

# *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.*

## **Ellen Aldridge's Story**

Ellen was admitted to Farmfield Reformatory on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1900<sup>1</sup>, the establishment had been only open since 28<sup>th</sup> August<sup>2</sup> of the same year and offered a chance for women to conquer their problems with alcohol. The building had been acquired by the London County Council following on from the Inebriates Act 1898<sup>3</sup> which allowed the court to send non-criminal inebriates to a reformatory if they had been convicted of drunkenness four times or more in one year. Ellen entered into a life here that was very different from her own. The building had been brightly decorated and the recreation room had a piano and there was a separate dining room and

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<sup>1</sup> LCC/PH/MENT/4/29 Register of patients at Farmfield Reformatory for Female Inebriates (1900-1908)

<sup>2</sup> <https://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/farmfield.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/61-62/60/enacted>

outside there was a vegetable and flower garden. The inmates worked in the kitchen, the dairy, or the gardens and for good behaviour they earned points which was translated into a small amount of cash on their discharge.

What do we know about Ellen? On her admission the case notes<sup>4</sup> that were written gives us an insight into her life, but we must remember it was what she told the staff, was all the information accurate? In 1900 she was 41 years old, (born circa 1859) and came from Burnham near Slough in Buckinghamshire. Ellen was married and her husband was a Great Western Railway (G.W.R.) guard. Without knowing Ellen's maiden name, I have not been able to identify a marriage, there are several possibilities, but the certificates would need to be obtained. After several years of marriage Ellen found out that her husband had been unfaithful and had been keeping another woman. On discovering this she left him, and she said she 'did not care what became of her'. At the time of her admission, she was living at 44 Walham Avenue, Walham Green, London, alone. To compound her situation her records show that she had had one child, but sadly this child had died. Ellen states that she started drinking when she was 35 years old, was this because of her husband's unfaithfulness and the loss of her child? Ellen's occupation is shown as a cook and that her first employment was as a kitchen maid.

The records go on to tell us that Ellen had blue eyes, dark brown hair, a fair complexion and was 5' 6" tall and had been vaccinated against smallpox and carried a scar on her left side from an operation. When she arrived at the reformatory she was dirty and miserable; she had no underlying health issues

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<sup>4</sup> LCC/PH/MENT/4/34 Farmfield Reformatory for Female Inebriates - Case History Book - Vol 1 (Nos 1-181) - Patients admitted (1900-1904)

but her general health was not good. The doctor wrote that she was quiet and respectful on her admission and there were no family traits towards alcoholism or insanity. She liked rum as her tippie and did smoke tobacco and took snuff but did not take opium or any other drugs. These records also showed that Ellen had been convicted twenty-three times for drunkenness and all but two had seen her imprisoned for her drinking, but she had not committed any other crimes.

I have not been unable to find definite evidence of any of Ellen's life before 1893. On 20<sup>th</sup> October 1893 in the newspaper<sup>5</sup> it is reported that Ellen was arrested by PC Jiggins 247T on the Fulham Road for disorderly behaviour, she gave her address as 33 Walham Avenue. On Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> at 2am she was heard shouting obscene language in the street waking many households. In court she told the judge 'I've been keeping away from the drink.' he advised her that she was not being charged with being drunk, although the gaoler could smell drink on her breath. On this occasion she was fined 20 shillings or 14 days in prison.

In August 1894<sup>6</sup> a crowd in Fulham watched as Ellen prodded PC 216T with a large hat pin to work out whether he was an inanimate object or a living person, obviously she was under the influence of liquor. For this she was sentenced to 14 days in prison with hard labour.

A slightly bizarre incident was reported in the Fulham News on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1899<sup>7</sup>. Ellen was at the coroner's court, presumably as a witness because she

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<sup>5</sup> Westminster & Pimlico News edition 20 October 1893, obtained from FindmyPast

<sup>6</sup> Fulham Chronicle 24 August 1894, obtained from FindmyPast

<sup>7</sup> Fulham Chronicle 15 December 1899 FindmyPast

had been found in bed with a dead woman. Her address was given as 48 Walham Avenue, Fulham, a few doors away from where she was previously living and she was coined as a widow. She refused to leave the court and her behaviour and language became abusive. Her penalty was to pay 40 shillings, if she failed to do this then she was to serve one month's imprisonment.

In September 1900 she was before the magistrate R. O. B. Lane at the West London Court for being drunk and using obscene language. It was P.C. Mason on this occasion who apprehended her. Obviously she had been in front of the magistrates on numerous occasions for being drunk and Lane decided to send her to a reformatory for two years.

On the 1901<sup>8</sup> Census Ellen is recorded as an inmate at Farmfield Reformatory aged 40 (her age was slightly different than on her admission) , married and having been born in Burnham, Buckinghamshire. Ellen Mathias is shown as the superintendent of the establishment. During Ellen's time at Farmfield her behaviour was excellent she appeared to thrive.

Ellen was licensed on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1902 and went out into the world to work. After three months officials went out to see how she was doing, and it was reported that she all was well in her work placement. It was beginning to look like Ellen had managed to change her life around.

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<sup>8</sup> Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey RG13 629 folios 151-152

On 23 April 1903<sup>9</sup> Ellen was convicted to 14 days hard labour and was entered into the Habitual Criminals Register where her photograph appeared. The photograph shows a sad face, her face is drawn and she looks much older than her years. Her clothing is shabby and her hat is adorned with feathers and other lack lustre ornamentation. Her address is still Walham Avenue, however her profession is now shown as a prostitute.

The case history book at Farmfield reads that she died in 1903. I have found a death<sup>10</sup> for an Ellen Aldridge in the second quarter of 1903 in Fulham, but the certificate would be needed to confirm this is the right person.

Ellen had a very sad life but I do hope that while she was at Farmfield she found some form of happiness and peace.

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<sup>9</sup> MEP06/77 Metropolitan Police: Criminal Record Office: Habitual Criminals Registers And Miscellaneous Papers

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl>