

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.

Sophia Gribble's Story

Sophia Gribble was, in the 1891 census, to be found in The Exeter Home for Fallen Women at 44 Bartholomew Steet in the town. She was 23, a Devonshire woman and single.

Let's try to establish what has brought Sophia to this refuge. She had been born on the 14th of April 1867 to a Mary Gribble, a single women.

The 1871 census shows her staying with her grandparents on Towsington Street, Exminster, St Thomas in Devon. Grandfather James is a gardener, his wife is named Betty and, in addition to Sophia, they have a son and a daughter with them, both scholars.

A record from Crediton Hayward School shows that, in 1879, Sophy Gribble, as she was called, in the register of admissions. Parent's name Mary and her date of birth was given.

At the time of the 1881 census Sophia was still (or again) living with her grandparents James and Betsy Gribble. Both are in their 60s. In the household are seven children to this couple ranging from the ages of 36 to nine. None of these children are working. There are four sons and three daughters including Mary who is 34, and all have “*none*” written in the “*Rank, Profession and Occupation*” field. Sophia is the only grandchild, aged 14 and there is a nurse child aged 6 who the family is caring for. James Gribble seems to be the only one working and, as a labourer, probably not for much money. Odd that James is a labourer, as in the 1861 census, he is a blacksmith. Although that is a good and skilled profession, we find that, in 1851, although a smith, he is also on parish relief.

By 1891 most of the sons and daughters are now in employment, although one daughter (Lucy) is in the Workhouse. So one wonders what happened in 1881 to this family, and does this explain the route to earnings that Sophia was forced to take?

The Western Times of the 25th of May 1888 carries a snippet about Mary Ann Cotes, and Elizabeth and Sophia Gribble being arrested for trying to steal a portion of a fence belonging to Sir Redvers Buller. Elizabeth may be Sophia’s grandmother. A gentleman named D. Tuck, Sir Redvers’ keeper, caught the women with pieces of the broken fence in their bags. He stated that he has warned them previously. They were fined 1s each with a warning that next time they would be dealt with more heavily. One wonders why they would commit such a seemingly pointless crime but maybe it was for fuel, rather than mere vandalism, as the Tiverton Gazette, covering the same story, described all three as “poorly dressed women.”

In 1901 Sophia is living with her mother Mary on Dean Street in Crediton. Both mother and daughter are charwomen. Mary has a son with her named William, a

mason's labourer. And there is also Mary's grandson, named Frederick, who is three years of age.

The 1911 census shows Sophia, now aged 42 and still a charwoman. Frederick is with her, and we can see he is listed as her son. He is now 13 and at school. A school register says he was born on the 28th of November 1897. They are still on Dean Street but in Roach Court, a name which one hopes does not describe the local wildlife.

All family and local historians know that the occupation of charwoman, as with dressmaker, can hide an ugly truth. Women have always something to sell when money is required. But, in the 1921 census, we see a change. Frederick, who one may have feared was sent to war, from which he may not return, is still with his mother Sophia. And still on Dean Street but Sophia is now on "home duties" and Frederick is a cab driver for Messrs Borne and Son on Union Street in Crediton. They are described as Posting House Proprietors.

There is no sign of Sophia on the 1939 register although I do not believe she died until 1941.