

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.

Hilda A Marsh's Story

Hilda Amelia Marsh was a woman whose generous nature was recognised by so many friends and family that, at the end of her relatively short life, it was remarked upon in the local paper¹.

She was born in Street, Somerset, on 14 March 1897² less than a mile from The Grange, which opened its door to pupils as the Somerset School of Housewifery on 24 July³ the same year.

Hilda attended school at The Grange when she was 13 years old and could not have guessed that over 90 years later, the building would become home to a Trust caring for the archives and collections of C&J Clark Ltd, a firm that employed over 30 of her family members⁴. The world famous shoe manufacturers still have their base in Street, which was a village when Cyrus & James Clark started making footwear. Over time, the business expanded and they moved from employing home

In 1875 Fred's father Eli Marsh married again. His second wife was called Ellen Higgins¹⁵ and together they had 5 children. It may have been because there was little room in his father's home that in 1881 Fred lived in lodgings on the High Street and worked as a boot finisher¹⁶.

Hilda's mother

Hilda's mother Mary Ann Culliford, known as Polly⁴, was born on 9 November 1862¹⁷ in the small market town of Somerton, some 6 miles south of Street. Her parents were Charles, a sawyer, and Mary Culliford. They were both born in Somerton and may have been related to some degree, as they shared the same surname. They married in 1861¹⁸, though Mary had a daughter and son before that. (Both may have been Charles' children, as he was named as father on marriage certificates.) By the time Polly was 4 the family had moved to Street¹⁹, and the 1871 census shows Charles and Mary living there with their younger children²⁰. In 1881, Polly was a boot and shoe fitter, still living with her parents. Her eldest brother was a stone mason, though other family members worked in the shoe trade like her²¹.

Hilda and her parents

On 9 October 1883 Frederick Marsh married Mary Ann Culliford in the local Parish church²². The witnesses were Fred's eldest brother Hugh and Polly's sister Lucy.

In 1891 the couple lived close to the church and Fred's brother Robert lodged with them. Both men worked as shoemakers, while Polly was a mother to 5 young children, 4 daughters, Rosalie, Nelly, Ella Mary, and Frances May, and a son called Frederick Charles²³. Fred must have

Hilda's eldest sister, Rosalie was living in Burnham, Somerset, working in service²⁷. The rest of the children still lived at home, and Hilda's sisters Nelly and Ella were employed. Nelly as a domestic servant, while Ella worked in the shoe factory like her parents.

The Somerset School of Housewifery

In 1905, 1908 and 1909, Hilda's name appeared in the Central Somerset Gazette reporting her excellent attendance at school²⁸. This was preferred for girls applying for entrance to The Somerset School of Housewifery at The Grange. The course was "not the training of teachers, but to give girls such practical knowledge as will make them more useful in their parents' homes, or will enable them to enter the more skilled branches of domestic service, and will also be helpful to them when, later on, they have homes of their own"²⁹. It must have seemed a perfect course for a child who could follow her sisters into service.

In 1908 Hilda's maternal grandfather, Charles Culliford died³⁰. The following year however, saw an event that Hilda's family must all have celebrated, when Fred's eldest brother Hugh married Ellen, Polly's eldest sister and Fred and Polly were the witnesses³¹. Ellen had been a widow for over a decade, raising 2 daughters, while Hugh had never married.

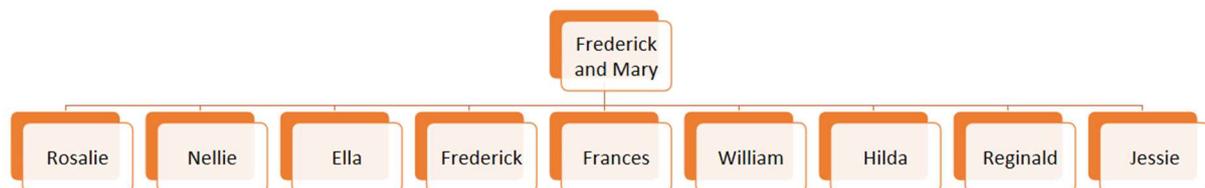
On 18 June 1909 the Committee of Managers of the Somerset School of Housewifery held a meeting and the minutes said Hilda A. Marsh of Street was put on the reserve list to fill any positions which may become vacant there³². In March 1910 there was an outbreak of scarlet fever at The Grange, which led to the school's temporary closure³³. Hopefully

