

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.

Margaret Conway's Story

Margaret was listed on the 1901 Census¹ as being an inmate of St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory in Ashford, Middlesex, the place that female, catholic prisoners were sent from the London courts. No occupation is given and no place of birth, but she is said to be aged 36 years, giving her a likely year of birth in 1864/5, although she might have been under punishment and may not have given this information herself, as it is so sparse. There are no records associated with the Inebriate Reformatory to corroborate this census record. The only other census record that could be found was the 1881 Census² that gives her age as 20 years, indicating a birth year of 1859/60 and a place of birth as Cardiff, Wales, but again, as this was a boarding house, it is unclear if she was asked to provide these details herself.

I looked for a birth record in Cardiff, Glamorganshire on FreeBMD, but was not able to find one for 1859/60 or 1864/5. There was a report in the England and Wales Criminal Registers³ of a Hannah, alias Margaret Conway, being acquitted of Larceny about the person in January 1874³, but as this was in Monmouthshire, it is unclear if this is the same person, but she does have a number of previous convictions for assault and drunkenness. Would this be said of an 14 - 18-year-old girl?

There is a Margaret Conway born in the June quarter of 1860⁴ in St Pancras and she appears on the 1861 Census⁵ record the daughter of John Conway, 39 a labourer, born in Ireland and his wife Margaret. However, in 1866 there is a report⁶ of a burglary in a dwelling house of David Middleton (who ran the lodging house) of a dispatch box and other items. John Conway pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 5 years penal servitude. In another record⁷ it states that he was held at Millbank prison, Westminster which was the holding prison prior to prisoners being transported, but he might not to have gone to Australia as a John Conway is in the UK in the 1871 census⁸ out of employment and living in a lodging house owned by William Lang. This John Conway appears for the next 3 years in the workhouse records for St Pancras and Highgate Infirmary⁹ but there is no sign of his wife, Margaret or the children. This may not be the same John Conway, but something must have impacted Margaret's life as in August 1872, a Margaret Conway is in Lambeth Workhouse aged 12 years and is discharged 'into the hands of the police'.⁹

There is nothing more in London about Margaret, unless she went to Wales (see above) but if she did, she was back in London by 1881 as she appears in the census for New King Street², living in a lodging house and working as a

charwoman. The next report of a Margaret Conway is when she and her 'husband' Thomas are admitted to Bedford workhouse in September 1881⁹ on their way to Luton. Why they would be in Bedford when they were living in London suggests that this might not be 'our' Margaret. However, the couple are again in the Bedford area in 1885 and charged with concealing a pregnancy and wilfully depositing a dead body of a male child in a hedge¹⁰. The trial lasted 2 weeks, but it was decided that there was not enough evidence to convict, and they were both discharged.

Whatever the reason that Margaret began to drink, she was a regular in the Greenwich workhouse⁹ for the next couple of years, having 8 admissions and discharges. She also became a regular attendee at court from 1885, being charged with being drunk and disorderly¹¹, drunk and incapable¹², drunk and using obscene language¹³ and causing wilful damage¹⁴ by breaking shop and pub windows – usually after they refused to serve her! By 1899, when she was sent to the St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, she had served nearly 60 sentences in prison,¹⁵ over the 15 years, for being Drunk and Disorderly and, when not in prison, was being admitted or discharged from Greenwich workhouse¹⁶ 50 times during the same period.

Her 3-year sentence at St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory did not stop her drinking. She was charged with being drunk and disorderly in Deptford Broadway only a week after being released from St Joseph's.¹⁷ She spent the rest of the time, when not in prison, again in Greenwich workhouse during 1901/2 and had her picture taken for the UK Register of Habitual Criminals in 1903.¹⁸

She is described as having no fixed abode and 'usually residing at a lodging house in Mint Street, Borough'. She gives her age as 39 (but she was about 45!), height 4' 8", of slight build with a sallow complexion. She had brown hair, brown eyes with a broad nose that is bent, with a long face and pock marks on the sides of her mouth. She is described as a street hawker who 'frequents the neighbourhood of High Street Deptford'. She was convicted at Greenwich court on the 22nd of January 1903, one-month hard labour and ordered to find surety of £10 for 6 months and if default, 6 months' imprisonment (surety not found). This record in January 1903 is the last record that I could find for Margaret Conway, possibly as the record sets all end about this period – not bad for an unknown woman from the 1901 census!

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Sources

- 1 1901 Census St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex RG13 1171 folios 12-13
- 2 1881 Census New King Street, Deptford *RG11*; *Piece: 705*; *Folio: 16*; *Page: 25*; *GSU roll: 1341164*
- 3 England and Wales Criminal Registers 1791-1892 - 6 January 1874 Monmouthshire
- 4 <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?cite=klfLwq8NWbBzOajSy9Hlfw&scan=1>
- 5 1861 Census entry for St Pancras, London *RG 9*; *Piece: 115*; *Folio: 43*; *Page: 26*; *GSU roll: 542576*
- 6 London, England Proceedings of the Old Bailey and Ordinary's Account Index 1674-1913 - August 1866
- 7 UK After Trial Calendar of Prisoners 1855-1931 – August 1866
- 8 1871 Census entry for Marylebone, London *RG10*; *Piece: 167*; *Folio: 33*; *Page: 60*; *GSU roll: 823302*

- 9 London, England Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records 1764-1921 at Ancestry.co.uk
- 10 Hertfordshire and Cambridge Reporter and Royston Crow – 13/11/1885
- 11 Woolwich Herald – 13/08/1897
- 12 Police Gazette – 13/12/1890
- 13 West Kent Argus and Borough of Lewisham News – 06/07/1897
- 14 Woolwich Gazette – 08/08/1890
- 15 West Kent Argus and Borough of Lewisham News – 13/12/1898
- 16 London, England Poor Law Hospital Admissions and Discharges 1842-1918 at Ancestry.co.uk
- 17 West Kent Argus and Borough of Lewisham News – 11/07/1902
- 18 UK Register of Habitual Criminals – published in the Police Gazette - January 1903 No 91