

# *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 Harrison's Story**

When recorded as an inmate of St Joseph's Reformatory in Ashford Middlesex on the 1901 census Mary Harrison was a long way from home.

She was born in the city of York in the parish of St Denys (Dennis) in the December quarter of 1862, the daughter of Peter and Mary Harrison, both born in Ireland<sup>i</sup>. York was host to a large influx of Irish immigrants following the potato famine in the 1840s, and from 1851 they constituted between 7 - 8% of the total population of York<sup>ii</sup>. The majority of the Irish population in York at that time lived in the Walmgate district where Mary was born in 1862.



Plaque at 64 Walmgate, York

Her parents, Peter and Mary nee Melvin were married in York in 1859 and in the census of 1861 the couple were living in the household of Peter's mother-in-law, Charlotte Melville [sic], at Rectory Buildings, York St Dennis, with their baby son Thomas, aged 1, all three adults having been born in Ireland. Peter's occupation was described as bricklayer's labourer<sup>iii</sup>.

Ten years later the family were at the same address in the Walmgate district, Peter with the same occupation and Mary described as a washerwoman. Their family had grown to include Mary aged 8, John aged 6 and twins Peter and Ann, aged 6 months, all described as scholars. Son Thomas, then aged 12, was already employed as a glass blower.

In 1881 when Mary was eighteen and described as a laundress she was living with her parents who had then moved to the parish of York St Nicholas and were living at 9 Herbert Street. Her father Peter was described as a labourer, her mother had no occupation recorded, brother Thomas continued as a glass blower, together with John aged 16, a labourer, and Ann aged 10, a scholar, her twin Peter having died in 1875 aged 5.

Peter and Mary Harrison had moved back to Rectory Buildings in 1891, living at No.6, Peter again described as a bricklayer's labourer, son John, the only one of their offspring still living with them, also employed as a bricklayer's labourer. On this occasion the census enumerator noted that both Peter and Mary were born in the county of Mayo in Ireland. Judging from the continuity of Peter's employment as a bricklayer's labourer and the permanency of the family's residence in the city of York, it would appear that Mary Harrison was brought up in a relatively stable household.

Mary Harrison's home address could not be identified in 1891 although she remained in the Walmgate district. She made numerous court appearances charged with drunkenness and disorderly conduct, one of the first newspaper reports was published in the *York Herald* on Thursday 10 January 1884:

**DISORDERLY WOMEN.**—Ann Butler, Walmgate, and Mary Harrison, George-street, both immoral characters, were charged with having been drunk and disorderly in Walmgate. The defendants have been several times previously convicted, and they were now sent to prison for one month each.—Michael Dean, a private in the 4th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, was charged with having been drunk and with having attempted to rescue Mary Harrison from custody. He was fined 10s. and costs.

In the *York Herald* dated 25 July 1899 it was reported:

*York Woman Sent to a Home for Inebriates.* Mary Harrison, a disorderly character, residing in Margaret-street, York, was yesterday brought up before the York City Magistrates charged with being drunk and incapable on Peasholme-green on the 20th inst. The Chief Constable pointed out the number of times the prisoner had been before the court, viz, 54; and also stated that she had been convicted three times of drunkenness this year. He thought she ought to be sent to a home for inebriates. In spite of prisoner pleading for another chance, and promising to sign the pledge, the magistrates ordered her to be confined in a home for inebriates for three years and to be remanded to prison until such a home was found. Prisoner, upon leaving the dock, said, in a dazed manner, "Have I got three years?"



Map showing The Ancient Parish of York Saint Dennis from [openstreetmap.org](https://openstreetmap.org)

Following her stay at St Joseph's, Mary returned to her home county of Yorkshire, but was soon again in trouble with further offences recorded in 1902 when she was sentenced to fourteen days imprisonment in HMP Wakefield for prostitution. On this occasion some physical description was recorded with her age at thirty-nine: she was 5ft. 3 1/2in. in height with light brown hair<sup>iv</sup>.

Barely a year later in July 1903 Mary was once again serving a fourteen day sentence in HMP Wakefield for drunkenness<sup>v</sup>, and again in November of that year fourteen days with hard labour, though the actual offence was not specified in this case<sup>vi</sup>. The register of HMP Wakefield's female prisoners in

January 1904 recorded Mary back again serving another fourteen days for prostitution and now at the age of forty-one her hair was brown/grey<sup>vii</sup>.

The last appearance of Mary Harrison in the local press was in August 1910 when she was summoned for assault on a neighbour in Walmgate: she had gone to the door of Margaret Knavesey who said Mary had “called her everything”, according to the report in the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, and had physically attacked her when she threatened to fetch the police. It was stated that the defendant was drunk at the time, and having previously been bound over, was again dealt with in this way.

Considering Mary’s relatively stable upbringing, the reason for her descent into alcohol dependency is not readily explained. It should be remembered though, that living conditions in the Walmgate district were far from comfortable, the area was overcrowded, poverty was rife, and one in five children born there did not survive infancy. This was the environment where Mary spent her formative years.

No further information could be discovered in the public records. Mary Harrison could not be positively identified in the 1911 or 1921 censuses, nor could her death be conclusively determined although there is one Mary Harrison recorded by FreeBMD who died in York, aged 53, in the September quarter of 1913. It seems very possible that this Mary Harrison was the inmate of St Joseph’s Reformatory in 1901.

## Sources

St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex RG13 1171 folios 12-13

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes\\_](https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes_)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://yorkcivictrust.co.uk/heritage/civic-trust-plaques/irish-community-walmgate/>

<sup>iii</sup> Class: *Rg 9*; Piece: *3552*; Folio: *78*; Page: *10*; GSU roll: *543150 accessed via Ancestry*

<sup>iv</sup> West Yorkshire Archive Service; Wakefield, West Yorkshire, England; Register 14 of Female Prisoners; Year Range: 1901 Sep - 1902 Sep; Reference Number: C118/240

<sup>v</sup> West Yorkshire Archive Service; Wakefield, West Yorkshire, England; Register 15 of Female Prisoners; Year Range: 1902 Sep - 1903 Oct; Reference Number: C118/241

<sup>vi</sup> West Yorkshire Archive Service; Wakefield, West Yorkshire, England; Register 15 of Female Prisoners; Year Range: 1902 Sep - 1903 Oct; Reference Number: C118/241

<sup>vii</sup> West Yorkshire Archive Service; Wakefield, West Yorkshire, England; Register 16 of Female Prisoners; Year Range: 1903 Oct - 1904 Oct; Reference Number: C118/242