Hilda wasn't affected by that, though she joined the school some time before a meeting held on 12 April 1910, when the minutes show a number of girls left the school for various reasons and Hilda was able to take one of the places. She is mentioned a final time in the minutes of a meeting on 17 June 1910, which said Hilda's studentship was renewed, and she would return to the school after the summer holidays³². That she did return is evinced by her appearance on the 1911 census, living at The Grange³⁴.

Interestingly, she was one of only 2 girls in attendance on the night of the 1911 census who were born in Street, The other girls were mostly from elsewhere in Somerset, though two were from further afield, one from Camden Town in London and another from Bristol.

Hilda's parents, brothers and sisters

The 1911 census completed by her father shows her parents still lived in the High St, though they had moved to number 23. Both were employed, Fred as a shoemaker and Polly a shoe binder. It also says how long the couple were married (28 years) and that they had 9 children, and all were still alive³⁵.



Frederick and Mary Ann's children

They shared their home with 3 of their children: William who was 18 and worked as a shoemaker, Reginald who was 11 and still at school,

though he also worked as a baker's errand boy, and their daughter Jessie who was 9.

Their older children had moved away from Street, though Nelly and Frances had stayed in Somerset. Nelly was a kitchen maid in a hotel in Portishead³⁶, while Frances was a domestic cook in Glastonbury³⁷. Rosalie lived in Surrey and worked as a domestic cook for Robert Mennell, a tea merchant, and his wife Lilius May Clark Mennell³⁸. Lilius was eldest daughter of Francis Clark, one of the partners who ran C&J Clark's Ltd³⁹.

Ella had married the previous year and also lived in Surrey, about 25 miles from Rosalie, with her husband Frederick Bush, a domestic chauffeur, and their infant son⁴⁰.

Hilda's brother Frederick had attested to the British Army and was a Private in the 16th Lancers, stationed in Norwich⁴¹.

In 1912, when he was home on furlough, Frederick was cycling past C&J Clark's factory when he fell off his bike, injuring his nose and dislocating his shoulder. "He was taken to his mother's house at 23, High-street, in an unconscious condition, and there received medical attention." The accident delayed his return to the Army, as he was unable to use his right arm for 2 weeks⁴².

1913 saw 2 of Hilda's sisters get married. First was Frances May, who married Ernest Best, a shoemaker, on 24 March. Her brothers Frederick and William were the witnesses⁴³. Then in June, Nelly married Norman Clark, a soldier (and no relation to the famous shoemakers)⁴⁴. The

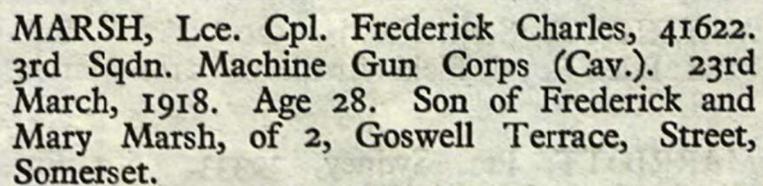
marriage register shows Hilda was there, as she and 3 of her siblings, Frederick, Rosalie, and William signed as witnesses.

The Great War

There is no evidence of the work Hilda did once she left the School of Housewifery, but perhaps, during World War I she took on factory work, like her paternal uncle Hugh, who “was a mason by trade [and] worked during the war for a short time in the sole department of Messrs. C&J Clark Ltd.”⁴⁵.

