

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.

Jessie Franklin

Jessie Franklin was admitted to Farmfield Inebriate Reformatory in 1900 when she was about thirty years old. Up to this point Jessie had had a difficult life since birth having parents who each had their own problems. Her father was a drunkard, as stated in the admission record for Farmfield, who drank regularly and frequently which led to him being violent. Her mother had a number of workhouse and workhouse infirmary admissions; Jessie's mother was Mary Ann Franklin, sometimes known as Ann or as Mary, and was born about 1824-1825.

To provide some background to Jessie's life it may be useful to look into parts of her mother's life as outlined below. Mary / Ann was admitted to Westminster workhouse infirmary, from Salisbury Street, north west of the city

centre, when she was reportedly 20 years old and discharged five weeks later in 1844. (1) Two years later Mary Ann was again admitted to the workhouse being destitute and ill; on the same day an Esther Franklin was admitted to the same workhouse infirmary, aged 31 years, this could have been Mary / Ann's older sister and Jessie's auntie. (2) In 1870 Mary / Ann was again admitted to the workhouse, this time in Southwark and with her two year old daughter, Jessie Franklin, born about 1868. They were admitted on 4th July and had slept in Woolwich the previous night. Ann was recorded as being a servant, this could have been a daily servant or as a live-in servant where she had lost her job; they were discharged the following morning at 11:00 am. (3) Later that year, in November, Jessie and her mother, this time Mary, now aged 45 years, were again admitted to Southwark workhouse and they had slept in Greenwich the previous night. (4)

No further records were found of Jessie living with her mother or being in the workhouse with her mother. However, a possible match to Jessie Franklin appears in the 1871 census as the four year old adopted daughter of Benjamin and Louise Franklin in Reading; (5) it is plausible that Benjamin was Mary / Ann's brother and had taken care of Jessie due to her mother's issues of caring for her daughter, Jessie. Jessie is not found with Benjamin in the 1881 census when she would have been about 14 years old. In 1891 Jessie Franklin was in the workhouse infirmary of St George's, London as a patient, aged 22 years, born about 1869. (6) Nine years later, in September 1900, Jessie appears in a newspaper article which provides the first insight into her adult life and her behaviour. The article explains that Jessie was charged with stealing a cape, her defence was not consistent with that of the witnesses and the judge stated that her story was 'a wildly improbable one'. Jessie must have been living with

her mother at the time as her mother and Jessie are referred to as neighbours of the victim, in Mile End, London East End. It would seem unlikely that the 12 shillings fine could have been paid; therefore, Jessie will have been imprisoned for seven days. (7) A month later, on 3rd October 1900, Jessie was admitted to Farmfield Inebriate Reformatory following a conviction of drunk and disorderly behaviour by Lambeth Court for an eighteen month sentence. (8) She was stated as being thirty years old, born about 1869 / 1870, living alone, single with no children and had no siblings and worked as a launderess. She is reported to having a good education and it seems to appear on the record that she had attended a private school – this may have been provided by Benjamin Franklin. Jessie was 4' 10" tall and weighed about 8 ½ stones, she was blue eyed with fair hair and a fresh complexion, she had a chronic curvature of the spine. No photograph was available.

The admission record states that she was born in Bermondsey and had left home, perhaps her uncle Benjamin, when she was 14 years old which is when she started drinking. The cause of her drinking, intemperance, was 'bad living'; she is recorded as being a prostitute and that the immoral living led her to drink. It would appear that Jessie was not really caring for herself as on admission she is described as being 'most dirty and deplorable'. However, she was stated as having good general health and mental health; mental health was not understood in 1900 as the way it is today and it is likely that Jessie was not a well balanced and happy young woman. Despite not having had previous admissions to asylums Jessie had had nine convictions for drunkenness and one conviction for prostitution; these convictions culminated in four periods of imprisonment. The admission record provides information on where Jessie was living prior to her admission to Farmfield; her last address was Malpas Road,

Lewisham. At the time her mother was living on Daniel's Road, Nunhead, Southwark. Her father had died due to drinking rum.

