

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written in August 2023 as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who enrolled in the first two cohorts [1908 & 1909] of Trainee Teachers at the Cheshire Country Training College, Crewe [CCTCC]*

## **Muriel Annie Riley's Story**

*Warning, this story contains an account of suicide.*

Muriel Annie Riley was born on 28 December 1890<sup>1</sup> probably at home – 40 Rigg Street - in the small parish of Monks Coppenhall two miles from Crewe. She was the eldest daughter of William and Elizabeth Riley, and her father was a railway clerk, Crewe being the major junction for several railway lines and one of the earliest and largest stations to be built.

On 7 September 1903<sup>2</sup> Muriel was enrolled at Crewe Secondary School (CSS) having gained a free studentship there for her entire time at the school. By now she had 3 younger sisters – Constance, Bessie and Doris, and the family had moved to 26 Cemetery Road, a short walk from Rigg Street. Twin brothers, Clarence and Wilfred, were born

on 12 May 1905. In all 5 out of the 6 Riley children would go on to attend CSS.

Muriel did well at school, passing her Matriculation exams and gaining a prize in languages, followed in 1908<sup>3</sup> by winning a bursary for student teachers to Cheshire County Training College. She started there on 15 September 1908<sup>4</sup> and successfully completed the course. Her first position was as an assistant teacher at Hightown Council Girls' School<sup>5</sup> in Crewe. It was close to home, and she can live with her parents and siblings in Cemetery Road during this time. She moved from this school to work at Borough Infants' School<sup>5</sup> in 1913.

It was also in 1913 that she joined the Workers' Educational Association (WEA)<sup>6</sup> in Crewe. The Crewe branch was only 5 years old at this time and Muriel's first foray was to take a class in Economics.

The WEA was founded in 1903 by Albert Mansbridge, the son of a carpenter from Gloucester. Mansbridge had to leave school at the age of 14 owing to his family's limited financial resources. He became a clerical worker but simultaneously satisfied his desire for additional education by attending university extension classes at King's College in London. Eventually, he taught evening classes in industrial history, economics, and typing while supporting himself as a clerk during the day.

Mansbridge became distressed that the university extension system—created in 1873—appealed almost exclusively to the upper and middle classes. In 1903, therefore, he founded the Workers' Educational Association (WEA; originally called An Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men). The WEA was quickly recognized by most British universities, and in 1905 Mansbridge abandoned clerical work to become its full-time general secretary.<sup>7</sup>

Within a couple of years Muriel was teaching a class on industrial history at the Shavington WEA branch. Local history was one of her

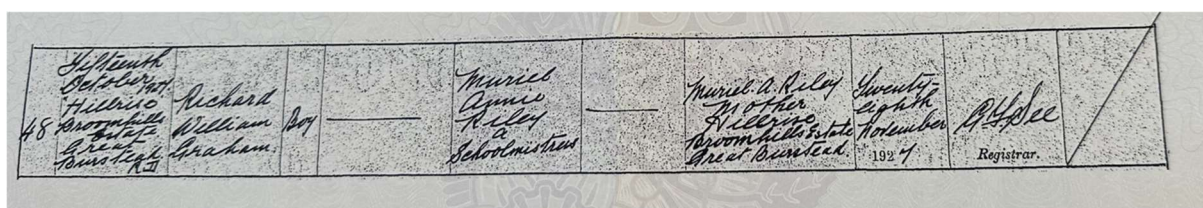
big passions and she became a member of the Cheshire Historical Society later in life. Throughout her life, wherever she lived, she was heavily involved in the WEA.

Muriel remained at Borough Infants until 1917<sup>5</sup> when she had a brief spell at Bedford Street Boys' school<sup>5</sup> before moving onto St Paul's Boys'.<sup>5</sup>

According to the 1921 census<sup>8</sup> she moved to work at St Luke's infant school in Sale, near Manchester. She was boarding in the home of Georgina Mills at 21 Abington Road, Sale.

