

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*Written in November 2023 as one of a series resulting from A Few Forgotten Women Friday collaborative research investigating women who studied at The School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.*

## **Martha Ellen Backholer**

Martha E Backholer was a 13 year old pupil at The Grange School of Housewifery studying cookery in the 1901 census<sup>1</sup>. From this we learn she was born in Sidbury, Devon.

This is her story. Martha Ellen Backholer was born on 29th April 1887 in Buckley, Sidbury<sup>2</sup>. Her father Charles Robert was a dairyman. Her mother, also called Martha Ellen Backholer, had a maiden name of Smith.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/7814/images/SOMRG13\\_2318\\_2320-0311?ssrc=&backlabel=Return](https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/7814/images/SOMRG13_2318_2320-0311?ssrc=&backlabel=Return) accessed November 2023 1901 Census of England Class: RG13; Piece: 2319; Folio: 59; Page: 19

<sup>2</sup> Birth Certificate from <https://www.GRO.gov.uk>. accessed November 2023 Registration district Honiton, Vol 5b page 29 Father Charles Robert, dairy man, mother's maiden name Smith. Registered 3 June 1887

Our Martha was baptised on 11 June 1887 in Sidbury<sup>3</sup>. She was the seventh of eight children.

Sadly brother John died aged 16, on 13 December 1889 from Enteric Fever.<sup>4</sup> It appears the family were then living in Thorncome, Dorset, father Robert still working as a Dairyman. A highly infectious disease, there are many newspaper reports in December and the following January of an epidemic in London and elsewhere. We cannot know how many of the children were ill, but it must have been a worrying time for the growing family. Martha was just a toddler (age 2 years and 8 months) but likely sensed the distress from both the disease and bereavement.

By the 1891 census<sup>5</sup>, Martha aged 3 years old, was at home with her parents, and 5 of her 6 remaining siblings. Her sister Emily was aged 19, brothers Charles 12, Frank 10, Gaius 5, and baby Walter. Her father now calls himself farmer of Tapstone Farm, Tamworth, Somerset.

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<sup>3</sup> Baptism Devon, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1920 accessed via [ancestry.co.uk](#) November 2023 Indexes created from Anglican Parish Registers held at South West Heritage Trust; Taunton, Somerset, England. Transcript only.

<sup>4</sup> John died 13 Dec 1889 at Batehams, Thorncome, Dorset. Registered at Axminster, Devon 16 Dec The General Register Office of England & Wales Vol 5b page 4 1889 Q4. Note Thorncome parish, formerly in Devon in Axminster Hundred, was transferred to Dorset in 1844.

<sup>5</sup> The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891; Class: RG12; Piece: 1893; Folio: 66; Page: 28; GSU roll: 6097003 accessed via [ancestry.co.uk](#) November 2023

Only Thomas, aged 21 had already left home, he was a servant working as a baker in Surrey.<sup>6</sup> By 1901<sup>7</sup> he was married and had returned to the South West. Despite the large age gap, we find later at least one of his daughters was Martha's bridesmaid, so there was clearly a continuing relationship.

Another family tragedy followed in 1898. Brother Frank, a grocer's assistant, aged just 18, developed Hodgkin's disease<sup>8</sup>. He was ill for about 6 months before dying with thrombosis of his leg at home, Tapstone Farm, on the 10th November 1898<sup>9</sup>. A rapidly researched family tree can be found as an appendix to this document, based on one of my [ancestry.co.uk](#) trees, created in November 2023.

We next return to the census record in 1901, when Martha was living at the School of Housewifery, studying cookery. She would only have

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<sup>6</sup> In 1891 Thomas is working for Langham as a servant / baker at Oatlands, Walton on Thames, Surrey, England. The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891; Class: RG12; Piece: 550; Folio: 73; Page: 11; GSU roll: 6095660 accessed November 2023 via [ancestry.co.uk](#).

<sup>7</sup> 1901 England Census Class: RG13; Piece: 2059; Folio: 73; Page: 3 accessed via [ancestry.co.uk](#) November 2023

<sup>8</sup> Quote: named for Dr. Thomas Hodgkin who, in 1832, described several cases of people with symptoms of a cancer involving the lymph nodes. The disease was called "Hodgkin's disease" until it was officially renamed "Hodgkin lymphoma" in the late 20th century. Information from the Leukaemia & Lymphoma Society [www.lls.org](#) accessed November 2023

<sup>9</sup> Death Certificate from The General Register Office of England & Wales, Death date 10 Nov 1898, registered on 11 Nov 1898 Registration district Chard, Somerset, Vol 5c Page 245 Q4

been there for a year, but no record has yet been found of any work she took on following the course.

At the time of her marriage in 1910, Martha was living in Tamworth Parish. Her husband to be was Frederick William Gee, a grocer's assistant, the son of a schoolmaster. Frederick was of Furnham Parish where the banns were read (14, 21 and 28 August 1910)<sup>10</sup>.

