

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 Ann Bennett

"Is she known?"

"Known, not arf", retorted the 33 year old, "wild, dishevelled, little woman in the dock" on 15th May 1903 who had been accused of "molesting gentlemen" on St John's Hill.

The gaoler produced the Black List, a record of habitual drunkards, where could be found Mary Ann Bennett's photograph and record. A record which 3 months earlier on 7th January had amounted to over 200 appearances in the dock. She had been warned by Mr Garratt of the South Western Police Court, that, should she appear again before him the she would be treated under the new Act. Long before this act MA had been charged on multiple occasions promising on one occasion in 1894 to return to her mother as she was too good to be sent to a home.

The Inebriates Act of 1898 allowed non-criminal inebriates to be admitted to reformatories for up to 3 years instead of the numerous small punishments for a month or so or a fine. This voiced a growing concern in the late 19th century about the abuse of alcohol and several movements to reduce the dependence on it had sprung up. The Temperance Movement and the British Society for the Study of Inebriety, who recognized alcoholism as a disease. The mandate for reform included rehabilitation and punishment. Inebriates who had committed a crime, which would have warranted imprisonment, could also be included. Institutions were state controlled, council supervised or private establishments. Retreats for inebriates had already been made provision for under the Habitual Drunkard's Act of 1879, however they were fee paying and therefore excluded the poor and working class, those actually most in need. Local authorities were to say the least, tardy in establishing the homes. 91% of inmates in the 11 establishments which had been opened by 1906 were women. This situation lasted until 1913. The 1902 amendment to the Licencing Act made it an offence for those identified as habitual drunkards (3 or more convictions) to attempt to purchase or consume intoxicating liquor. Publicans and other individuals would be prosecuted if they supplied drunkards with alcohol. The Black List was an attempt to aid licensees to identify those listed.

In May 1900 this "... undersized repulsive looking woman..." had according to the assistant gaoler been charged in every court in the Metropolis. Mary Ann's many appearances in the dock had usually been treated by her as a joke. On 15th May her singing and laughter in the cells, prior to being brought into the court could be heard in the court itself. However whether it was the production of the Black List which caused a change in her mood or the fact that she probably had nowhere to go, only having only come out of the workhouse the previous day, at the sentence of a fine of 20/- or 14 days she threatened her accusers, "When I come out again I'll work you for this, see if I don't"

Violence, bad language and improper behaviour were all characteristics of “undesirable” Mary Ann’s drunken state as again in October 1903 she was charged and received a fine of 40/- or 1 month. By December her offences were enough for her to be incarcerated for 12 months. However on the day after her release she had so celebrated her freedom, getting so drunk that falling on the floor and using foul language “this uncouth looking, half witted woman had to be stretchered away”. Her reaction to the sentence of a week in gaol was to clap her hands “gleefully” rejoicing that, “7 days lumme; I’ll sleep that away”. The judge commented that everything had been done for her. One thing that had been tried, three years previously, had been to admit her to Farmfield, a home for inebriate women.

The homes were an attempt to help women such as Mary Ann to escape the cycle of drunkenness, prison and return to drunkenness. As early as 15th September, 1900, Mary Ann had entered The Farmfield Reformatory at the age of 32. Over most of the period when Mary Ann appears in the newspapers she seems to have kept her age to around 33 years of age, with an occupation of laundress. Her entry in the Admissions Book records her as living at possibly 21, Wingfield Road, (which might have been Winfrith as recorded in the South Western Star newspaper report on 2nd October 1903) the same address as her mother. She was very small only 4’ 3” and about 8 stones in weight, of fair complexion, blue eyes and dark brown hair. Despite being at her mother’s address she was said to have left home at 14, having had no education, probably playing truant, as the reason for her offences was that she had fallen in with “bad companions” which had led to an “immoral life”. The record does show that Mary Ann had a child. There are no details.

The immediate cause of her incarceration in Farmfield was her appearance, before Mr C.F. Francis, magistrate, due to have been found by P.C Braddick, drunk and using foul language at Herne Hill. She was in a deplorable state, afraid and abusive. Her sentence was for 18 months. The

effect of the whiskey and rum, to which she was addicted, was to make her violent and intemperance was a constant state. Despite her constant intoxication, on examination at the home, her general state of health was good, all her organs being healthy with no reportable diseases but she did have an excitable mental state.

Was her prostitution a means to an end to get money for her whiskey and rum? The gaoler's comment that she was "a mental case" was probably more a layman's observation rather than a medical diagnosis but would have reflected attitudes at the time judging people's mental health by casual observation of behaviour. The record gave several treatments, including dietary and cell punishments, to deal with her bad and troublesome behaviour. The dietary regime might have been following guidelines issued by Dr.F.J. Gray of Old Park Hall Retreat in Staffordshire who recommended breakfast at 9 o'clock of porridge, followed by bacon and dried fish varied with eggs, sausages, bread and butter, jam and marmalade. Despite these treatments it would seem that they did not have any effect on Mary Ann's behaviour and on 17th September 1901 she was transferred to Aylesbury Women's Prison.

