

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in April 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women staff and female patients associated with the Fleming Memorial Children's Hospital, Jesmond, Northumberland.

The Borrowdale Sister's Story Edith, Isabella, and Ethel

The Fleming Memorial Hospital for Sick Children was opened in September 1888 by Lord Armstrong, the foundation stone being laid by Lady Armstrong the previous year. The hospital was built by Mr John Fleming, a local solicitor in memory of his wife, Mary.¹ A potted history of children's hospitals in the UK, nursing and the Fleming Hospital in particular can be read on the Few Forgotten Women webpage.²

The Borrowdale sisters were among the 33 female staff enumerated at the Fleming Hospital in the 1901 census. The sisters were all employed as domestic staff, 24-year-old Edith as a Domestic House Maid, 22-year-old Isabella was listed as a Laundress and youngest sister 17-year-old Ethel was a Laundry Maid.³

¹ Newcastle Evening Chronicle, 26 September 1888, 3

² See - <https://www.fewforgottenwomen.com/general-8-3>

³ 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13, Newcastle upon Tyne Registration Dist, Piece 4781



Map of Jesmond area of Newcastle upon Tyne, courtesy of The Genealogist

The hospital was situated in Burdon Terrace [circled in red on the above map], while the family were living in Brandling Village [circled in green] just a short distance away. How long the sisters, especially Edith and Isabella, had worked at the hospital by 1901 is not clear.

A letter sent into the *'Ladies Corner'* column of the Newcastle Chronicle in 1894 by *Geraldine*, perhaps gives us a little insight into the work that the sisters carried out. The letter tells of Geraldine's visit to the hospital where she was cordially greeted by the *'cheerful'* matron Miss Daintree, who *'showed much pleasure in escorting us through the buildings.'* I strongly suspect that Geraldine was Geraldine Cecila Armstrong, nee Burge, who was the wife of Ralph Walter Armstrong, son of the very Lord Armstrong who had opened the hospital in 1888. Geraldine was obviously one of the army of philanthropic Victorian ladies who considered it their civic duty to distribute their largesse on the deserving poor. Geraldine notes that she began her tour on the ground floor and was shown over the spotlessly clean kitchen, with two immense ranges, which, together with all the utensils showed signs of *'thorough brightness and order'*. Here staff were pounding meat for a beef tea for the invalids and there was a delicious savoury smell emanating from the room. From the kitchen she wandered to the laundry, in the large washhouse several maids were at work and two huge boilers were bubbling *'as though they meant business'*, while in

an adjoining room another maid was folding the ‘*snow white articles and indigo prints so often seen in such institutions*’. The children were encouraged to sing to entertain their visitor, which was a typical happening during such visits. Afternoon tea in matron’s apartments ended the day and Geraldine was at pains to state that the ladies and gentlemen who subscribe to the funds of the charity deserve all honour and gratitude for the blessings they are instrumental in conferring on the ‘*little mites*’.⁴

Early Lives of the Sisters

The sisters were three of the eleven children born between 1871 and 1894 to cabman William Borrowdale and his wife Esther, nee Carruthers.⁵ William’s father, also called William, was a cab proprietor and it could be that William took the business over from him after his death in 1866.⁶ His father’s death was reported in the local paper under the heading ‘*Fatal Results of Intemperance*’.⁷ William and Esther frequently changed addresses during their married life, never being at the same house at the birth of any of their children or from one census to another. Edith, named Edith Wilkie, her middle name being her paternal grandmother’s maiden name, was born at 12 Garden Street on the 19 October 1876.⁸ Two years later at the time of Isabella’s birth, December 1878, the family were residing at 36 Wellington Terrace,⁹ and on 18 June 1883 Edith is born at 11 Brindling Village, where the family did seem to live for a number of years.¹⁰

The younger siblings, Alexander and Jane, are recorded as attending the Christ Church Primary School in Shielfield, but online records only start in 1901 so whether the older children attended the same school is not known.¹¹ One child of the couple did not survive infancy, Margaret Jane who was born in June 1882