Jessie appears to have been discharged from Farmfields and transferred to another institution, the 1901 census reveals Jessie as a patient in Leavesden Asylum, Watford. Jessie is recorded as being an imbecile. (9) According to the 1871 census General Report "The principal causes of idiocy and imbecility are spoken of by those who have studied the subject as distinctly recognised; they are connected with physical or mental weakness, or with abnormal conditions, either the fault or the misfortune of parents. Residence in deep valleys, damp and unwholesome climate, crowded dwellings or other unhealthy conditions, intermarriages among a limited number of families, and more especially where weakness of brain already exists,—these are allowed to be predisposing causes, and as they are obviously within human control, the hope may be entertained that the extent of this affliction may be limited in the future." Census of England and Wales for the Year 1871. General Report. Volume IV. A Vision of Britain Through Time. (10) Some of the description may have been associated with Jessie, such as a physical or mental weakness and of living in poor conditions; the cause is attributed to either the parents or a blame on the person and that the problems are within that person's control. The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 described imbeciles as those who are incapable of managing themselves and moral imbeciles also had vicious or criminal tendencies. Jessie appears to have been an alcoholic who resorted to crime and this caused her to be labelled as an imbecile. There was not the understanding of supporting the cause of a person's actions and incarceration was implemented, which did not address Jessie's needs. (11)

It is not known how long Jessie was at Leavesden asylum; however, in 1902 she had two further admissions to an asylum. In August 1902 she was admitted to Wandsworth asylum and was discharged from there on 16th December 1902. (12) It is likely that she was transferred to ?Hammersmith asylum as she was admitted there on the same day of 16th December and was discharged as 'not improved' on 19th December 1923. (13) The date of discharge for 1923 is not consistent with other records where Jessie is found in 1903, 1906 and 1909; perhaps she was readmitted to ?Hammersmith asylum and from then was discharged in 1923. Jessie had left Farmfields and Leavesden by 1903, where her conduct had been described as excellent. However, a newspaper article reveals that in February 1903 she was charged with being drunk and incapable at Lambeth Court, she is still stated as being 30 years old! (14) She was also charged, under the 1902 Sale of Liquor to Habitual Drunkard's Licensing Act, of obtaining intoxicating liquor on licensed premises; Jessie was on the 'Black List' of people deemed as being habitual drunkards. (15) The newspaper article continues to explain an anomaly in this law which was that any person who helped the person to get drink on licensed premises was liable to one month imprisonment and that the person arrested, Jessie, was not liable to the same punishment; she either could pay a 20 shillings fine or spend 14 days in prison.

The Habitual Criminal Register record for the February 1903 charge shows that Jessie had a punishment of seven days hard labour, no doubt she could not afford the 20 shillings fine. The record provides a photograph of Jessie. (16) She was unemployed and of no fixed abode and frequented Queen's Road, Peckham and Peckham Rye, a park in Southwark. Jessie now had alias names, Jessie Franklin was also known by the surnames of Gray, Graham and Richardson. This did not deter Jessie, in June 1903 she was homeless and

charged at Greenwich of being drunk and disorderly while on the 'Black List; this time she either had to have a surety to keep the peace for a year or go to prison for three months. (17) In December of the same year, 1903, Jessie was again charged with drunkenness and was committed to a certified inebriate reformatory for eighteen months. (18)

In November 1906 Jessie was 37 years old and charged again and committed to a certified inebriate reformatory, this time for three years. As well as being known by the surnames of Franklin, Graham, Gray and Richardson she was now known as Lilian Newlands. She looks quite sad and dejected in her 1906 photograph. (19) The admission record to Farmfield in 1900 has an additional comment that Jessie Franklin, now known as Lilian Newlands, returned to Farmfield in 1909; at this time she would have been about forty one years old. There are no further records or pieces of information found for Jessie, except for the asylum discharge in 1923 when she would have been about fifty five years old. Her mother appears to have continued to be admitted and discharged from workhouses and the last record found was in 1897 when Mary Ann was 73 years old, she left at her own request. (20) Jessie had a very troubled life from at least the age of two; it is likely that she only knew the way of life that she led having witnessed an alcoholic father and a mother who was unable to support her daughter, this will not necessarily have made her resilient to feelings of despair and sadness and it is hoped that she was given some compassion at Farmfield Inebriate Reformatory.

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