

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.

Margaret Best's Story

Margaret's story is not straight forward! She is possibly born in 1860/1 and on her admission book entry for 5th October 1900 for Farmfield¹ she is aged 40 years, born in Southampton, but left there when she was 14 years of age. She started drinking aged 19 and has a history of 13 terms of imprisonment and 29 fines, 42 of which were for drunkenness. There was one term of imprisonment for assaulting a police officer and another for attempting to commit suicide. Margaret is described as being 5' 2" with blue eyes, a dark complexion and with grey hair, weighing 140 lbs (10 stone). She was a cook (first employment) but now is a laundress who is hardly able to read and write; it was not known what if any school she attended. She is described as married and as having one child living; her husband (Charles Best) in October 1901 was in St Georges Workhouse on the Fulham Road, although she was admitted to Farmfield from

a lodging house in St Peter Street, Westminster. The cause of her intemperance is given as 'Bad Living' and her present conviction is described as being 'drunk and behaving in a disorderly manner'. She was accompanied to the home by PC Hunt having been convicted at Southwark court by Wyndham Slade, Magistrate. Her general condition was 'dirty' on admission. Although Dr Williamson found her to be 'healthy' and her behaviour was 'quiet'. She had been sentenced for a year and had no history of intemperate or insane relatives. Her Intemperate Habits were described as Regular, continuous (except when in prison) and drink made her cheerful and her preference was for Rum!

Her other habits are described as social, no tobacco or snuff taken, no drugs taken and she has not had any delirium tremors or any alcoholic convulsions. She has no pox marks, has been vaccinated and has no syphilis or scrofula but does have an operation wound on her hip. Her time at Farmfield was summed up:

'This patient was a very bad woman and had a very bad influence over the women, especially the younger women. She was most untruthful and in every way unreliable'.

She had been punished in the 'cell' and had 'relapsed' by Feb 1902 and 'news was had of her in 1907 and 1909' – probably not good news! Some of this information was also held in the Register of Patients.²

Initially, there appeared to be lots of information to go on, however, not having her parents' details or maiden name (these were omitted from the Farmfield register) it was very difficult to try and track her birth details. There are many Margarets born in 1859/60 in Southampton (10 who were born in

Southampton were still living there in the 1861 census³). However, the same issues apply to the 1871 census, as Margaret stated that she did not leave Southampton until she was 14 years of age.

Her husband Charles Best gives his place of birth as Christchurch, Hampshire and again, it is not straight forward. There is a Charles Best who joins the army and is shown as being still in Hampshire in 1871, but he is probably the Charles Best who stays in Hampshire and is still there on the 1901 census. A Charles Best marries an Ann Parsons in the March quarter of 1865⁴ in Christchurch and I did wonder if Margaret had a maiden name of Parsons and had lived with her sister's husband after the sister's death. Unfortunately, I could not find any evidence of this scenario, but an Ann Best did die in 1866 aged 19 years in Staines in Middlesex⁵; Staines and Southampton were both on the London and South Western Railway network, and Charles gives his occupation as Railway Porter on some of the Workhouse admission documents⁶.

But what of Margaret? I found a Margaret Best working in a 'security' capacity at Railway stations in London in 1886-9 as a female searcher. This Margaret appears in court documents as a 'witness' having been tasked with carrying out searches of female suspects in cases of theft⁷. She appears to be based in Southwark Police station, and this is the area where she is reported as working in the 3 court appearances she makes. However, would a cook/laundress/seamstress/tailoress be likely to have this sort of change of career? Something happened between her arriving in London and May 1893, when the first admissions to workhouses begin, with some 62 admission and discharge records^{6,8} generated between then and March 1897, when they stop

for a few years. Maybe her drinking became more of a problem, and she was not able to find/keep work?

Charles also first appears in the workhouse records^{6,8} at this time. A Charles Best is on the 1881 Census as a Licenced Victualler, living with his wife Ann and 3 children in St Giles in the Fields⁹ and a Charles Best is arrested and charged with forging and uttering (lying) in November 1888¹⁰. The case was reported in the Old Bailey accounts¹¹ where:

Charles Best pleaded guilty to forging and uttering a request for the delivery of cheese and also to forging and uttering a request for the delivery of bread and cheese. Sentence 4 months Hard Labour.

It was shortly after this conviction was spent that Charles Best started appearing in the workhouse records. I could find no record of a Margaret/Charles Best marriage and wondered if they were not married? They are always admitted together to a range of workhouses in the London area:

Chelsea, St Lukes - Middlesex

Holborn – Middlesex

Kensington - Middlesex

St Georges, Fulham Road - Middlesex

St Marys, Islington – Middlesex

Westminster Union – Middlesex

On admission, Charles was always on diet 1 (19 oz/day) and Margaret was on diet 4 or 5 (20-26 oz/day) probably as she was working in the laundry and Charles was not able to do manual work, possibly to an industrial injury sustained while working as a Railway Porter.

There was a period where Margaret appeared to be in employment and did not feature in any of the workhouse records, from April 1896, she only had 3 admissions until she was admitted to Farmfield in October 1900¹, and 2 of these were to Infirmaries (St Marys Islington and Westminster). I did wonder if she had her operation at this time as she had a scar on her hip on admission to Farmfield¹. She was also recorded as having a child on admission to Farmfield¹, but no further information could be found as they were never recorded as having a child with them on admission to the workhouses. Maybe the child was bought up by family or friends?

Of her court appearances leading to imprisonment (13), only one could be found recorded in the South London Chronicle¹² in 1897 and it is not known if she paid the fine (10s + 2s costs) or spent 7 days in prison. She was described as having 'no home', but there are no corresponding admissions to workhouses at this time, so I wonder if she was living in a boarding house and working?

Her other court appearance that I could find was the sad case of her attempted suicide by jumping off Westminster Bridge. The court case in July 1900 records¹³:

Margaret Best, 40 described as a married woman was charged at Lambeth with attempting to commit suicide by jumping into the River Thames. PC Cann, of the Thames Police said he was on duty in a Police launch, off St Thomas' hospital on Friday evening when he saw the prisoner held up in the water by a man in a boat. He took charge of the woman, who was unconscious and, after using the means to restore her

conveyed her to Waterloo Pier Station where she was given medical attention. Mr Francis remanded the prisoner for one week.

There's also a report of a woman called Margaret A Best assaulting a Police Officer¹⁴ in 1886 trying to rescue another person who was being arrested. These newspaper reports are the only evidence that Margaret was in court and match the record held at the inebriate's home¹.

Margaret was in Farmfield when the 1901 census¹⁵ was taken, Charles was in St Georges Fulham Road workhouse, where he was on her entry to Farmfield¹. According to the records, Margaret had again 'relapsed' in 1902, 1907 and 1909, but further Farmfield records were not available at the time. In the 1911 census, Margaret and Charles were both in St Georges, Fulham Road as inmates¹⁶ and this was the last reference to Margaret that was found; however, the records mostly end in 1912. A death was found in the December quarter of 1912, of a Margaret Best aged 59, living in Chelsea, London. Without the death certificate, it is impossible to say if this is 'our' Margaret.

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Sources

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- 3 1861 Census entry for Southampton RG 9; Piece: 678; Folio: 55; Page: 16; GSU roll: 542683
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- 13 South London Mail dated 07/07/1900 held at the British Library
- 14 Greenwich and Deptford Observer dated 03/12/1886 held at the British Library
- 15 1901 Census entry Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey *RG13 629*
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- 16 <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/information.pl?cite=3USg%2BnXlvUT7JwZ77hMWLQ&scan=1>