⁴ 1895 Marriage of Ralph Walter Armstrong and Geraldine Cecila Burge, St Faith’s Church, Winchester Southampton; Newcastle Chronicle. 22 December 1894, 11

⁵ GRO Marriage Indexes, September Quarter 1870, Newcastle T Dist, Vol 10b Page 23; 1871 England and Wales Census, RG10, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 5069; 1881 England and Wales Census, RG11, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 5070; 1891 England and Wales Census, RG12, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 4192; 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13 Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 4785; 1911 England and Wales Census, RG14, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 30436

⁶ GRO Death Indexes, June Quarter 1866, Newcastle Dist, Vol 10b, Page 48; *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*. 13 February 1895, 2 reporting the death of Elizabeth Borrowdale, the widow of Cab proprietor Willaim Borrowdale

⁷ *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 28 April 1866, 2

⁸ Birth certificate of Edith Wilkie Borrowdale, 19 October 1876

⁹ Birth certificate of Isabella Borrowdale, 22 December 1878

¹⁰ Birth certificate of Ethel Borrowdale, 18 June 1883

¹¹ National School Admission Registers and Log-Books 1870-1914, accessed via www.findmypast.co.uk

and died aged just 7 months on 24 November 1882 of bronchial convulsions, her father who was present at her death notified the registrar.¹² In 1891 William and Esther are living in Derby Street in the St Shield's ecclesiastical district of Newcastle and have six children living with them. Edith is 14 years old and noted as a day servant, while Isabella and Ethel are both at school.¹³

During the next ten years the family move from Derby Street to Copeland Street and by the time of the 1901 census are residing at Yorkshire Street. Two more children are born, Alexandra and Jane, but sadly their father William dies in 1899. William was 51 years old, noted as a Coachman [not domestic] and had succumbed to cancer of the oesophagus after being ill with the disease for some 6 months. The eldest daughter of the family Ann, being present at his death was the informant.¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, Edith, Isabella and Ethel are all working and living at the Fleming hospital at the time of the 1901 census.¹⁵

Isabella Borrowdale

In the 1901 census from the Fleming Hospital Isabella, as noted above, was recorded as Laundress, with several laundry maids listed after her name on the schedule. This suggests that Isabella oversaw the laundry, which must have been hard work for all concerned, despite the somewhat rosy picture presented to visitors such as Georgina Armstrong.¹⁶

The 1901 census also shows the widowed Esther Borrowdale enumerated at 31 Yorkshire Street, with five of her children, William, Fred, John, Alexander, and Jane, and a lodger, 22-year-old railway machine engineer William Carr.¹⁷ In 1903 William Carr and Isabella marry,¹⁸ and go on to have one child, a daughter Edith in 1907.¹⁹ At the time of Edith's birth the couple were living at Tosson Terrace and William's occupation was that of electric wireman.²⁰

¹² GRO Birth indexes, June Quarter 1882, Newcastle on Tyne, Vol 10b, Page 132; GRO Death Indexes, December Quarter 1882, Newcastle on Tyne, Vol 10b, Page 87; Death certificate of Margaret Jane Borrowdale, 24 November 1882

¹³ 1891 England and Wales Census, RG12, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 4192

¹⁴ GRO Birth indexes, September Quarter 1891, Newcastle on Tyne, Vol 10b, Page 39; GRO Birth indexes, July Quarter 1894, Newcastle on Tyne, Vol 10b, Page 46; 1899 Death certificate of William Borrowdale, 11 August 1899; 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13 Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 4785

¹⁵ 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13, Newcastle upon Tyne Registration Dist, Piece 4781

¹⁶ *Ibid*; *Newcastle Chronicle*. 22 December 1894, 11

¹⁷ 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13 Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 4785