During the war 3 of her brothers served in the Armed Forces. William signed up for the British Army and was stationed in Egypt. Frederick continued to serve, attaining the rank of Lance Corporal and transferring to the Machine Gun Corps, while the youngest, Reginald, joined the Royal Navy⁴⁶.

Sadly, Frederick was killed in action in France on 23 March 1918⁴⁷.



MARSH, Lce. Cpl. Frederick Charles, 41622.
3rd Sqdn. Machine Gun Corps (Cav.). 23rd
March, 1918. Age 28. Son of Frederick and
Mary Marsh, of 2, Goswell Terrace, Street,
Somerset.

Rosalie, Hilda’s eldest sister, continued working for Robert Mennell’s family. Like the Clark family he had married into, Mr Mennell was a Quaker, and during WWI he called for no military duties for those who had a conscientious objection. In 1916 he was one of 4 signatories to a letter to Prime Minister Asquith, saying: “An objection to combatant service based on a belief that human life is sacred must also entail an objection to military duties of a non-combatant nature...”⁴⁸ Later that

year, he was fined £2 for refusing to serve and handed over to the Military⁴⁹. Once there he was tried by court martial for refusing to put on a uniform⁵⁰. In 1917, J Rowntree Gillett said “I was at a Court Martial at Kingston - Robert Mennell’s. It was a simple enough defence, but the Spirit of God was speaking through Robert Mennell. He is now lying in prison.”⁵¹ By January 1919, Mr. Mennell had served 4 prison sentences, totalling 2 years⁵². We can imagine Rosalie did all she could to support Lillas Clark Mennell during the difficult war years, though how ironic for her, working for such an outspoken man of peace and losing a brother to the conflict.

Even during the war, there are glimpses of happier times. The first is in a newspaper report in April 1915 about the marriage of Hilda’s cousin Amy Fisher when Hilda was one of the bridesmaids⁵³. The following year Hilda’s brother William married Hilda May Hill⁵⁴, and in 1917 it was Hilda’s turn when she married Charles Thyer Reed⁵⁵. Charles Reed, or Charlie, was born in Street on 20 August 1896⁵⁶ and he was the son of Edwin Reed, a farmer.

The 1911 census shows he worked as a shoemaker⁵⁷, though by 1916 he was a farmer working for his father. He was exempted from military service briefly that year “on the ground that the whole family was dependent on him for support”. At the time, his father had not worked for 12 months, though “was not absolutely invalided” and his sister was also an invalid⁵⁸. Later that year his father’s health improved, so the exemption was revoked and Charlie served in the Royal Engineers⁵⁹.

Charlie and Hilda’s first child, Maisie, was born the year after they married⁶⁰. Once the war ended, Charlie returned to work on his father’s

farm and in 1919 he helped his father to apprehend a elderly man who stole 24lbs of apples. They noticed apples were missing, so patrolled their orchards the following evening. When they saw someone they chased him and Charlie caught up with him. The man swung a stick around, described as “a most formidable weapon”, but Charlie testified in the Glastonbury County Petty Sessions that “eventually he got the stick away from the defendant”. The man pleaded guilty and was fined £5⁶¹.

Hilda and her family in the 1920s

By 1921 the couple were living in Park Terrace, Cranhill Road, Street. On the census taken that year, Charles described his occupation as “Assisting father in general farm work”. Hilda was looking after the home as well as her 3 year-old daughter⁶².

The 1921 census shows Hilda’s parents were living in Bristol, where they had moved during WWI, with their 2 youngest children. Fred and youngest daughter Jessie were shoe examiners. Polly was occupied with homes duties, while son Reginald was one of many people at that time who found themselves out of work⁶³.

In Surrey, Rosalie still worked for the Mennell family, at the time as a nurse⁶⁴. Her sister Ella was in Croydon, working as a domestic cook⁶⁵. By then she may have separated from her husband Frederick Bush, as they later divorced. He was boarding with Ella’s sister Nelly, who lived in Guildford with her children⁶⁶ while her husband served in the Royal Air Force in Lincolnshire⁶⁷. Frances May was living in Street with her husband Ernest and their 2 sons⁶⁸. Ernest worked for Clark’s as did his near neighbours, Hilda’s brother William and his wife⁶⁹.

