

# *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 and Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey.*

## **Mary Husher's Story**

Mary Husher was an inmate of St Joseph's on the night of the Census of 1901. When I started to investigate her life I was puzzled as I found that having been born Bridget Sullivan she was also known as Mary Usher and Bridget Husher and Bridget Usher. I am convinced that despite the different names, she is the same person.

According to the census of 1901 Mary was born in 1866 in Knightsbridge<sup>1</sup> and she was Roman Catholic. Checking the census of 1871<sup>2</sup> I found her mother and father were Mary and John Sullivan who were both born in Ireland. There were at least 6 children in the family. The youngest 5 were at the Ragged School in 1871. Her father was a bricklayer. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find any of the Sullivans in the BMD records.

In the 1881 Census<sup>3</sup> Bridget Sullivan was a servant at 27 Ovington Square, Kensington. This was the year she married James Albert Husher, her address at her marriage being 44 Yeomans Row, Brompton.<sup>4</sup> Bridget married James on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1881 at the Brompton Oratory, confirming the fact that she was a Catholic.

The couple started a family the following year when James Albert born 11<sup>th</sup> November 1882. He was followed by Ada Mary born 25<sup>th</sup> November 1886, John William born 1891, Annie born 1894 and Alice Ellen born 1905. There is evidence that she had other children which I will come to later in the story. I have found 2 of the children, James Albert and Ada Mary baptized at St John's, World's End.<sup>5</sup>

Tragedy struck in January 1886 when 3 year old James Albert died when his nightshirt caught alight at home at 41 Dieppe Street, West Kensington. This was reported in the Liverpool Mercury on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1886. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death.<sup>6</sup>

In the census of 1891 Bridget and James are living at 51 Slaidburn Street, Chelsea with two other families and their two children, Ada Mary and John W.<sup>7</sup> Annie was born in 1894.<sup>8</sup>

My first sighting of Mary in the press was in 1887.

*West London Observer 27th February 1887*

*Bridget Husher of Dieppe Street, Fulham was charged with assault on Mary Treaves. Bridget was accused of hitting the other woman, who lived in the same street, on the head with a poker. This happened on a Saturday night. Mrs*

*Treaves's husband said the accused then broke open the door on the Monday and threw water over him as he lay in bed. She had been drinking and was remanded for enquiry. (A week later it was reported that she was committed for 21 days).*

*Westminster and Pimlico News 12<sup>th</sup> February 1892*

*Moonshine is apt to go to the head, but Mary Usher, 26, married, of 51 Slaidburn Street, Chelsea, was so attracted by the real moon's watery beams on Saturday night that she paid a visit to the Man in the Moon, when she took it neat without. The consequence was that about the time the moon set she rose and made a great to-do outside the public house, when PC Hadaway 150B, was called upon to remove her to the station. She had been in trouble before, but the gaoler could not find the last date, and so she got off for 5s, or seven days and the curious warning that "if we had known what time you were here before it will be prison without a fine if you come here again."*

In 1899 we find a report in a local newspaper which seems to be the point when Mary was committed to St Joseph's. There must have been instances of Mary being in trouble with the law but I haven't been able to find any other reports between 1887 and 1899 yet:

*London Evening Standard 13<sup>th</sup> December 1899*

*Alice Arnold or Mary Usher, 34, described as an artificial flower maker, of Flood Street, Chelsea, was brought up after a week's remand, to be dealt with under the Inebriates Act. The prisoner's husband left her some time ago and she has since had no knowledge of his whereabouts. Her two children have been placed in Roman Catholic Institutions and after the police had proved five convictions*

*for drunkenness during the past twelve months, Mr Horace Smith told the prisoner she would be sent to an Inebriates Home at Ashford for two years. Prisoner was removed protesting she did not deserve this. Drink was her only failing.*

This ties in with the other information I have found regarding Mary's life with James. Mary's life was punctuated with admissions and discharges from the Britten Street Workhouse in Chelsea.<sup>9</sup> She can be found in the records on more than 25 occasions between 1894 and 1916. Her children, Ada Mary, John William and Annie were admitted to Exmouth Training Ship and RC Schools, Banstead Road School and Marlesford Lodge between 1898 and 1909.<sup>10</sup> After Mary was released from St Joseph's she seems to have kept on the straight and narrow for some time but can be found again in local newspapers from 1904 onwards:

*Chiswick Times 8<sup>th</sup> July 1904*

*Mary Husher, a married woman of Elbe Street, Townmead Road, Fulham was charged at Mortlake, with being drunk and disorderly and using obscene language. Her landlady said she had known her since February and had not so far as witness knew tasted drink and had not known her to use bad language. Mary was fined 10s or 3 days.*

*A Distressing Case Chelsea News and General Advertiser 27<sup>th</sup> October 1905*

