

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



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.

Eliza Margaret Ferns's Story

Eliza, as with a lot of the other girls sent to the Leeds Industrial School, proved quite problematic to research despite having some quite detailed information on the admission sheet. A brief history and explanation of the school can be found on the Few Forgotten website, along with the stories of many of the other girls admitted to the school.¹

Eliza's Admission Record

According to the admission sheet for Eliza, she was committed to six years at the school by stipendiary magistrate Mr Bruce on 3 September 1869, when she was recorded as being nine years of age and having been born in 'Mexbro'.² No height was mentioned but other physical details included the fact she had light brown hair, blue eyes, was of slender build and had a light complexion. Eliza has reportedly attended school and was able to read and write a little and carry out simple addition.³

¹ See - <https://www.fewforgottenwomen.com/general-4-1>

² Mexbro is a shortened form of Mexborough, part of Doncaster, Yorkshire

³ West Yorkshire Reformatory School Records 1856-1922, originals at West Yorkshire Archives Service WRT/1/72-77, 81-84 accessible on www.ancestry.co.uk

The section devoted to parents and other relations and friends is where the information became very challenging. The form states her parents as being John and Eliza,⁴ John listed as a painter by occupation, is said to have deserted Eliza three times and been in prison once. At the time he had been 'away' for four years, whether this meant in prison or just missing is not clear. He was also thought to be possibly dead or living with another woman. Eliza's mother was ill and not able to work and was in receipt of relief. An aunt by the name of Sarah Ann Rhodes and another called Hannah are mentioned, along with a Mrs Sunderland, cap manufacturer and a Mrs Tenant, these are all people who had knowledge of or been looking after young Eliza.⁵ You will read later how, after researching the family, some of this information has been proved to be not quite accurate.

Eliza's crimes, misdemeanours and previous character are catalogued, these include

- Disobedient for two years
- Wandering⁶
- Keeping the company of thieves⁷
- Staying out at night
- Lying
- Swearing at her mother
- Throwing things at her mother while the woman was ill in bed
- Stealing things from her mother's house and from neighbours
- Being drunk more than once
- Going to bed with a boy, with her clothes off and being with him all day
- Both of them having got spirits to drink and being drunk

Finally finishing off with the line, '*She is most depraved*'.⁸

⁴ With both Eliza and her mother sharing the same Christian name, I will occasionally differentiate between them by using Eliza senior or Eliza junior

⁵ Ibid

⁶ If you were found "wandering" then the assumption was that you were a vagrant and vagrants were beggars. See also

⁷ Poor Law Amendment Act, 1844 and District Schools Act, 1848. The Industrial Schools Acts of 1857 and 1861 also empowered the state to send certain children to certified industrial schools which included children under 14 who had been found begging, wandering, destitute, homeless or frequenting 'the company of thieves'. Also eligible were children under 12 who had committed an offence punishable by prison and children under 14 whose parents were unable to control. Following the late nineteenth-century education acts, children who did not attend school regularly could also be admitted to industrial schools.

⁸ West Yorkshire Reformatory School Records 1856-1922, originals at West Yorkshire Archives Service WRT/1/72-77, 81-84 accessible on www.ancestry.co.uk

Searching for Eliza

The search for Eliza, or perhaps more to the point, verifying the details on the admission sheet, ran into difficulties from the very beginning with her name. Her surname, Ferns, has been spelt or transcribed in several ways; Fern, Fearn, Fearne, Fearn, Fearn, Fearn and finally Furn. The most common spelling and that on her birth certificate is Fearn, so I will use that spelling throughout this report. Eliza Margaret Fearn was born on 31 March 1860 at Number 2 Higgins Place, Hunslet, Leeds to James Fearn, house painter, and his wife Eliza, nee Rhodes,⁹ so not John as suggested on the Industrial School admission sheet. Eliza was baptised in St Peter's Church, Leeds on 11 June 1860.¹⁰ A year later, as recorded in the 1861 census, the family can be found living at 19 Dewsbury Road, Hunslet with Eliza senior's brother William and wife Elizabeth, James is again noted as a painter.¹¹ Ten years later young Eliza is in the Leeds Ragged School, still serving her sentence, having been found guilty of the list of misdemeanours previously described.¹² Her mother can be found living at 186 Quarry Hill in the north east ward of Leeds, she describes herself as a widow and an upholster and has two lodgers living with her, as well as a five year old child, Henry Thomas Nettleton.¹³ Henry turns out to be the lynchpin that helped me track down the names of the other people on the list of relations and friends on Eliza's admission record, more of that further down this narrative.

James, who by 1871, if Eliza senior's census return is to be believed had died. I couldn't positively identify a death and could find nothing in the criminal and prison records online that I could definitely say was James, the newspapers not being very helpful on the matter either. I was disappointed that I couldn't find anything about Eliza being committed to the Industrial School in the local press, especially as some of the 'crimes' she was accused of seem perhaps newsworthy.