On 30 March 1924 Hilda's brother Reginald married Beatrice Wiltshire in Bristol⁷⁰. He was described as a bootmaker, as was his father. Later that year, on 3 June, Jessie married Charles Walter Hewitt, who gave his occupation as "chocolate worker"⁷¹. He worked for Bristol-based JS Fry & Sons Ltd.,⁷² which - like Clark's - was established by a Quaker family⁷³.

After the double celebrations in Bristol, the rest of the Twenties must have seemed marred by sadness, as between 1925 and 1928 Hilda's grandmother, father, uncle, and father-in-law died.

Polly's mother, Mary Culliford, was the first in 1925. Her obituary said that she was "full of years and with a remarkably long line of descendants - they numbered very little indeed short of a hundred living"⁷⁴.

Hilda attended the funeral and sent flowers, as she did when her father died in Bristol after a brief illness. His passing must have been a shock as a newspaper report of his death said "He visited Street as recently as two months ago, when his many friends saw him in very good health". His funeral was attended by a representative of C&J Clark's as he had been employed by the firm for many years²⁴.

His brother Hugh passed away the following year. The local paper, in reporting his passing, mentioned his dedication to the local parish church, where he had spend over 50 years as a chorister and bellringer⁷⁵.

When Hilda's father-in-law Edwin Reed died in 1928, the family put his effects up for sale. Newspaper adverts in January 1929 listed the items, which included livestock, farm implements - including cider casks, a charabanc, 2 cars, ricks of hay, as well as household furniture, including a piano⁷⁶.

At this point, Charles must have set up in his own name and we can imagine Hilda was able to apply the skills she learnt at the School of Housewifery when she "assisted her husband in developing his farming and dairy business"¹.

Over the next few years Hilda and Charlie had 3 more daughters and in 1937 he was nominated as an Independent candidate in the Street Urban Council elections. Charlie said it would be his "endeavour to study your interests, and at the same time support a progressive policy"⁷⁷, however he failed to get a seat on the council at that time.

Hilda and her family on the 1939 Register and beyond

In 1939 Hilda was living in Cranhill Road with her family and oldest sister, Rosalie Marsh, who was described as "incapacitated"².

Their mother was still living in the Fishponds area of Bristol, sharing the home of one of her brothers and his wife¹⁷. Hilda's brother Reginald, his wife and their children lived nearby⁷⁸, as did Jessie, her husband Charles Hewitt, and their children⁷⁹.

Nelly was living in Winchester with her husband and their family⁸⁰. Ella was divorced and lived in Croydon with 2 of her children⁸¹. Frances, her husband Ernest Best and children still lived a few doors from her brother

William and his wife in Street. Ernest, William and his wife all worked for Clark's⁸².

It isn't clear from the records how WWII affected Hilda and her family, though it's likely they continued their usual work. At the beginning of the war, Britain was importing much of its food and one of the German strategies was to target shipping in order to block food imports and starve Britons into submission. The Ministry of Food implemented food rationing to manage shortages. People had to register with shops and use ration books⁸³. Charlie's farm was one of the places providing rationed items. An announcement in the local paper in 1943 told the customers of Mr. Edgar Hutchings that their registration for eggs and milk was being transferred to the new proprietor Mr. Charlie Reed, of Cranhill Farm⁸⁴. As well as selling these items Charlie would have been responsible for cancelling the coupons in his customers' ration books. Perhaps Hilda helped him sell the farm produce and check ration books. Their daughters worked as dairymaids just before the war and may have continued to do so, as food production was vital to the war effort. In 1943, William and Alice Culliford, one of Hilda's maternal uncles and his wife, celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary with a family reunion, which was reported in the local paper, and perhaps Hilda attended. The article said William had retired after 48 years service with C&J Clark, Ltd. 7 years before, but had "resumed work at the factory as a war effort". It described him as "a member of a remarkable family whose record of service and combined ages would challenge the rest of the country. There are 10 living and only one has not yet qualified for his old-age pension." One member of that family was of course Hilda's mother "Polly Culliford - Mrs. Fred Marsh - 81"⁴.