*Mary Husher, 48, of 58 Elbe Street, Fulham and who was formerly well known in Chelsea as a woman of very intemperate habits, was before the magistrate on the charge of being drunk while having the care of an infant child at Slaidburn Street. A few years ago prisoner was constantly appearing for drunkenness and was sent to an Inebriates Home. There she behaved*

exceedingly well and since her release has kept out of trouble. As soon as she was in the dock, it was apparent that the prisoner was in a semi-hysterical condition. She had a clean-looking plump baby in her arms and said the Court missionary knew all about her. The child she had in her arms was by her husband and she was very sorry she had got into that trouble. Mr Horace Smith – You should not get drunk. Prisoner – I am doing my best. I went to the club at the St John's Mission Hall. I didn't give any trouble. I have kept out of this place. I took your advice, as the Court Missionary knows. Mr Horace Smith – you endangered the life of your child. You don't seem to think about that. It might have got killed. Prisoner – I have had ten children and never got one killed yet. Mr Horace Smith – You ought to be ashamed of yourself getting drunk in this way. After looking at the prisoner's record, Mr Horace Smith said it was difficult to know what to do with her. She would have to go to prison for a month's hard labour. On hearing this prisoner lost her head completely. "When I get out," she shouted, "I will get drunk every day". She also declared she would smash the windows. A few moments afterwards the Court Missionary said that prisoner was in a very hysterical condition. Had not the gaoler caught her child, no doubt it would have been very seriously hurt. Mr Horace Smith said he doubted the prisoner was sober that morning. His Worship directed that she should be charged with assaulting her child. When her temper had subsided somewhat the prisoner was brought in again. She cried piteously. "May I beg for mercy?" she said. "Do let me off this once. I have tried. I have not been here for months". Mr Horace Smith: That is what you have said before. Sergt Urry, the gaoler said that as the prisoner was leaving the court he heard her using bad language and went towards her. At that moment she threw her child down, but he managed to catch it when within a foot or so of the ground. Then prisoner rushed to a window and struck it with her fist, but not hard enough to break it.

*Two constables restrained her. Since then he had been obliged to get a constable to watch her as she had tried to injure herself by beating her head on the ground. Prisoner – I was heartbroken at the sentence of a month. I have worked hard. No policeman can say he has seen me about the streets. Just for a few minutes I didn't know what I was doing. I did not, really. I have tried to keep out of disgrace. I am very sorry. If you send me to prison it will kill the baby and not hurt me. Mr Horace Smith finally remanded prisoner. As soon as she got out of court again she struck the gaoler on the head.*

*A Very Merciful Decision - Westminster and Pimlico News 10<sup>th</sup> November 1905*

*Mary Usher, the woman who has been again and again remanded, the magistrate scarcely knowing what to do with her, was again brought up. For some years the prisoner lived in Slaidburn Street, Chelsea, and was constantly appearing at the Court up to three years ago. Then she was sent to an Inebriates House, and there she behaved exceedingly well. On her release she kept straight for a considerable time, but suddenly burst out again, got drunk, and injury to her child was narrowly avoided, as she threw it down when at the Police Court a fortnight ago. The gaoler caught it however. After this the prisoner had another fit of temper and struck the assistant gaoler on the head. Since she has been in custody the Court Missionary, who knows her history well, has interceded for her, and Mr Horace Smith, addressing prisoner, said: I shall bind you over to come up for judgement within a month. If you don't behave yourself properly you will be brought up, and I shall sentence you for these various assaults. I can give you 13 months in all, you know, and I shall do it because I don't know what else to do. I don't want to separate you from your baby. I want to be kind to you: everybody wants to be kind to you. I don't think you really knew what you were doing, but you know it all comes from drink. I*

*don't want to separate you from your baby. Do try and behave yourself quietly and reasonably. Prisoner promised to do so, and thanked his worship and the missionary.*

*Chelsea News and General Advertiser 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1909*

*Mary Usher, 43, of Markham Street, Chelsea, married, admitted being incapably drunk at Oakley Street, and was fined 5s or 5 days.*

*Serious Assault at Chelsea Workhouse - Chelsea News and General Advertiser 15<sup>th</sup> September 1916*

*Mary Bridget Usher, 53, an inmate of Chelsea Workhouse, Arthur Street, was charged with assaulting Ada Roberts, an inmate of the same workhouse, on Saturday evening. Prosecutrix, whose face was much disfigured by bruises, stated that about 5.30pm on Saturday she was cleaning a dormitory when prisoner entered and accused her of saying she had been out with one of the Workhouse men hoping in Kent. She denied having said it. Prisoner then exclaimed "I'll give you hopping" and attacked her with her fists, showing her no mercy. She punched her in the face about eight times, knocking her on to a bed. Her eyes were blackened and her head cut, there being a pool of blood in the bed. Mary was sentenced to 14 days hard labour.*

Mary's surviving children were Ada Mary, Annie, John William and Alice Ellen. Starting with John, the three eldest emigrated. John joined the army in England and eventually married and emigrated to Canada. Both Ada Mary and Annie emigrated to Boston, USA. Alice Ellen, whom I believe to be the baby who was caught by the gaoler, married in 1924. John William, her brother who had

emigrated to Canada, returned and was a witness at her wedding. Alice went to Canada after her husband died and, sadly, soon died there in 1948.