Over the next half a dozen years there was no evidence of Muriel on any school registers or in the newspapers. She emerged again in 1927 aged 38, some 230 miles from Sale in the village of Great Burstead, Essex.

On 15 October that year she gave birth to a son, named Richard William Graham Riley<sup>9</sup>, born at 'Hillrise', Broomhill Estate (now known as Broomhill Chase) in the village of Great Burstead. There was no father named on his birth certificate and Muriel was listed as a schoolmistress.



Richard's birth certificate

Their home was described in a local newspaper<sup>10</sup> a year or two before as 'a detached house, one mile from Chelmsford station, with 2 receptions, 4 bedrooms, a bath, 2 w.c.'s, and a large garden'. Even today the houses all sit behind high hedging on a private road, within their own large gardens. Privacy seems to be key. Hillrise still exists and is the second to last house in the road, tucked away and out of sight.

Within two months of Richard's birth it would appear that Muriel has moved on. There are many adverts selling cars under the name of Harries at the address, which go on for several years after she has been found living elsewhere. Perhaps Hillrise was just a quiet place to have her baby?

Muriel had him at a time when illegitimacy was still very much frowned upon. In fact, in 1920, an Anglican Vicar refused a request to help illegitimate children on the grounds that it would be unforgivable to "approximate a human generation to the morals of the farmyard". The children may be blameless – though arguably moral degeneracy was an inheritable characteristic – but assisting them would mean condoning the intemperance of their mothers.

The 1913 Mental Deficiency Act enabled unmarried mothers to be categorised as 'moral imbeciles' and sent to lunatic asylums. This act was not repealed until 1959 so was very much in operation in 1927, should Muriel have been unlucky enough to fall on hard times and be unable to support herself. However, we know she was an educated and resourceful woman and appears to have done the next best thing to getting married – that was assume the mantle of the widowed young mother.

A year after having Richard there was a listing for a Muriel Annie Stead in the electoral records, living in the School House at Bowers Gifford in Essex<sup>11</sup>. It is perhaps not a surprise to find no marriage records for Muriel at all. We will discover shortly that, to her great credit, she had kept her son with her and even had him educated at the schools she worked in. A plus side to her supposed widowhood was that she was able to continue working as a teacher – had she been married this would not have been allowed.

There is just the one school in Bower's Gifford - St Margaret's - and for her to be living in the School House, does this mean she is now the

head teacher? She remained at this address and school from 1928 to 1930 at least.

From here she moved to the Nash group of schools in Buckinghamshire, as Head, first appearing in the local newspapers in 1935. She was a busy person in the local community seemingly the instigator of many Whist Drives to raise money for her school or the church. Some of these make the local papers and include taking her year 6 pupils on a day trip to London in 1935<sup>12</sup>, taking in the Tower of London and getting a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament; and a trip for the entire school to Whipsnade Zoo in June 1937<sup>13</sup>. Richard was a pupil at the school too – mention is made of an R Stead doing a recital of 'The Apple Tree' at a school show in 1935.

Richard also got a mention in 1937<sup>14</sup> when he won a prize at yet another Whist Drive. The prize was donated by his mother and was a packet of cigarettes. There seem to be no qualms in 1937 with a 10-year-old smoking!

Coronation Day, 12 May 1937<sup>15</sup>, was celebrated joyfully by Muriel and her pupils. A sports day followed by a picnic was held for the pupils and each was awarded a Coronation medal along with an apple, orange and a bag of sweets. Muriel brought in her radio so that everyone could listen to the King's speech and sing God Save the King. As headmistress of the school she was very much part of the local community.

Despite her standing in the community there is no mention of her wedding in the summer of 1937. The many mentions of her in the local papers just switch her name to Mrs Aydon rather than Stead! This happened for the first time in September 1937<sup>16</sup>.

Her husband was Walter William Aydon and he was 64 when he married 47-year-old Muriel<sup>17</sup>. She was presumably listed as a widow,

and he was definitely a widower having lost his first wife Edith in 1927 in Bengal. Walter was a retired Indian Army veteran who had lived for a long time in India. Walter and Edith had one surviving daughter, Amy, who remained in Bengal when her father returned to England.