Eliza junior next appears in the records in 1879 and sadly it is her death that is being recorded. At the tender age of 18, on 4 January, she died from a tumour of the neck, her mother was present, and they were both living at 12 Grattan Street, Leeds at that time.¹⁴ Eliza was noted

⁹ Marriage Certificate, James Fearn and Eliza Rhodes, 7 May 1848, West Yorkshire Marriage and Banns accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk; Birth Certificate, Eliza Margaret Fearn, 31 March 1860

¹⁰ West Yorkshire Births and Baptisms, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹¹ England and Wales 1861 Census, RG9, Hunslet Registration District, Piece 3366

¹² England and Wales 1871 Census, RG10, Leeds Registration District, Piece 4555

¹³ England and Wales 1871 Census, RG10, Leeds Registration District, Piece 4554

¹⁴ Death Certificate of Eliza Margaret Ferns, [subsequently corrected to Fearn] 4 January 1879;

as a domestic servant and she was buried on the very same day at the Beckett Street Cemetery.¹⁵ Where Eliza was employed is unknown and again there was nothing in the newspapers about her death, she does seem to have had a very short and troubled life.

Tracking down Eliza's 'Other Relations and Friends'

Eliza's admission sheet mentions two aunts called Sarah Ann Rhodes and Hannah Rhodes, as well as a Mrs Sunderland of Albion Street, a cap manufacturer and finally a Mrs Tennant '*do*' meaning ditto, whether this meant that she also lived in Albion Street or was also a cap manufacturer was at first unclear. Eliza senior was the daughter of shoemaker Sydney Rhodes and his wife Izetta, nee Kitching, Sydney died on 15 August 1868 and Izetta on 2 October 1867.¹⁶ Eliza was one of at least six children born to the couple, one of which was a Sarah Ann.¹⁷ By 1869, the time of Eliza junior's committal Sarah Ann was married and living in Norfolk so I doubt whether she would have been of any help to Eliza or her mother.¹⁸ I cannot find a Hannah Rhodes, although in the 1851 census there is a Hannah Thackery, wife of Jack, living with Sydney and this maybe the Hannah being referred to.¹⁹

The other two women, Mrs Sunderland and Mrs Tennant, prove to be related to Eliza and her mother, and it was by tracing five-year-old Henry Thomas Nettleton, living with Eliza senior in 1881, that I was able to find the connection.²⁰ Henry was born on 2 June 1875 at 27 Hilary Street, Leeds to commercial traveller Walter Nettleton and Angela, nee Sunderland.²¹ Angela herself was the daughter of cap manufacturer Henry Sunderland and his wife, also called Angela, nee English. Henry's maternal aunt Eliza Rhodes, living with the family in 1861, was the sister of Sydney Rhodes, grandfather of Eliza Fearn junior.²² Mrs Sunderland, as mentioned in the admission record is Angela Sunderland, wife of Henry, his cap making

¹⁵ Beckett Street Cemetery, 1845-1987 Non-Conformists. Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁶ Marriage of Sydney Rhodes and Izot [sic] Kitching, 27 May 1817, England Select Marriages 1538-1973, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk; Marriage Certificate, James Fearn and Eliza Rhodes, 7 May 1848, West Yorkshire Marriage and Banns accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk; Beckett Street Cemetery, 1845-1987 Non-Conformists. Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁷ England and Wales 1841 Census, HO107, Leeds Registration District, Piece 1347; England and Wales 1851 Census, HO107, Leeds Registration District, Piece 2320.

¹⁸ Marriage Certificate of Jacob Lamb and Sarah Ann Rhodes, 30 January 1839, Norfolk, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1938, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁹ England and Wales 1851 Census, HO107, Leeds Registration District, Piece 2320.

²⁰ England and Wales 1881 Census, RG11, Leeds Registration District, Piece 4532

²¹ Birth Certificate of Henry Thomas Nettleton, 2 June 1875

²² England and Wales 1861 Census, RG9, Hunslet Registration District, Piece 3337; Marriage Certificate of Walter Nettleton and Angela Sunderland, 6 October 1869, West Yorkshire, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1813-1935, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

business, based at Albion Street, is referred to in the local press on a number of occasions.²³ That just leaves Mrs Tennant, who turns out to be Jane, another daughter of Henry and Angela Sunderland, Jane married John William Tennant in 1862, and lived with her parents in Albion Street after his death.²⁴ These women although somewhat distant relations to Eliza junior seem to be regular contact with her mother as it later transpires that Eliza senior took guardianship of Henry Thomas Nettleton, the familial connection seemed to have remained strong for many years.

