

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.

Julia Oliver's Story

Julia Oliver was born on 15 April 1895 in Bristol¹. Her parents, Oliver Oliver and Julie Hannah Goodwin had married in Hereford in 1887². At this time, Oliver was employed by the Great Western Railway as an Engine Driver³.

In 1901 the family of 7 had settled in Bristol, living at 45 Balmain Street⁴. Oliver, a Railway Engine Driver, was aged 42 and his wife Julia was 40. The family had moved from place to place with Oliver's employment and this is reflected in the birthplace of their children. Their 5 children were Edith Jane aged 12 born in Plymouth, Devon; Lemuel aged 11 born in Ross, Hereford; Gwynne Henry aged 8 born in Hereford, Hereford; Julia aged 5 and William Eleazar aged 3 also born in Bristol.

Oliver, Julia and youngest son William Eleazar were still living in Bristol in 1911

though they had moved to Blagdon Street⁵ and Oliver was still an engine driver for the Great Western Railway. Eldest daughter Edith Jane was a live in servant to the Aiken family in Bristol⁶, son Lemuel was a clerk boarding in Bristol⁷ and son Gwynne Henry was a labourer boarding in Penygroes, Wales⁸. Julia, aged 15, was by now a student at the Abbey Grange School of Housewifery in Street⁹, adjacent to Messrs C & J Clark's Boot and Shoe Factory¹⁰. Had Julia followed in the footsteps of her sister Edith? From minute books of a meeting held on 12th April 1910 for the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery, a number of girls had left the school and Julia Oliver of Blagdon had taken up one of the vacancies.¹¹ On 17th June 1910, it was noted that Julia Oliver of Blagdon had had her studentship renewed and would therefore be returning to the school after the summer holidays¹¹.

Abbey Grange School was also known as the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery¹¹. The headmistress in 1911 was Miss Louisa Frances Acheson⁹. She was living in Abbey Grange with two teachers and 19 students⁹. Miss Margaret Hunter Pearson taught laundry and dressmaking whilst Miss Isabel Mary Cayley taught housewifery⁹. Julia and the other students lived in dormitory style accommodation in the Georgian house which also served as the school building¹⁰. Subjects naturally enough covered how to keep a house, hygiene, managing a household budget, cooking and healthy eating, home nursing, needlework and mending, laundry and stain removal¹². Surprisingly exercise was also a subject, though one would have thought that a housewife of servant in 1911 would have got enough exercise with her daily chores as she did not have the benefit of the labour-saving devices' we all take for granted. The aim of the school was to educate the girls so that they became good wives or good servants¹¹. Julia became a good servant. In 1921 she was working as a

professional cook in the St John Hostel, Courtenay Road, East Moors, Cardiff¹³. The hostel was run by the Order of St John for the Priory for Wales. Julia was one of 9 staff which included the matron, 3 nurses, a porter, a housemaid, a kitchen maid and a scullery maid. She would have needed the assistance of the kitchen maid and scullery maid as there were 46 residents.

Tragedy had struck the family in 1916, with the death of Julia's brother Gwynne Henry on 9 May 1915. He had enlisted for service in WWI as Private 2478 in the 1st 4th City of Bristol Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment and was KIA near Ploegstreert in Belgium¹⁴. While her sister Edith² and brothers Lemuel¹⁵ and William Eleazar¹⁵ married, Julia remained single. Their father died in 1932 and her mother in 1942¹⁶.

Julia had moved to Northampton by 1939¹⁷. She was employed at the kitchen superintendent in the Manfield Orthopaedic Hospital. Julia had done her training in Abbey Grange adjacent to the Clarke's shoe factory. In 1939 she was working in what had been the home of James Manfield, a local Nottingham shoe manufacturer! James Manfield had given Weston Favell House and its land to the Crippled Children's Society in 1925. It was originally known as the Manfield Home for Crippled Children before changing its title to Manfield Orthopaedic Hospital. The hospital closed in 1992, was sold and is now apartments known as Manfield Grange¹⁸.

Julia died in Bristol in 1988 aged 93 having outlived her parents and siblings¹⁶.

Sources

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