Sadly married life did not last long for the couple as Walter died in July 1939<sup>18</sup>. A small mention in the Buckingham Advertiser<sup>19</sup> states that 'he died in Crewe and was buried on 15 July. He was the husband of Mrs Aydon, the former head of Nash Junior School'.

The newspaper has got this wrong however, as Walter died at their new home in Ellington, where Muriel has become head of the village school. For some reason he was taken to Crewe for burial<sup>20</sup> - perhaps she is thinking ahead to the days when she retires back home to Crewe.

What also transpired was that Muriel lost her father William on 23 June 1939<sup>21</sup> and had probably returned to Crewe at least in time for his funeral on 27 June, if not before. It must have been a terrible shock for Muriel to lose these two men so close to each other. Incidentally, William's obituary in the Crewe Chronicle<sup>22</sup> stated that, despite working as a railway clerk most of his life, he also taught shorthand for many years at the Mechanic's Institute and at the Borough Evening Schools. Of his other children, Constance and Wilfred both went into teaching as well.

When the 1939 Register<sup>23</sup> was taken Muriel was listed as head teacher at a school in Ellington, Huntingdonshire, residing in the schoolhouse. Her son Richard was with her and was now called Richard Aydon. Within a few weeks she had established the first branch of the Women's Institute in Ellington and had been elected their President in recognition<sup>24</sup>. The following year she became involved with the local Women's Voluntary Service and was nominated Chairman of the branch. At this stage of the war knitting for the soldiers on the frontline is their priority.

No mention of Muriel's years of teaching in Huntingdonshire can be found, as there are no newspapers archived for that area between 1899 and 1950.

Muriel suffered another personal tragedy in 1950 with the suicide of her beloved sister Bessie. Local papers<sup>25</sup> report that Bessie had been cruelly abandoned by her husband, a well-known local auctioneer, who had gone off to live with a married woman and refused all contact with Bessie. He denied all allegations. She tragically gassed herself and her little dog in the living room of her marital home.

Muriel is still living in Huntingdon in 1953 as she can be found in the phone book, at the School House in Great Stukeley.<sup>26</sup> However in 1954 she was elected Treasurer of the Crewe branch of the WEA so must be back in Crewe.<sup>27</sup>

She was in fact living in her old family home at 26 Broad Street (was 26 Cemetery Road until 1939). Her parents lived there all their lives, and after their father's death Constance and her family occupied it for a while.

Muriel died at the age of 72 on 5 April 1963<sup>28</sup>, at her family home. Her funeral took place at St Paul's Church on 16 April and she was buried at Crewe Cemetery. Her funeral was attended by a great many people and over 2 dozen wreaths received. Perhaps the best way to sum up Muriel is in the words of Malcolm Pittock, the WEA tutor organiser who wrote an Appreciation for the Crewe Chronicle of 20 April<sup>29</sup>.

*We in the WEA in Crewe were saddened by the death of Mrs Muriel Aydon. Our movement has lost a devoted friend. She first became connected with the WEA in Crewe in 1913 when, five years after the branch had been founded, she joined the class on economics. Several years later she herself acted as tutor for class on industrial history at Shevington. She left Crewe in the early 1920s, but wherever she went*

*she became active in the local branch. On her return to Crewe 30 years later she immediately got in touch with the branch here and eagerly began to take up the threads again after her long absence. She held the office of Treasurer for several years, was a delegate to the district council to just before her death and was also President of the branch. In 1959 it was she who compiled and partly wrote the pamphlet '50 Years of Adult Education' which was issued to celebrate the jubilee of the Crewe branch.*