Two of the family continue to work at Messrs. C. and J. Clark's. Seven years ago there were 30 members of the family employed in the same factory, and up to that date their aggregate of years amounted to 728.

Street Golden Wedding, 28 May 1943

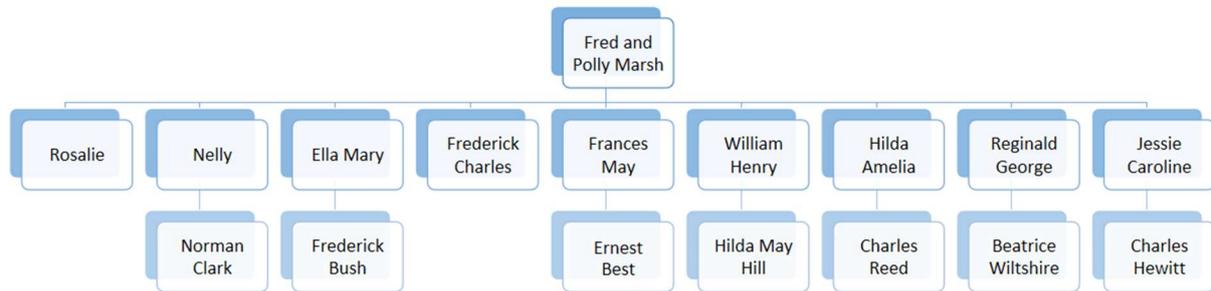
Hilda, her husband, children, mother and all of her siblings survived to see the end of WWII, though Hilda was already poorly and did not live long after it. She died on 10 June 1946 of cancer, that at the end affected her liver, breasts and peritoneum⁸⁵. She was survived by her husband and 4 daughters, the youngest of whom was only 10, as well as her mother and all but one of her siblings.

Her obituary described her passing “to her rest... after a lengthy illness borne with much patience and characteristic cheerfulness”.

That she was much loved was reflected in the newspaper reports of her death and funeral. The first described her as “good natured and always jolly, Mrs. Reed was a lady whose quiet generosity won her the esteem and regard of a great number of friends”¹.

The following week’s mentioned “the unusually large number of friends who attended the funeral” and said “there were 130 floral tributes”⁸⁶.

More about Hilda's family



Soon after Hilda passed away, Charlie married a widow called Daisy Monelle⁸⁷, nee Barnard, probably needing someone who could support him running the farm and helping with his children. In 1952 Daisy sought possession of a house she owned in Wells⁸⁸ and it's likely she and Charlie separated or divorced, because when she died in 1976 she had been living in her house there for some years⁸⁹.

Charlie remained in Street and was active in the community, serving as one of the members of The Drainage Board locally in the 1960s⁹⁰. He passed away peacefully on 6 January 1984 at the age of 87⁹¹, survived by his and Hilda's 4 daughters.

Hilda's mother Polly died in Bristol on 2 October 1949, and her death was reported in the Somerset newspaper because she was "Formerly a well-known resident of Street"⁹². The report went on to explain "The late Mr. and Mrs. Marsh resided in High-street, Street for many years and the lady was a member of the Culliford family."

In 1950 two of Hilda's sisters passed away. Nelly, on 27 January in Bornemouth⁹³ was survived by her husband Norman and their children. Norman passed away in 1982⁹⁴.

When Rosalie Marsh, who never married, died on 7 March 1950 in Croydon after a long illness, a small notice in Somerset papers described her as a “devoted and much loved friend of three generations of the Mennell family”⁹⁵.

Ella passed away in Croydon in 1953⁹⁶, and was survived by her children.