¹⁸ GRO Marriage indexes, April Quarter 1903, Newcastle on Tyne, Vol 10b, Page 109

¹⁹ Birth Certificate of Edith Carr, 22 January 1907

²⁰ *Ibid*

By 1911 the couple are living in 3 rooms at 8 Holmwood Grove in Jesmond, the census return shows us that Isabella has had just the one child in the 7 years she has been married. William is now employed by Newcastle Corporation Tramways as an overhead linesman, while Isabella has no occupation noted against her name.²¹ No more children are born to the couple in the years leading up to the 1921 census, in fact the only change being that they have moved next door to number 6 Holmwood Grove and William has been promoted to electrical foreman at the corporation tramways, Edith who is 14 years old is in full time education.²²



Numbers 8 & 6 Holmwood Grove, Jesmond. Courtesy of Google Maps

On 8 February 1923 Isabella died at home at the young age of 44. The cause of death was tuberculosis bronchitis and exhaustion, William was with her when she died and registered her death a few days later.²³ Their daughter Edith would have been 16 at the time and for a while I struggled to find any mention of her in the records. However, she pops up again as a beneficiary of the will of her

²¹ 1911 England and Wales Census, RG14, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 30571

²² 1921 England and Wales Census, RG15, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 25355

²³ Death Certificate of Isabella Carr, 8 February 1923

maternal aunt and namesake Edith Borrowdale [see the section on Edith below for more details].²⁴ It seems that for some reason young Edith spent some time in Uxbridge, Middlesex after the death of her mother, her cousin David Richardson, the son of her aunt Ethel had moved south and perhaps she stayed with him for a while.²⁵ Edith marries French Polisher Thomas William Burns in Middlesex early in 1929 and returns home to the north-east by 1939, living in 87 Tosson Terrace, just a few doors away from where she was born.²⁶

Ethel Borrowdale

As previously noted, Ethel, the youngest of the three Borrowdale sisters who were working at the Fleming hospital in 1901, was one of five laundry maids under the supervision of her older sister Isabella.²⁷ Some six years later Ethel marries gas fitter Matthew Richardson and the couple make their home in Kent Street in Newcastle where they have their first son Norman Borrowdale Richardson in November 1908.²⁸ By the time the couple were completing the 1911 census they had moved to Woodhorn Road in Ashington, Matthew now worked in the mining industry as a pipe fitter and living with them was Ethel's brother William, also working in the mine. Their son Norman was two years old and Ethel claimed that she had had two children by this time, one of which had died.²⁹ I cannot locate the birth of this child and wondered if there has been an error in transcription or whether the child was born before the couple were married and without a name then a death is also hard to find. The couple do have two more children, David Frederick in September 1911, who in later life moves to Middlesex as mentioned earlier and Ethel Borrowdale born in 1914.³⁰ Matthew and Ethel prove to be an elusive couple and I struggled to find them definitively post 1914, after the birth of Ethel at 62 Molineux Street. Online family trees suggest that Ethel died in 1937 but I've concluded that that is not

²⁴ Will of Edith Wilkie Borrowdale dated 21 April 1924

²⁵ 1939 National Register, RG101, Edmonton Dist, Piece 0737E

²⁶ GRO Marriage Indexes, January Quarter 1929, Uxbridge Dist, Vol 3a, Page 118; 1939 National Register, RG101, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 2924C

²⁷ 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13, Newcastle upon Tyne Registration Dist, Piece 4781

²⁸ GRO Marriage Indexes, September Quarter 1907, Newcastle upon Tyne, Vol 10b, Page 139; Birth Certificate Norman Borrowdale Richardson, 22 November 1908

²⁹ 1911 England and Wales Census, RG14, Ashington Registration Dist, Piece 31042

³⁰ Birth Certificate, David Frederick Richardson, 19 September 1911; Birth Certificate, Ethel Borrowdale Richardson, 27 March 1914

the former Ethel Borrowdale as the date of birth at death does not match her birth certificate.