*No enumeration of the offices she held, however can do justice to her tireless work on behalf of the WEA. She wrote letters, paid visits, made telephone cold calls ceaselessly, frequently dipping into her own pockets to pay for advertisement of the class programme of the branch, and until just before her death regularly offered hospitality for branch meetings. Her interest in the affairs of the WEA never flagged; even when her hold on life was slipping she still continued writing letters on WEA affairs, and in the depths of this last bitter winter insisted on attending a meeting of a particular class by taxi, even though she was not fit to do so.*

*Mrs Aydon was, of course, interested not only in adult education but in education of all kinds, and in many other matters also. She attended the Crewe Training College, spent much of her life in the teaching profession, and when she retired was head mistress of a village school in Huntingdonshire. After her retirement which coincided with her return to Crewe, she still did an occasional spot of teaching for the local authority: she helped out at Edleston Rd school for several weeks and later taught an epileptic pupil at his home. A member of the Cheshire Historical Society, one of her abiding interests was local history. She did a great deal of work on parish records and churchwardens accounts, frequently bringing out with a shrewd comment the human implications of a particular item. She had also a lifelong interest in the Guide movement and was a member of the Trefoil guild. The WVS on*



*the Women's Institute were likewise movements which claimed her allegiance.*

*Mrs Aydon was a kindly and generous woman always ready to seize any opportunity of showering gifts on her friends. My wife and I have reason to be grateful for her many acts of generosity towards ourselves, but one instance may serve to show the extent of her kindness a month or so ago. Hearing that my wife was confined to bed with a slipped disc, she sent through a tin of chicken, although at that time she was clearly a dying woman. She was also very eager to lend books, never seeming to worry whether they were returned or not. It must have been getting on for a dozen books of hers which I shall have to return to her executors. Her interest in people was another of her distinguishing traits. She would tell anecdote after anecdote of the doings of others often interlarding them with comments which showed a shrewd observation of human nature.*

*Of course she had her faults too. Probably as a result of advancing years she sometimes became obsessional about people and used to worry unduly about small matters, which sometimes led her to injure others without her really realising the implications of what she was doing. But none of us is free from warts.*

*Mrs Aydon will be much missed and long remembered by those of us in the WEA both for her personal kindness and a lifetime's work for adult education.*

Muriel sounds like an inspiring woman, many would say ahead of her time. Perhaps this should end with her own words, taken from the pamphlet she helped write in 1959<sup>29</sup>.

*Education must be a dominating concern in our modern state - the most mature of democratic states. We have to train in increasing numbers scientists, technologists, technicians, administrators. More and more people too will be on routine work or watching automatic*

*machines. Creative interest must be found in leisure for otherwise we may find that we have sold our souls for a mess of pottage.*

## ADDENDUM

We are very lucky today that so many historic documents are kept in local archives. One such document is a letter<sup>31</sup> in the Cheshire Archives written by Muriel. In 1952 she wrote to the Head of Crewe Secondary School (CSS), which she had attended from 1903 to 1908. She wished to award a prize for the girl who showed most public spirit, in memory of her husband Walter Aydon. The prize was to be for £2 2/- awarded yearly. Muriel wrote twice as the first time her letter was not replied to nor was her cheque cashed.

She reflected on being terrified of the Headmaster she encountered at CSS, Mr D H McCurtain, so much so that she had a breakdown at the age of 14. She described him as a fiery Scottish Presbyterian but wondered why, at their daily assemblies, all he did was take the register rather than start the school day with a prayer or religious teaching. Acknowledging that most children went to Sunday school until after the First World War (WWI) she supposed this might be the reason. Muriel makes a point in this letter of saying that Sunday school disappeared from life after the WWI “The first war, the unemployment and disillusionment that followed, bred widespread cynicism - the damage done to the spiritual life of the nation has never been repaired. The next generation of children just weren't sent to Sunday school unless you felt like you ought to be out of the way while father read the paper”.

