

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



This story was written, in January 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of girls from Leeds, Girls' Industrial School, Yorkshire.

Sarah Ann Kirby

Sarah Ann Kirby's birth was registered with the GRO in December 1861¹ which suggests that she was born in the period October to December of that year. It has not been possible to find any online records of her baptism. The GRO website states her mother's maiden name was Whensley.

Sarah Ann was admitted to the Edgar Street Ragged and Industrial School in Leeds on 14th February 1870, the admission register² stated that she was 8 years old at the time. It also provides a reasonable amount of information about her appearance, family, education and an attached newspaper account of Sarah Ann's crime and subsequent court appearances.

The admission register described Sarah Ann's appearance; whilst her height was not recorded, her hair and eye colour were noted as dark brown, she had a slender figure and for "scars" the comment written was "light complexion".

It was observed that although she could not read or write she had attended two schools, Marshalls Holbeck and Miss Sharp's in Jack Lane.

From the detail in this register, it is possible to begin to piece together details about Sarah's family. It records that her father was dead and her mother, Isabella "goes out to wash". Two siblings were mentioned; John "with mother" and Thomas "Monkton Street near Jack Lane". From this an assumption is that Sarah lived with her widowed mother and brother John, in Fourth Court, the next part of the register is abbreviated and unclear, but the address continued as Jack Lane near Deansley Road. Thomas presumably lived close by in Monkton Street. An aunt was mentioned named, Dorothy D Kirby, who lived in Darlington.

Sarah Ann's crime was stealing and keeping the company of a pick pocket. For the section "previous character" it stated that for 12 months Sarah Ann had been in the company of an older girl and that they went out daily picking pockets and stealing for "shaps". Attached to this page is a newspaper cutting which provides further information on Sarah Ann's case³;

Sarah Ann and Margaret Morley aged 10, appeared at Leeds Town Hall on Saturday 12th February before Mr Tennant and Mr Titley. The girls were said to be neighbours in Jack Lane. They were accused of pick pocketing Mrs Holland of James Street on Friday 11th. At about noon the girls had entered Mr Bew's

butchers in Meadow Lane and bought a penny's worth of "craps". Shortly after they left, Mrs Holland found that her purse with about £1 of silver in it, was missing from her pocket. Someone followed the girls and saw them hire a cab to take them to the new railway station. They were stopped and searched but Mrs Hollands purse was not found, however, when Margaret's satchel was searched her own purse was found, this contained a half sovereign, 18s 9¹/₂ pence. The two girls were taken into custody and removed to the Town Hall.

On being interviewed by the police Sarah Ann told them it was Margaret who had stolen the purse and that they had thrown the emptied purse into a privy near the Falcon Inn on Wilson Street, where it was later found. She also told them that Margaret had picked the pockets of about 20 people over time. Margaret was taken to the cells where she later confessed to going out every day between 3-5pm to pick pocket. She said they spent some of the money on "spice" but that the rest was given to their mothers. When questioned further Margaret explained that she had bought her clothing and hat from these proceeds. She added that Sarah Ann was not a very good pick pocket being "not sharp enough". Sarah Ann was called as a witness against her friend and Margaret's mother was also called, who claimed her daughter had been sent by her to the shops with some money and that she did tell lies. Margaret was sentenced to 3 months in prison and then to a reformatory school for 5 years. Whilst the court was in hearing a lady in the gallery claimed the two girls had robbed her the week before.

Sarah Ann's mother was in court to hear the charges and Sarah Ann was initially remanded for a week. On 19th February Sarah Ann was back in court when she was committed to the Ragged and Industrial school until she was 16,

a sentence of 8 years. During that time the girls were moved from Edgar Street to Windsor Road where in 1871, Sarah Ann was enumerated on the census along with the other girls in the school. Sarah Ann's 1871 census entry is to be found listed as being resident at the Girls Ragged School, Windsor Street, Leeds⁴

From this initial information it is possible to pinpoint the family in the 1871 census. Her family are found living nearby in Holbeck, Leeds⁵, although no longer at the address given in Sarah's trial but at 2 Groisdale Court, Holbeck. Her widowed mother, Isabella aged 51, was living with two sons; John aged 24 and Henry aged 18 and one grandson, also dwelling in the house were two lodgers.