Edith Wilkie Borrowdale

Edith was enumerated at the Fleming Hospital in 1901 as the first of the domestic staff, which suggests a certain standing and perhaps meant that she was the head housemaid.³¹ This was the exact state of affairs at the time of the 1911 census when 34-year-old Edith was still on the domestic staff but listed as the Head House Maid.³² After some ten years serving as a domestic Edith decided to turn her hand to nursing, she studied for, and sat the Central Midwives Board [CMB] examinations, registering as a midwife on 31 October 1916.³³

Edith's decision to change her life course and pursue a professional path could have been influenced by many things. Perhaps her experience of working with sick children at the Fleming Hospital exposed her to challenges that resulted from birth-related illnesses and disability. This could have led Edith to consider a career as a midwife, thereby helping to give newborns a healthier and more promising start in life.

Edith would have trained under provisions of the 1902 Midwives Act, which was a series of legislative measures, considered a milestone in infant and maternal healthcare. The act specifically introduced training and supervision for women wishing to become a midwife and at the same time outlawed uncertified and untrained 'handywomen' and phased out certified but untrained midwives. These untrained midwives and working-class handywomen were generally viewed as illiterate and who tended to follow dangerous and unsanitary practices, whereas after 1905 only those trained and certified under the act would be entitled to use the name or title of 'Midwife' and to charge a fee for attendance related to such.³⁴

³¹ 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13, Newcastle upon Tyne Registration Dist, Piece 4781

³² 1911 England and Wales Census, RG14, Newcastle upon Tyne Registration Dist, Piece 30570

³³ The Wellcome Trust; London, England; *The Midwives Roll* - Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁴ Fox E. An Honourable Calling of a Despised Occupation: Licensed Midwifery and its Relationship to District Nursing in England and Wales before 1948, *Social History of Medicine*, 1993, vol. 6, 237-59

According to the list of approved hospitals for the training of midwives recorded at the beginning of the Midwives Roll, Edith would have trained at the Lying-in Hospital, New Bridge Street, Newcastle, later replaced by the Princess Mary Maternity Hospital in 1923.³⁵



Lying-In Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne
Credit: Chabe01, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

The midwifery training that Edith would have followed included at least six months of supervision under CMB rules and she would have needed to complete a series of conditions to the satisfaction of the examiner. These included:

- Attending and watching no fewer than 20 labours, making abdominal and vaginal examinations during labour and personally delivering the patient
- Nursing 20 lying-in women and their infants during the ten days following labour
- Attending a course of not less than 20 lectures on subjects such as
 - Anatomy and physiology of the female pelvis and organs
 - Hygiene, diseases and complications of pregnancy in relation to both mother and unborn child including abortion
 - Symptoms, mechanism, course, and management of natural labour
 - Signs of abnormal labour
 - Haemorrhage: varieties and treatments
 - Antiseptics in midwifery, preparation, and usage
 - Management of the puerperal patient

³⁵ For more on the Lying-In Hospital see - <https://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/dobson/1.html>

- Management, including the feeding, of infants
- Signs of disease which may develop in the first ten days
- Obstetric emergencies
- Puerperal fevers, nature and causes
- Venereal diseases, dangers and risks to mother and baby
- Care of children apparently born lifeless

This was all in addition to period of training as a general nurse.³⁶

Edith obviously satisfied her examiners and registered as a midwife in 1916, her enrolment number being 4489.³⁷ In 1921 she was practicing as a midwife and at the time of the census employed as a monthly nurse in the home of surgeon Thomas Watson Carstairs presumably to assist with the care of his wife Winifred and 10-day old son Lionel.³⁸

Edith was unfortunately not destined to be a midwife for long as on 24 April 1924 she suffered a cerebral embolism and died, she was just 46 years old.³⁹ According to her will she was at the time of her death living temporarily with her eldest sister Ann Bain and her husband Archie at 197 Simonside Terrace, Archie was the informant on the death certificate. Her Executors were noted as Ella Rayne and Catherine Atkinson.⁴⁰ Miss Catherine Atkinson had been a domestic at the Fleming Hospital at the same time as Edith in 1911 and she later underwent training as a nurse and was practicing as a children's nurse in 1921.⁴¹ The two women obviously remained friends during their lives.