There were other staff at the school that were much loved. Mr Hepenstall, the Physics teacher was very popular but ill health led him to South Africa where he sadly died young. Another teacher who also went to South Africa was the brilliant Mr M A Jackson ‘whose English and History lessons were a joy’. He became a professor but suffered an untimely death there. They had a charming French mistress who showed great patience over their halting efforts, and an elocution mistress who was very ‘down’ on the men. Perhaps one teacher who helped form Muriel into the woman she became was Mr Claybourn,

the Civics teacher. She credits him with laying the foundation for her interest in social life and welfare. He taught them 'something about service to the community and citizenship that bore fruit early'.

Muriel points out that when she was at secondary school women did not have the vote. In her last year at school she was joined by Agnes Plant and the two young women wrote papers on the rights of women. However Muriel noted that the young men in their class were 'frankly derisive'. This did not deter the pair and, with an election approaching, they headed to the local town hall on the night of a political meeting. Upon arriving there they were stopped by one of their male classmates, Dicky Bird. (His name was actually Dicky Sparrow and he was sadly killed in WWI). Dicky refused to let the girls into the meeting despite their arguing and coaxing. As they were leaving a steward approached them 'surveyed the two small females and instructed Dicky Bird to put us alone in a gallery and mount guard, ready to throw us out if we made any scene'. They did not make a scene and thoroughly enjoyed their favoured position to watch proceedings.

Muriel states in her letter that any of the pupils staying on at CSS until the age of 16 were expected to go into teaching or the Civil Service. However the town was also in the fortunate position of having a Mechanics Institute where budding engineers could go for scholarships given by the LNW Railway. This led to some of her fellow male pupils going in this direction and gaining employment in the future as heads of Technical, Gas Engineers etc.

Unfortunately, as Muriel starts to talk more about her own aspirations the document ends, presumably with pages lost.

***Narrative by Helen Barber***

## References

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- <sup>3</sup> Crewe Chronicle, 15 August 1908, page 8
- <sup>4</sup> CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe
- <sup>5</sup> Teachers' Registration Council Registers 1914-1948 accessed via [FindMyPast.co.uk](https://findmypast.co.uk)
- <sup>6</sup> Crewe Chronicle?
- <sup>7</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Albert Mansbridge". Encyclopaedia Britannica, 18 Aug. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Albert-Mansbridge>. Accessed 24 August 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> 1921 census of England & Wales accessed via [FindMyPast.co.uk](https://findmypast.co.uk)
- <sup>9</sup> General Register Office; United Kingdom; Reference: Volume 4a, Page 940
- <sup>10</sup> Chelmsford Chronicle 02 February 1923, page 7
- <sup>11</sup> England & Wales, Electoral Registers 1910-1932, Parliamentary County of Essex, South-Eastern Division
- <sup>12</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 27 July 1935, page 2
- <sup>13</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 19 July 1937, page 6
- <sup>14</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 13 Feb 1937, page 5
- <sup>15</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 22 May 1937, page 5
- <sup>16</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 25 Sept 1937, page 7
- <sup>17</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916-2005, General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 3a; Page: 4371
- <sup>18</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916-2007, General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 3b; Page: 314
- <sup>19</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 25 July 1939, page 7
- <sup>20</sup> UK, Burial and Cremation Index, 1576-2014, Deceased Online; United Kingdom; Deceased Online Burial Indexes
- <sup>21</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916-2007, General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 8a; Page: 404
- <sup>22</sup> Crewe Chronicle 01 July 1939, page 9
- <sup>23</sup> 1939 England and Wales Register: The National Archives; Kew, London, England; 1939 Register; Reference: Rg 101/6355a
- <sup>24</sup> Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press 28 Oct 1939, page 5
- <sup>25</sup> Nantwich Chronicle, Nantwich 9 Dec 1950
- <sup>26</sup> BT Archives; London, England; British Phone Books 1880-1984
- <sup>27</sup> Crewe Chronicle 12 June 1954, page 9
- <sup>28</sup> England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995
- <sup>29</sup> Crewe Chronicle, 20 April 1963, page 6
- <sup>30</sup> Nantwich Chronicle, 2 June 1962, page 3
- <sup>31</sup> Memoirs of Muriel Aydon (nee Riley) 1903-1908, Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, SL 236/16/21