

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in March 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who appear in the 1901 census for St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex and Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey.

Honoriam Coleman's Story

Honoriam Coleman was recorded as living at the St Joseph's Inebriates Reformatory at Ashford in Kent in the 1901 census.¹ She was aged 34 years, single, had been born at sea near Singapore and had no occupation. There were no likely candidates for our Honoriam in the three previous English and Welsh censuses. There were many "hits" with that name in the online genealogy sites in Ireland, as the name Honoriam seems to be a popular one in that country so it is likely that she was of Irish origins. Having been born at sea, she could have been living elsewhere before coming to England. There is a possible birth in the Births Marriages and Deaths at Sea register for a female Coleman born 6 July 1867 to James and Anne Coleman aboard the ship Suffolk, (ship's number 15823) however, researching this ship showed that it was

sailing between London and Melbourne on that date, not off Singapore as stated in the census². Honoria gives a different date of birth in later records so this seems unlikely to be our lady. There were no “hits” from a search of her name in newspapers of that time which might have given us an account of a court appearance which lead to her incarceration at St Joseph’s. Perhaps the newspapers for the area where she lived have not yet been put online. So Honoria’s life before she was sent to the Inebriates Reformatory remains a mystery.

I had more success finding her again after 1901. An Honor Coleman of the correct age and born at sea was recorded in the 1911 census at another Catholic home, the convent and Home of the Good Shepherd, this time in Ford, near Liverpool.³ The convent consisted of 30 religious sisters, and the Home of 211 female inmates with a family of six living in the gardener’s cottage. The inmates were all adult, mostly single women, whose recorded occupations seemed to relate to their employment before they arrived at the Home, as they were described as hawkers, cotton mill workers, cigar makers, a barmaid and a hospital nurse. Many were charwomen or dressmakers. Honoria was described as a domestic servant. How had she come to be in this institution? St Joseph’s in Ashford where she was living in 1901 had been set up for short term rehabilitation of inebriate women, sent by the Courts. The project was not very successful and it had ceased to admit women after 1903, finally closing down in 1906. A quarter of the women were placed in domestic service, so Honoria could have been one of these women.

The convent of nuns of the Good Shepherd in Ford was described as having an asylum for penitent women in a History of the County of Lancaster.⁴ Entry to

this asylum or refuge was entirely voluntary so one assumes that Honoria had nowhere else to go. The phrase penitent or fallen women implies a life of moral failing, which could include Honoria's problems with alcohol. Photographs online of the institution dated 1895, so earlier than Honoria's residence there, show one large dormitory for the inmates where the double beds, two inmates to one bed, were situated close together with no personal space whatsoever. Another photo shows women in large white bonnets sitting in rows occupied with their needlework and a further photo shows women at work in the laundry room⁵. Honoria was still resident there when the 1921 census was taken when her occupation is given as Needlework.⁶ Her age was now given as 58 years and 8 months, five years older than in the 1901 and 1911 censuses but remains consistent in the next two records. Her recorded birth place "at sea" indicates we still have the correct woman.

Honoria remained in this institution for the rest of her life. This was her address for the electoral registers in the 1930's and again in the 1939 register when her date of birth was given as 24 October 1862. Now aged 77, Honoria was described as "unable for work". The remaining residents are all employed in various forms of laundry work, such as laundry sorter, laundry ironer, sewing machinist and seamstress. There are several invalids. The Home is still a large one catering for 171 female inmates.⁷

Honoria lived on in this institution for a further decade. She died at the age of 86 years and was buried in the nearby Ford Catholic cemetery on the 5th January 1949. So we know that Honoria spent at least 38 years of her life as a "penitent woman". Although to our eyes such a life of routine and petty restrictions probably seems intolerable, we can hope that in contrast to

whatever circumstances lead her to be sent to the St Joseph's Home for Inebriate women in 1901 that having a roof over her head, food and companionship proved a better option.

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Sources

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