It is possible to build up more information about Sarah Ann's parents and siblings by referring to the 1861 census⁶. Her father was Frederic Kirby aged 40, born in Hurworth, Durham, who worked as a carrier for a flour mill. Her mother, Isabella nee Whensley was born 1820 in Redmire, Wensleydale, Yorkshire. In total 6 siblings were listed on this census; Joseph born 1843, Thomas 1845 and John 1847 all born in Hurworth, Durham, then following a move to Holbeck, Henry was born 1853 then Elizabeth 1857 and finally Frederic in 1860. Sarah Ann was to be their final child born at the end of 1861.

Although there are slight differences in name spellings, the marriage of Frederick Kirby and Isabella Winsley on 3rd June 1839 at Hurworth, Durham⁷ appears to be that of Sarah Ann's parents. A search of the death registers shows that Frederick was buried on 11th March 1868⁸ in Holbeck cemetery.

Sarah would have been released from the ragged school in 1878; by searching the 1881 census it appears that she went back to live with her mother and elder sister at 7 Waverley Grove, Hunslet, Leeds⁹. She had gained employment as a woollen cloth weaver. The next census in 1891 shows Sarah Ann still working as a woollen cloth weaver living with her mother, sister and some nephews and nieces at 16 Lady Pit Street, Hunslet¹⁰. She was now aged 29.

On 24th December 1892 Sarah Ann married Joseph Thompson¹¹. They were both living at Naylor Street, Holbeck, both were single, and Joseph was 4 years younger than Sarah Ann. The marriage certificate confirms it is the right Sarah Ann as her deceased father's name and occupation correspond and her mother Isabella signed as a witness. Joseph's occupation was given as a Boiler maker. By the 1901 census they had a son, Norman who was born in 1896¹² and the family were living at 26 Coupland Lane, Hunslet¹³ which was next to Lady Pit Lane.

Online searches for the three of them living together in the 1911 census were unsuccessful. As the surname is a common one, there were numerous Sarah Ann's and Joseph's listed but not together and not with a 14-year-old called Norman. A search of the death records was carried out to see if Norman had died.

An online search found a Norman Thompson of the correct age being lost at sea, this linked to the Find A Grave website¹⁴. From the detail provided in the memorial there can be no doubt that this referred to Sarah Ann's son Norman. Below Norman's memorial was a link to his mother's name and this website provided information and further links to next stage of Sarah Ann's story.

In 1910 Joseph left England and travelled to America, whether this was to look for work or because he had gained employment there, it has not been possible to ascertain, but Joseph left in April 1910¹⁵. Apparently, Joseph applied for US citizenship upon arrival, but the article did not say if her had been granted it. Sarah Ann and their son Norman then travelled out to join him, departing from Liverpool on 19th July 1910 on the steamship Ivernia¹⁶. The address they were heading out to was where Joseph was said to be living at 83 Charter Street, Boston, Massachusetts. Sarah was described as 5' 4" with brown hair and eyes.

Sarah Ann, Joseph and Norman eventually moved to 150 Neponset Street, Cancon, Massachusetts, moving there sometime in 1913¹⁷. Whilst living here Joseph and eventually Norman, worked together for Readville Car Shops, Norman was a machinist there¹⁴. Joseph had been a boiler maker and engineer in the UK. Every spring/summer when the workload lessened the family would travel back across the Atlantic to visit family in Yorkshire. In 1915 they set off to visit Sarah Ann's family and to help her regain her health¹⁷.

On 1st May 1915 despite the risks of potential attack from German U boats, the family once again set out from New York, this time travelling on the ocean liner Lusitania. The family had been booked into third class. On 7th May, only 11 miles off the Irish coast, the Lusitania was torpedoed and sank after 18 minutes. Sarah Ann and Norman were lost when the ship sunk, together with about twelve hundred other souls. Joseph managed to make it to the lifeboat Heron and was saved.

Some bodies were recovered or were washed ashore and are buried in three mass graves in Cobh, in southern Ireland²⁰. It is not known whether the bodies of Sarah Ann and her son Norman were recovered or if they were never found and still lie in the Atlantic in a mass maritime grave.



Photo of Sarah Ann and her son Norman Thompson; Boston Globe; 10th May
1915

Sue Court-Oak January 2023

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