Aylesbury had formerly been a local prison but was converted by male prisoners in 1895 when it received its first female prisoners becoming a female only institution. Mary Ann's stay at Aylesbury lasted 5 months and she was returned to Farmfield on 17th February 1902. It was recorded that her behaviour had improved but on her release from Farmfield she was once again in the revolving door of prison, release, drink, bad behaviour and bad language, drunk and disorderly, charged again and brought to court and according to newspaper reports her life consisted of periods of imprisonment and sojourns in the workhouse.

Although Mary Ann was said to have left home at 14 there are glimpses that she remained in touch with her mother. On the admittance register both Mary Ann's and her mother's address are the same and it is

also the address given in the newspaper report in the South Western Star on 2nd October 1903. So what of Mary Ann's family? Using a wider address to search in Earlsfield, as the street was not very legible, they were first found in 1881 (RG11/657/20/34) at 4, Hill's Yard, Earlsfield, Wandsworth. Mrs Bennett was also a Mary Ann, a widow aged 42 and like her daughter was a laundress but she came from Thetford in Norfolk. Mary Ann's sister, Ellen, was 3 years older than her being 17 years old, again a laundress. Her birth place was Salt in Staffordshire. Ellen's baptism record on 27th March 1864, in the Staffordshire Collection of Parish Registers for Salt gave her father as Thomas Bennett, a railway labourer which probably accounted for their itinerant lifestyle. Ten years later in 1891 there was a totally different composition to the family. A 27 year old plasterer, William Leppard was the head. He had been born in Handsworth, Surrey. His wife was Ellen, who at 27 had been born in Salt Staffordshire. Was this a close enough match to be Mary Ann's sister? The couple had 4 children, Florence R. 6, William P. 5, Ellen 2, and Elizabeth 8 months. Mary Ann Bennett, mother, lived with them. She was 51 with occupation, sick monthly nurse from Norfolk. Was this another pointer to this being Mary Ann's family?

Without any further investigation this would probably be enough, however Mary Ann was not with them and she, in 1891, proved very elusive, was she in prison or the workhouse? It also proved more problematic finding a marriage for Ellen and William. There was no success looking for a marriage for Ellen Bennett and on the GRO there were no children surname Leppard, with mother's maiden name, Bennett. Turning to a marriage for William Leppard revealed a marriage in Wandsworth in December quarter 1882 (vol. 1d p.1155) but Ellen was Ellen Kinchin. Searching, the marriage of William and Ellen took place on 4th December 1882, William being 19 and a costermonger, his father John having the same occupation. Ellen was 18 and her father still Thomas but Thomas Kinchin, a labourer. 1882 would have been around the time when Mary Ann was recorded as leaving home. The children were recorded on the GRO with mother's maiden name Kinchin. Another conundrum appeared in the 1901 census for William and Ellen.

They had a visitor named James Russell aged 15. This was not unusual but in 1901 in Tooting Graveney St. Nicholas, Streatham, workhouse was Mary Ann Russell age 64, she was married, but a sick monthly nurse from Thetford, Norfolk. Was this Mary Ann Bennett's mother and the visitor, James, Mary Ann's son? There are several James Russells either in the workhouse or prison and one in the navy but I can find not definitive link. William and Ellen had 14 children. There is another Mary Ann Bennett with very similar details who appeared at The Old Bailey and details can be found at The Old Bailey Online site and Digital Panopticon but the offence, which included trying to commit suicide (against the law at the time) took place while the Mary Ann detailed above was already serving a 12 month prison sentence as recorded in the South Western Star of 30th Dec 1904, the gaoler reporting that Mary Ann had not been seen the court for some time (an unusual event) as she had only been released on the previous day from a 12 month prison sentence. The Old Bailey Mary Ann seems to have tried to commit suicide on several occasions. Bennett is not an uncommon name so it is possible there were 2.

What happened to Mary Ann after about 1904 is difficult to ascertain. The Farmfield register has written "dead by 1907" however the Mary Ann who died in 1907 is the death recorded in The Old Bailey Online / Digital Panopticon record for that Mary Ann and was a death in Liverpool. There are multiple entries in London workhouse entries for Mary Ann Bennetts which it is not possible to identify. She may have married, changed her name or even committed suicide and been an unidentified body. There was an entry for Mary Ann Bennett of the mother's age in a poor home in the same location that the Mary Ann Russell was found. Sadly mother and daughter appear to have faded from the identifiable records.

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Sources:

*Multiple entries in newspapers including South Western Star for 18th May 1900
30th December 1904*

2nd October 1903

15th May 1903

Halifax Evening Courier 7 Jan 1903

Reading Mercury 11th April 1903

Echo (London) 29th October 1894

Staffordshire Collection (baptisms Salt) accessed on FMP.

Habitual Criminals Register (Ancestry)

Census on Ancestry and FMP including RG11/657/20/34/72

RG12/449/88/23/138

RG13/485/154/21/139

RG14/2205/RD 26

RG13/480/43/23

RG14/2391/RD26

London, Church of England, Marriages and Banns, 1754-1938 (St. Anne's Wandsworth)

Searching on Ancestry, FMP and The Genealogist