William Henry Marsh and his wife Hilda stayed in Street. When she died in 1955 after a long illness her obituary reported that she had worked for C&J Clark’s for 38 years and had been connected to the church for a long time. It also said her husband was “still captain of the bellringers, and a member of the choir”⁹⁷. He must have followed his father and uncle Hugh into the role of bellringer. He passed away at his niece’s house in Surrey in 1969⁹⁸.

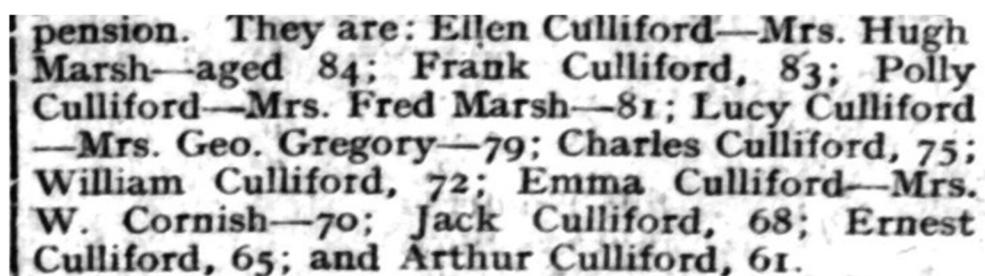
In 1963 there was a family celebration when Frances May (called May by family) and Ernest, her husband, celebrated their golden wedding anniversary with a party. Guests of honour were his sister and her brother William, who had been bridesmaid and best man⁹⁹.

A decade later they celebrated again and one of the guests was May’s brother Reginald, who had been page boy at their wedding¹⁰⁰. By then he was a widower, his wife Beatrice having died in 1959¹⁰¹. The celebration was reported in the local paper and also said the couple had changed their address 4 times in their 60 years of marriage, though they had lived in the same house!

Three years later siblings May and Reginald died, Reg in Bristol¹⁰², where he had lived for many years and May at home in Street. Her obituary said she was a member of the Royal British Legion (Women's branch) and a former chairman of Street Senior Citizens Social Club¹⁰³. Her husband Ernest Best died 10 months later. He had worked at Clark's for 50 years and had been a "founder member and staunch supporter of the Street Royal British Legion", after serving in the Somerset Light Infantry during WWI and being chosen to carry the regiments colours back to Britain, about a month after the Armistice and lay them in Bath Abbey¹⁰⁰.

Jessie was the longest lived of Fred and Polly's children. She was 95 when she passed away in 1996¹⁰⁴. She outlived her husband Charles Hewitt who died in 1970¹⁰⁵.

It seems like she inherited her genes from her mother's side. Charles and Mary Culliford's children, at least those who survived to adulthood, were long-lived.



pension. They are: Ellen Culliford—Mrs. Hugh Marsh—aged 84; Frank Culliford, 83; Polly Culliford—Mrs. Fred Marsh—81; Lucy Culliford—Mrs. Geo. Gregory—79; Charles Culliford, 75; William Culliford, 72; Emma Culliford—Mrs. W. Cornish—70; Jack Culliford, 68; Ernest Culliford, 65; and Arthur Culliford, 61.

Polly and her siblings in 1943

None more so than Polly's youngest brother, Arthur Gilbert Culliford who was born in 1882 and died 105 years later, and was "affectionately known as Uncle Arthur by so many"¹⁰⁶.



“Uncle Arthur” celebrating Queen Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee¹⁰⁷

Arthur started work at 13, when he was employed by the Avalon Leatherboard Company, “which was associated with Clarks, [and] made board for use in insoles”¹⁰⁸.

When celebrating his 90th birthday he calculated he had “26 nephews and nieces, all of pensionable age”¹⁰⁹. They lived on in Bristol, Street and other places with links to shoemaking, like Northampton.

He was survived by his children and other relatives including his great-nieces, Hilda’s daughters. One hopes they inherited her generous nature and were as much loved as she was.

Isobel Hoy

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