They were married on 15 September 1910 at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Furnham<sup>11</sup>. The extensive newspaper report of their wedding suggests no expense was spared -

#### “PRETTY CHARD WEDDING

A picturesque wedding took place at the Church of the Good Shepherd on Thursday, when the nuptials were solemnised of Mr. Frederick William Gee of Victoria Avenue, Chard, and Miss Martha Ellen Backholer, daughter of Mr. And Mr. (sic) Backholer of Hurtham Farm, Tamworth. As was exceedingly fitting, the service was a choral one, the bridegroom having for some years been a chairman and crucifer at the church,”

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<sup>10</sup>Somerset Marriage Registers, Bonds and Allegations 1754-1914. Banns read as dated above and in the margin the marriage date is written.

<sup>11</sup>Chard and Ilminster News - Saturday 17 September 1910 original at British Library, accessed via <https://www.BritishNewspaperArchiveNewspaper.co.uk> November 2023. Report extensively quoted in the text.

The church looked magnificent with tall lighted candles and white flowers adorning the altar. The choir met the bride at the church porch and processed through the church singing. It was the first fully choral wedding in Furnham for 15 years.

We learn that Martha had been a Sunday School teacher and that her father was ill, so she had to be given away by her uncle (Mr C . Smith). She wore a cream stripe crimplene dress with satin and Honiton lace<sup>12</sup> trimming. She looked radiant, wearing a wreath of orange blossom and embroidered veil, and carrying “choice flowers”.

Her nieces Amy and Margery Backholer, the bridesmaids, who were “becomingly attired in dresses of vieux rose”<sup>13</sup> each received the gift of a gold pearl brooch from the bridegroom. The best man was the groom’s brother. The happy couple left Somerset for Brighton on the train, the bride wearing “a neat travelling navy blue tailor-made costume”.

“As the train left Chard Junction there were bangs of many detonators along the railway.” So a real send off!

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<sup>12</sup> Honiton lace, a local fine lace, as worn by various members of Royalty on their wedding day. <https://luxebook.in/from-queen-victoria-to-kate-middleton-wedding-gowns/> (also Princess Grace Kelly)

<sup>13</sup> Vieux rose is old or dusty rose

By 1921 Frederick William Gee was in business as a grocer and provision merchant<sup>14</sup>, living at The Square, Crewkerne, Somerset and the family was growing. Saville Charles Gee was born early in 1912, Peggy Mary Nicholls<sup>15</sup> Gee was born in the second quarter of 1917 followed by Carol Pamela Gee in early 1924<sup>16</sup>.

Martha's parents died in Seaton, probably in a care home (The Rest) close to their home, aged 73 and 75 years. Martha, known as Nellie, must have been pleased that her sister Emily Mary, now Mrs Sutton, lived close by and could support them. Their mother died of chronic TB in 1923<sup>17</sup>, perhaps related to working with dairy cows for much of her life. Their father, dairyman and farmer, died in 1925<sup>18</sup>. The census often failed to note farm work done by a farmer's wife, but

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<sup>14</sup> 1921 census England & Wales found at The National archive RG15 and accessed through [FindMyPast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk) November 2023. rD 308 rSS3 ED 1,2. Shows the first two children and Frederick's occupation

<sup>15</sup> Nicholls was Frederick Gee's business partner as mentioned in a newspaper report of his death. Western Morning News Monday 02 February 1942 "One of the best known wholesale grocers I the West of England, Mr Frederick William Gee , proprietor of the firm of Messrs. Nicholls and Gee of Market Square, Crewkerne, collapsed and died suddenly in his shop on Friday. He was aged 55y." Aged 4y Fred was with his Uncle Frederick Nichols in the 1891 census, so there was a close relationship with the family, not fully investigated.

<sup>16</sup> Found on [GRO.gov.uk](https://www.gro.gov.uk), using surname and mother's maiden name. I did not find any additional infants.

<sup>17</sup> Death Certificate. Death 11 Mar 1923 at The Rest, Seaton, Devon. General Register Office England & Wales, Registration district Axminster, Vol 5b, Page 12, Q1

<sup>18</sup> Death Certificate Death April 1925 at The Rest, Seaton, Devon. General Register Office Registration district Axminster, Devon Vol 5b Page: 6 Q2

usually the women did work, particularly on dairy tasks, putting them at risk of bovine TB.

We might speculate that Martha would have sought employment as a cook after completing her course at the School of Housewifery, prior to her marriage. At that time a family such as the Gee's were likely to employ some staff including a cook or housekeeper.

However, following the war few families employed staff in the same way. In 1921<sup>19</sup>, when Martha was 34 years old, the Gee family did have a live-in general servant, who was aged 23, so she may have been with them for quite some time.

Martha's course at the School in Street would have enabled her to be a good housekeeper and mother at a time when it required quite some ingenuity to keep a family well fed, especially during and after the war. Of course being married to a grocer and provisions merchant (wholesale), and having links to the farming community would have helped too!

