

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in September 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon.

Elizabeth Allen's Story

By Shelly Matthews

Elizabeth Allen was fortunate to be born in 1830 at a time when suffering from the handicap of deafness, she would no longer be sent to an asylum. Instead, charitable institutions were created at this time to educate and enable her to learn life skills, allowing her to be active and valuable in the community.

Elizabeth began her education at the West of England Institute for the Deaf and Dumb in 1837 at the age of 7, an age that was generally deemed most suitable for young girls to begin their studies here.

Of the many ladies of the committee, one benefactor named Mrs Charlotte Hipplesley-Tuckfield was instrumental in the creation of the institute. After encountering a local farmer whose son was deaf, she and her friend Miss Grace Fursdon enquired as to how the boy would be educated. Upon learning that he would probably be committed to an asylum, Charlotte sought out assistance from the Deaf and Dumb Institute in Paris. Impressed by their progressive skills, Charlotte felt these ideals could be implemented successfully in England.

Having already brought 2 other deaf children to her home at Shobrooke Park where her niece's husband Reverend Fredrick Shelley began their studies, Charlotte was eager to enlist charitable donations for a permanent location. So, in 1826 she arranged a fund raiser in Exeter and invited many notable benefactors with deep pockets!

After receiving multiple donations and annual subscriptions, Sir Humphrey Davie, as the chairman, and also most generous benefactor with a donation of 100 pounds (equivalent of approximately 13,500 today), resolved to establish The Devon and Cornwall Institute for the Deaf and Dumb.

After temporarily leasing a building on Alphington Road, construction was finally completed in 1828 nearby in Topsham Road, large enough to facilitate 70 students.

Topsham Road Building 1828

By the time Elizabeth Allen enrolled, additional accommodation was required for another 20 pupils, and a gardener's cottage as well as sick wards were also

introduced. Elizabeth would have probably learned sewing and other domestic skills to ensure her compatibility with the outside world. With her family living so far away in Dorset, Elizabeth was possibly only able to visit once or twice a year.

Unfortunately, the children's education was only available until the age of 15. Pupils were then encouraged to return to their family or friends.

The only mention of Elizabeth after the 1841 census is on the annual report of 1850-51 stating that she works as a laundress which means she is now approximately 20 years old. This would probably have been exhausting work and extremely difficult navigating a working life on her own.

By 1851 the census shows that Elizabeth is back living with her family in Stourpaine, Dorset. Alongside, her married sister Ann aged 28, she resides with her younger siblings, Frances 18, Martha 15, and Robert 6, as well as her niece Rhoda Coward aged 3. It would appear that her sister Ann is married to a farmer as the remainder of the family are listed as agricultural labourers.

In 1861, the census shows Elizabeth, now aged 36 living with her father and 2 younger brothers, Robert and James. Although the others have their occupations still listed as agricultural labourers, Elizabeth has nothing listed as an occupation, which is unusual although it is not unreasonable to assume that she is looking after household and domestic chores. What leads me to this conclusion is that her father at this time was aged 59. In the UK in 1861, the average life expectancy is only 41 years.

It is interesting to note that Elizabeth is the only member of the family specified as being deaf and dumb. It has also been noted that it was a birth defect and not caused by a childhood illness which is much more common. I can find no other information about Elizabeth Allen between 1861 and her death in 1903.

Elizabeth Allen passed away on 27th May 1903 at the age of 74 in the Union Workhouse. Dying in the workhouse meant you either had a serious or infectious disease that could not be treated by your family or that you had no family to take care of you.

Sources

1841 census - www.ancestry.com

1851 census - www.ancestry.com

1861 census - www.ancestry.com

Burial record – www.ancestry.com