Miss Ella Rayne, daughter of wine merchant and mine owner Charles George Rayne and his wife Mary, nee Lambert,⁴² had the distinction of being presented to the King in 1908.⁴³ Ella was I suspect another of the philanthropic ladies who raised funds for hospitals and good causes at various fetes and concerns, the

³⁶ As stated in The Midwives Roll - Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁷ The Wellcome Trust; London, England; *The Midwives Roll* - Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁸ 1921 England and Wales Census, RG15, South Shields Dist, Piece 25027

³⁹ Death Certificate of Edith Wilkie Borrowdale, 24 April 1924

⁴⁰ Edith Wilkie Borrowdale, Probate, Newcastle under Tyne, June 1924, Spencer Arnott, Solicitors

⁴¹ 1911 England and Wales Census, RG14, Newcastle upon Tyne Registration Dist, Piece 30570; 1921 England and Wales Census, RG15, Newcastle upon Tyne Dist, Piece 25307

⁴² 1901 England and Wales Census, RG13, Morpeth Registration Dist, Piece 4831

⁴³ *Gentlewoman*, 28 July 1906, 53

Bedside Nursing Association being just one organisation that Ella engaged with.⁴⁴ Another was the Victoria Cottage Hospital, where Ella not only suggested concerts to raise funds to add to the income of the hospital, but she also '*undertook the whole of the secretarial duties*'.⁴⁵ Edith may well have made contact with Ella during one of these events and maybe Edith's transition from domestic to fully trained midwife impressed Ella, it was also not unusual for upper-middle class women to assist members of the respectable working-class with their paperwork and such-like, an example of women working together across the social divide.

Edith's will, penned on 21 April 1924, three days before her death, leaves bequests of £50 each to her nieces, Edith Carr [daughter of sister Isabella], and Jean Bain and Edith McCall [daughters of sister Ann]. She also leaves £100 to her younger sister Jane and the rest of her actual money, after expenses, to her elder sister Ann. Finally, all her clothes and other effects to be divided equally between Jane and Ann.⁴⁶ The interesting thing about Edith's will is that she leaves all her money and goods to the women in the family.

Edith's death and subsequent interment at All Saints' Jesmond on 28 April at 2:15pm was announced in the local press, to which all friends were welcome. She was noted as a nurse and the beloved daughter of William and Esther Borrowdale.⁴⁷ An acknowledgement a week later appeared from the '*sisters and brothers of the late Nurse Edith Borrowdale, who wished to thank all friends for their kindness and sympathy, also floral tributes, in their sad bereavement*'.⁴⁸

Of the three Borrowdale sisters that were working in the Fleming Hospital in 1901, Edith serves as a compelling illustration of how women who devoted their lives to a career could make a transition from a domestic to a highly skilled and valued individual. Her journey, marked by hard work and commitment, underscores the possibility for single women to achieve a degree of social mobility during the Edwardian period. This achievement required a significant

⁴⁴ *Morpeth Herald*, 22 February 1908, 4

⁴⁵ *Morpeth Herald*, 31 October 1903, 5

⁴⁶ Will of Edith Wilkie Borrowdale, 21 April 1924, Spencer Arnott, Solicitors, Newcastle upon Tyne

⁴⁷ *North Star (Darlington)*, 25 April 1924, 6; *North Star (Darlington)*, 26 April 1924, 6

⁴⁸ *North Star (Darlington)*, 1 May 1924, 6

investment of both effort and time, a feat virtually impossible for married working-class women with children.

Narrative by Margaret Roberts

Few Forgotten Women Team