At that time fetching and preserving food was as important as meal preparation. With no fridges (only affordable from 1950s), many dairy products had to be bought daily. Vegetables often came from

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<sup>19</sup> 1921 Census Of England & Wales Registration district Chard Sub-district Crewkerne RG 15 Piece number 11300 RD 308 RS 3 ED 1, 2. Accessed via [FinndMyPast.co.uk](https://www.findmypast.co.uk) November 2023

the garden and needed harvesting and cleaning prior to preparation. Foods were available in season and good housewives took advantage of any abundance to provide variety as well as a good supply of food over winter and into spring. Without freezers, foods were bottled, pickled, dried, salted, smoked or preserved in sugar, honey or alcohol. Apples were picked carefully and stored. Many fruits were made into tasty jams. Then there were seasonal imports such as Seville oranges from Spain, whose bitterness and high pectin content made excellent marmalade. Such seasonal activities needed planning and took quite some time. Similarly housework, with no machines or easy care materials, took a great deal of time and elbow grease. Being a housewife, even with the luxury of a servant or daughters to help, was a full-time occupation.

During Martha's lifetime, especially the 1930s things in the home started to change quite radically. Across Europe and America new exotic foods were appearing in the shops. Her husband, as a wholesale grocer, would certainly have been aware, and potentially could have been at the forefront of this. "Despite the poverty and hunger of the 1930s, many people could begin to vary their diet more and to radically change their cooking and eating habits."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Shephard, Sue, *Pickled, potted and canned pub 2000* by. Headline book publishing, London.

I wonder whether Martha embraced the changes, or if she preferred to stick to familiar tasks and foodstuffs.

We now turn to the early death of Martha (known as Nellie) from metastatic breast cancer at the age of 47 years on 21st April 1935<sup>21</sup>. Little is said in her funeral report<sup>22</sup> to tell us about her life.

Crewkerne Parish church was full and members of her husband's firm Messrs Nicholas and Gee were the bearers.

She had many nephews and nieces as well as children and grandchildren, but the descendants have not been explored. Further expansion of the family tree including the relationship to the Nicholls family would be possible using the funeral report for example.

Further research could also include trawling the newspaper archives and tracking down her burial.

If any living descendants can add more detail to her life story, correct any errors or indeed wish the story to be removed, please let us know.

***Researched by Helen Shields. November 2023***

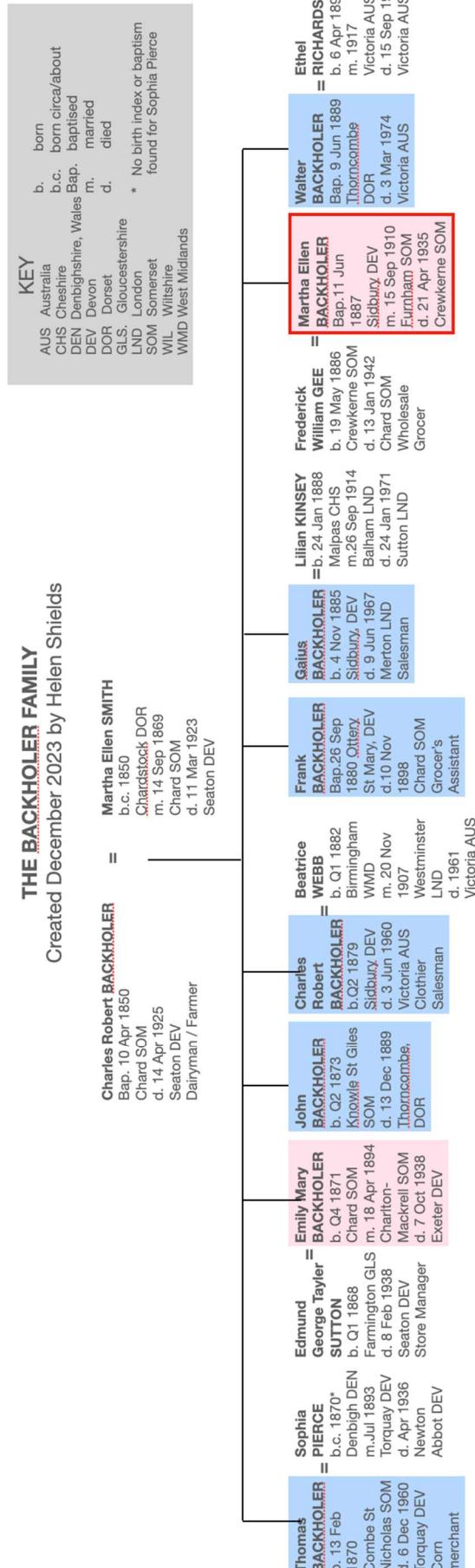
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<sup>21</sup> Death Certificate pdf. Death Index reference District Chard Vol 5c p413 [GRO.gov.uk](https://www.gro.gov.uk) accessed December 2023

<sup>22</sup> Exeter & Plymouth Gazette Friday 3 May 1935 Report of funeral at Crewkerne. Accessed December 2023 via [BritishNewspaperArchive.co.uk](https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) original at The British Library.

## THE BACKHOLER FAMILY

Created December 2023 by Helen Shields



Martha is outlined in red, and her siblings are shaded blue for brothers and pink for her sister.