Henry had three sisters, Louisa Elizabeth, Florence Angela, and Gertrude Augusta and I found all of three of them in either Canada or Australia from the late 1870s onwards.²⁵ Louisa and Florence emigrated to Canada as part of a group of destitute children sent under the British Home Children scheme by Maria Rye.²⁶ They arrived in Quebec aboard the SS Sardinian on 14 June 1879.²⁷ Gertrude remained in the UK, she can be found living with her uncle George Nettleton in 1881, why only her younger sisters were sent to Canada is unclear, but 1886 Gertrude makes her way to Australia, arriving aboard the Garonne on 30 May 1886.²⁸ Sadly on 6 November 1887 Louisa took her own life. A verdict of '*self-destruction while temporarily insane*' was reached at the inquest into her death.²⁹ The fact that two of the sisters were sent to Canada as Home Children suggests that their parents were possibly deceased, I found a death for their father Walter in 1877 but I cannot find a death for Angela, the mother.³⁰

This brings me back to Henry Thomas Nettleton, the brother of these girls, he was not sent to Canada because he was being looked after by Eliza Fearn senior.³¹ On 5 February 1886 Henry was admitted the same Industrial School as Eliza junior, after being sentenced to six years,

²³ *Wakefield Free Press*, 22 August 1868, 3

²⁴ Marriage Certificate of John William Tennant and Jane Augusta Sunderland, 9 December 1862, West Yorkshire, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1813-1935, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²⁵ GRO Birth Indexes, 1870 September Quarter, Leeds District, Vol 9b, Page 396; GRO Birth Indexes, 1871 December Quarter, Leeds District, Vol 9b, Page 379; GRO Birth Indexes, 1873 June Quarter, Leeds District, Vol 9b, Page 573; Death of Thomas Chiswell, husband of Florence Angelica Nettleton via Ontario Deaths 1869-1948; Marriage of Gertrude Augusta Nettleton, Sydney, Australia Anglican Parish Registers 1814-2011; *The Daily Sentinel-Review [Woodstock, Ontario]*, 11 November 1887, 4

²⁶ For details on Maria Rye see <https://britishhomechild.com/resources/sending-agencies-organizations/maria-rye/>

²⁷ Canada Incoming Passenger Lists, 1865-1935 accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²⁸ England and Wales 1881 Census, RG11, Lancaster Registration District, Piece 4262; Victoria, Australia, Assisted and Unassisted Passenger Lists 1839-1923

²⁹ *The Daily Sentinel-Review [Woodstock, Ontario]*, 11 November 1887, 4; *Sarnia Observer*, 11 November 1887, 5

³⁰ Death Certificate, Walter Nettleton, 31 October 1877

³¹ England and Wales 1881 Census, RG11, Leeds Registration District, Piece 4532

accused under the Industrial Schools Act of 1866 of habitual wandering. His guardian was noted as the widow Eliza Fearn, a carpet sewer living in 12 Grattan Street. She is described as having a poor income but was honest.³² It seems then that Eliza's great nephew was allowed to 'wander' just as her own daughter had. Henry returned to the care of Eliza by 1891, the pair are still living in Grattan Street but at number 13, 15-year-old Henry was employed in a cloth mill.³³ Eliza Fearn senior died on 22 November 1897 of a cerebral apoplexy, she was noted as being the widow of James Fearn.³⁴

To round off this complicated family story. Eliza senior's charge Henry Nettleton married on 23 November 1895, he was noted as a rivetter, his bride was 18 year old Sarah Ann Green.³⁵ The couple had a son, Walter born on 1 October 1896, sadly Henry died a few years later on 12 November 1899 of pneumonia.³⁶ I cannot find what happened to Sarah but their son Walter emigrated to Canada, possibly to be with his sister, he married and raised a family, and even enlisted in the Canadian Army to fight in WWI.³⁷ This story at first glance seemed a simple one of a poor young girl, with a family who were not perhaps the most attentive or supportive, who goes astray and died young, however in truth there seems to have been a strong familial network, across both the years and the huge expanse of the Atlantic.

Narrative by Margaret Roberts Few Forgotten Women Team

³² West Yorkshire Reformatory School Records 1856-1922, originals at West Yorkshire Archives Service WRT/1/72-77, 81-84 accessible on www.ancestry.co.uk

³³ England and Wales 1891 Census, RG12, Leeds Registration District, Piece 3705

³⁴ Death Certificate, Eliza Fearn, 22 November 1897

³⁵ Marriage Certificate of Henry Thomas Nettleton and Sarah Ann Green, 23 November 1895, West Yorkshire, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1813-1935, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁶ Canada, Word War I CEF Personnel Files, 1914-18, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk; Death Certificate, Henry Thomas Nettleton, 12 November 1899

³⁷ WWI CEF Attestation Papers, 1914-18, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk; 1921 Census of Canada, RG31, Wentworth, Ontario; 1931 Census of Canada, RG31, Hamilton, Ontario; Archives of Ontario; Toronto, Ontario, Canada; *Registrations of Marriages, 1869-1928*

