 2: Postcard of High Street, Stoke Newington (c.1900)

¹⁷ England and Wales, *Civil Divorce Records, 1858-1918*, The National Archives; London, England, UK; Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, later Supreme Court of Judicature: Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Files, J 77; Reference Number: J 77/215/5869; Series Number: J 77; Piece Number: 215 (accessed via Ancestry, July 2025).

¹⁸ 1881 Census for England and Wales, Stoke Newington, Hackney, Middlesex, Class: RG11; Piece: 283; Folio: 48; Page: 35; GSU roll: 1341061.

Emma Jane Marsh was the widow of Benjamin Marsh and daughter of William Shaw (brother of Emma Shaw) and Emma Eaton. Jane E. (Eleanor) Marsh was the daughter of Benjamin and Emma Jane. Three years after the census, on 27 November 1884 at Hackney, William Shepherd married his niece by marriage, Emma Jane Marsh.¹⁹

The last chapter of Emma's story closes with the death of William Shepherd on 4 April 1901 in Hackney, leaving an estate worth £3175 7s 3d, equivalent to between £350,00 and £3.5 million today.²⁰ Their son, William John, had predeceased him in 1889.

Although Emma's early years were marred by her father's bankruptcy, she later probably enjoyed relative comfort and stability. Her life reflects both the hardships and triumphs of a Victorian woman who navigated family upheaval, social expectations, and personal loss with quiet strength.

Alison Kennedy
August 2025

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¹⁹ 1884 London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1938, Reference: P79/JN1/089.

²⁰ Shepherd, William, of 31 Lordship-road, Stoke Newington, Middlesex, *Search Probate Records or Find a Will*, <https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk/search-results> (accessed 5/08/2025).

University of Leicester – Special Collections Online, Historical Directories for England and Wales:

<https://leicester.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16445coll4>