Mary died 10<sup>th</sup> November 1928. It was reported in the Westminster and Pimlico News as follows:

Fulham Woman Killed

*Crossing King's Road as if her mind were elsewhere, and looking neither left nor right, Mrs Bridget Usher aged 64 of 10 Cambria Street, Fulham, failed to hear the warning shout of the driver of an oncoming taxi-cab, and was knocked down. She was conveyed to the St Stephen's Hospital, Fulham Road, where she died from her injuries on Saturday.*

*An inquest was held at the Chelsea Guardians' offices, King's Road on Tuesday, Mr H H Oswald (the West London Coroner) sitting with a jury.*

*A plan prepared by PC Atlee 120B showed that the accident happened in King's Road opposite Cambria Street. The road at the spot, he said, is well lit and in good condition. The width of the road was 28'10".*

*The identifying witness was the husband, James Albert Usher, a general labourer, who said his wife was a woman of sober habits. Her eyesight and hearing were good and she was quite active on her feet. She left home at 5 o'clock on the afternoon of Wednesday November 7 to take a frock to her niece at War Seal Mansions, Walham Green and the next thing he heard of her was that "she was laying up the road run over". Witness immediately went up to King's Road and saw her lying opposite Cambria Street. She was bleeding from the head and unconscious. An ambulance was sent for and she was taken to St Stephen's hospital, where she died on Saturday morning.*



*An independent eyewitness, Clifford FG Melville, a laundry carman, of 118 Lower Richmond Road, Putney, stated that he was driving a van along King's Rad, towards Putney. A taxi, coming in the opposite direction, was keeping on its nearside. It was not very dark at the time, and witness did not notice whether the taxi lights were on.*

*The Coroner – what speed was it going? Witness – about 15 miles an hour, very moderate.*

*Mrs Usher was on the pavement on the taxi's nearside, and when the vehicle was about five feet from her she stepped off the pavement and walked into it. She did not look either way. The taxi driver swung the front of the cab to the off side but Mrs Usher was knocked down and rendered unconscious. The driver pulled up within a few feet. PC Stock 521B said he was called to the spot while on point duty at Harwood Road and he found Mrs Usher lying injured in the road. He bandaged her head as best he could and she was taken to hospital. PC Robinson 216B who saw the taxi driver soon after the accident said he was sober, and in a statement he said "The lady crossed from a turning in front of me. I shouted to her but she did not seem to hear me. I pulled up within three yards". PC King (Coroner's Officer) stated that another eye-witness had to attend West London Police Court that morning and was therefore unable to be present. He had, however, made a statement corroborating that of the driver of the taxi.*

*Dr DS Sandiland, medical superintendent at St Stephen's, said Mrs Usher regained consciousness a little, but was always confused. On Thursday last week she lost consciousness again, and coma became deeper until her death in the early hours of Saturday. An extensive fracture of the skull and laceration of the brain was confirmed by a post-mortem examination.*

*The taxi driver, Edward Charles Cole of 51 Aylmer Road, Shepherds Bush said he was employed by Karl Smits of Tadema Road, Chelsea and had driven a taxi for 21 years. When the accident occurred he was proceeding towards Victoria at 10 to 12 miles an hour, with a fare in the cab.*

*The Coroner: that was a slow pace to go with a fare?*

*Cole: It is a dangerous place, and I know it.*

*Continuing, witness said his cab lamps were on, and he had a clear road. As he approached Cornwall Street, he sounded his horn, as was his custom, and when he reached the corner Mrs Usher came out of the turning and ran into the road. Straight into the cab. He shouted to her and pulled towards the centre of the road.*

*The Coroner: Which way was she looking?*

*Cole: she had her head slightly bent down and was looking straight across the road. Three parts of the cab had passed her before I felt a slight jar, and I stopped dead.*

*In answer to a juryman, witness said Mrs Usher seemed to be preoccupied. Replying to Mr G Temple Martin (representing Mr Smits) witness said that in his 21 years on the road he had never been concerned before in an accident which involved personal injuries. The Coroner addressing the jury, said Mrs Usher made the mistake of not observing the rule of the road to look to the right when leaving the pavement and in the circumstances they could not blame the driver for what had happened.*

*The jury agreed by exonerating the driver from all blame and returning a verdict of accidental death.*

## Sources

1. St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex RG13 1171 folios 12-13
2. 1871 Census of England
3. 1881 Census of England
4. Marriage certificate
5. St John's, World's End, Parish Baptismal records
6. Liverpool Mercury
7. 1891 Census of England
8. BMD records 1837-1915
9. 1921 Census of England