

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were found residing or working in various homes for Fallen Women in the census returns.

ELLEN NORMAN

Ellen was born in 1853 in Westhall, Suffolk. Her parents were John and Harriet. John was an agricultural labourer. Married in 1843, by the time of the 1861 census they had 9 children. John died in 1870. Harriet's occupation in 1870 is noted as "workwoman; mill". At the age of 44 and with several of her children still dependent on her it must have been a very hard life. Ellen, however, is not still at home at this time. She is working as a "servant: nursemaid" for Andrew Robinson, a medical practitioner in Westhall.

Ten years later, in the 1881 census Ellen is a "special inmate" in The House of Mercy Magdalen Home, Toldish Hall Road, Great Maplestead, Essex. Aged 28 she is one of the older residents at the Home. I have not been able to establish why she is a resident there or what the term "special inmate" denotes (there are several women with this designation). The Home was set up as a place of

“refuge” usually for unmarried mothers. I did not find an entry for a baby or young child with Ellen’s surname around that time, so I cannot confirm that this was the reason she was in the home. Her occupation is noted as “laundry worker”. Many of the women took on this task as a way of earning money for their “keep”. It is clear though that something happened in the 10 years since she was a nursemaid in a very respectable home.

Another 10 years later finds Ellen once more in an institution and this time it would appear that although unmarried she has had two children Emily born in 1886 and Robert Henry born in 1888. All three are noted to be “paupers” and are residents in the Blything Union Workhouse in 1891.

By 1901 Ellen is a housekeeper at the home of Samuel Carter, who is a “roadman” working for the council and who has a 16 year old daughter. Ellen’s own daughter, Emily, is in service elsewhere in the village. A year later, in 1902, Ellen marries Samuel and by 1911 the couple are joined by Ellen’s son Robert, noted to be Samuel’s stepson. The couple appear to have had a long married life as they are still together in 1939. Ellen died in 1941 in the very institution where we found her in 1891. No longer a workhouse, it had become a home for the chronically ill. Samuel died a few months later in 1942.

We have seen that Ellen spent much of her life in institutions, indeed two of her children were with her on at least one occasion. She had been doing very hard work either within these institutions or in other people’s homes. I was interested to find she was a nursemaid for a medical doctor. He had no children so I wonder if she assisted in some way with his patients? However, within 10 years she was in a refuge for unmarried mothers followed by years in a workhouse. Having

been institutionalised for much of her life and brought up with 8 siblings one wonders what time she ever had to herself or what hopes for her future.

What saddens me is that her mother also had a very hard life. Widowed with 9 children aged 44 she had the occupation of a “workwoman” (I have not come across this title before) which surely describes a hard labouring job. Harriet did in fact remarry but in 1881 found her living at “Barracks” Westhall. I cannot find details of this address anywhere. Her husband William Howard is listed as having “no occupation”. She died in 1890.

Ellen’s daughter Emily married Valentine Fox, a farm labourer in 1908 and went on to have at least six children. Valentine fought in the Great War, where he suffered the effects of gas. The allowance for him, his wife and 5 children was 10s 4d a week. A very small sum for 7 people to live on in 1919. Her daughter Joan worked as a clerk in a factory in 1939 at the age of 16. This must surely have been a very great comfort to Emily – she, her mother and her grandmother were brought up in domestic service, institutions and poverty for much of their lives. That a daughter of hers would be able to work in an office must have seemed unthinkable a few decades earlier.

Researching Ellen has been very rewarding, even though it demonstrated how hard life was for working class, rural women in the late 19th and into the 20th century. This project has enabled us to rescue them from the obscurity of rural poverty and allowed us to rediscover their stories and the lives they led. I would suggest these histories – of our own ancestors – are far more worthy of research than Kings and Queens. These women struggled on a daily basis but they are our past – and we stand on giants’ shoulders.

