

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.

Mary Ann Whitbread's Story

Mary Ann Whitbread's father John was born in Eversholt, Bedfordshire, in 1855, to Abel and Rebecca. He's one of ten children of Abel, a labourer, and Rebecca, and was labouring at an early age. In 1878 he married Mary Ann Lydiatt, 25, from Ashorne, Newton Pacey, in her parish. Both of the couple were both servants, and illiterate.

At time of marriage Mary was approximately four months pregnant with their first child, John George Whitbread, born summer 1878 at Newbold Pacey.

Soon afterwards the Whitbread family move to Holly Berry End, near Meridan, Warwickshire. This is a rural street, with three farms and their buildings. Mary Ann is born here on the 23rd of November, 1880. She is not baptised – neither was John George.

1881

The family are there in 1881. The order of the nine residences suggests that they were in the middle farm, Ivy House.



<https://maps.nls.uk/os/>

In 1886, John and Mary Ann have a third child, Deborah.

In August 1890, the Coventry Divisional Sessions hear a case. As reported in the Coleshill Chronicle “John Whitbread – described as an Allesley labourer – has brought his 9 ½-year-old girl (who must be Mary Ann), to the court and “represented that, with his wife in the lunatic asylum, the child was quite beyond his control, and he asked that she might be sent to an industrial school. She slept out at night, and P. C. Vale said he had had complaints in the village of the girl being found in peoples gardens and otherwise misconducting himself, and though he had spoken to her, she seemed to be altogether uninfluenced by what was said – The justices complied with the father’s request, and sent the child to the Leicester Street school, until she was 16 years old.” The Coventry Herald adds; “on two occasions she had slept out all night sleeping in hovels”. The Coventry Chronicle byline was Only Nine Years

Old and Beyond Control. “He could do nothing with her”. The chairman said “I have never heard of such a case”. Police Constable Vale said that what John had said was quite true.

So we learn from this that they are in Allesley; that’s very close to Holly Berry End, but I think they have moved as a few months later all their neighbours are different. We don’t know how long Mary Ann snr has been in the asylum – logically a few months? - or why.

Nor do we know anything about why Mary Ann is acting in that way – whether she is just upset and missing her mum, and doesn’t like to be in the house without her, or whether there is a deeper problem.

1891

In 1891 Mary Ann sr is in the Coventry Lunatic Asylum, Hatton (which is probably where she was the previous year). She’s listed as W, MA, married housewife of 37; from Allesley, and a lunatic (the majority of inmates are).



Image: Hatton Hospital Wikimedia Commons

How is John sr coping? Well, he is an agricultural labourer in Allesley with son John George. John George is only 12, but is described as “works on farm”.

Deborah, aged five, has been sent to live with her widowed maternal grandmother, who is supported by the parish.

Mary Ann Whitbread, is 10 and has indeed been sent to the Coventry Girls Industrial Home, 42 Leicester Street Coventry. The school is for girls aged 10 to 15 – she is one of the youngest of the thirty there, at ten and four months. It

would appear she either went a bit early with court permission, or after her tenth birthday.

Information about the school can be found at <https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/CoventryIS/>. There are also images from around 1900, but they are not included here as they are copyright. Mary Ann is in a brand new building, opened for use in October 1889. The Home Inspector called the premises “very suitable” but with too small a schoolroom. However, it was a troubled place, with harsh discipline (perhaps why John had petitioned for it!). A superintendent was pushed to resign in March 1891 after punishing several girls by putting mustard plasters on their fingers. (which with prolonged contact would cause chemical burns). Mary Ann could plausibly have been one of them. So at the time of the census there is also a new head – but things didn’t improve. In 1893 a special inquiry is held by the Home Office over a case of alleged excessive punishment. Four girls – though not Mary Ann – had been beaten with a cane for taking some bread and treacle. Miss Camp claimed she had not known this was not allowed in industrial schools. She resigned.

If Mary Ann stayed the expected length of time, she would have left in 1897. It seems likely then that she saw improvements in that time, judging by the 1896 report, which is broadly positive and notes “there was said to be very little punishment”

Records of the school can be found at the Coventry History Centre, which may shed more light, but there is nothing more available online.

Mary Ann sr died in summer 1891.

In 1895 John married again. Mary Ann’s new stepmother was Emma Bishop, who is from Droitwich but also lived in Meriden, and then Allesley. Emma already had three children – Mary Eliza (b. 1881), John (b. 1882) and William Albert (b. 1884). In 1891 she is widowed, working as a charwoman, and living very close to John Whitbread. In late 1895, the two have their own child – Ernest Sidney (again, it’s likely that Emma was pregnant at the time of marriage).

Mary Ann will have left the Industrial School at 16, so that’s also 1895-6. In theory every girl who left the school should have had a good education and a placement as a servant. But we don’t know what happened to her, over the next five years. But if she had wanted to go home to her father, might she have

felt herself supplanted by her stepmother's new family, who were close to her in age, and her new baby half brother?

1901

By 1901, Mary Ann is living at 44 Bartholemew Street West, Exeter Home for Fallen Women, along with a head matron, a sub-matron, and nine other inmates. Notably only three of the group are from Devon – as well as Mary Ann, from Warwickshire, there are two Londoners, one from Oxford, one from Jersey, and one from New York!

The Exeter Home for Fallen Women was founded in 1862. The building isn't there any more. We know from news reports of the 1880s that it was "many chambered" with room for 34 inmates, but seems to have been reduced soon after that. Annoyingly it stops publishing annual reports in the press. These show us what it was like back then – more relaxed than a penitentiary in that the women were not locked in and not in a uniform, but still built around religious and moral education.



<https://maps.nls.uk/os/>

As for her family, in 1901:

Her sister Deborah is a servant in Birmingham; she dies in 1903.

Her brother John George is a letter press printer, living in a lodging house in Coventry.

Her father and stepmother have moved to Redhill Road, Yardley (presumably number 64 as per 1911), with young Ernest Sidney. Also here are the two stepbrothers – working in blacksmithing and brickyards – but the stepsister has married and moved away. These are quite new houses (they weren't there in 1889). John is working as an excavator (scavenger) – according to one writer to birminghamhistory.co.uk there was “the dump” at the end of the cross road, which might be where he worked..

At some point between 1901 and 1905 Mary Ann Whitbread returns to Warwickshire. In April 1905, aged 24, she is baptised at St John the Baptist, central Coventry. Presumably she gained her faith while at the Home.

1911

In 1911, Mary Ann is a servant for silk manufacturer Edward Spencer and his family, Radcliffe Road, Coventry.

Her father and stepmother are still at Redhill Road; he's working for a steel wire manufacturer. Also here is Ernest Sidney, who works in a cycle parts factory (and who, in 1909 was rescued from drowning in a local canal).

John George is in a different Coventry lodging house from ten years before, working as a general machinist (motorcycle). He must still be in touch with his sister because in 1912, he marries Bertha Milton. Now, Bertha Milton is from Devon – and she was one of the others in the Exeter Home in 1901. Perhaps she moved to Coventry at the same time as her friend Mary Ann Whitbread. In 1911 she's working as a laundress in a large school in Warwick.

The couple move to 24 Kingsway, where we find John George listed as an engineer in a 1912 directory. He's also registered to vote from here. He calls the place Ivy House (presumably named after the farm of his childhood). Over the next few years they have four children. I haven't followed their lives, but young Geoffrey wins a “best decorated bicycle” prize in a 1928 carnival, which suggests a decent childhood!

The two stepbrothers have now also moved away – one to Staffordshire, the other to Wales.

There's no sign that any of the family were involved in World War One. That's odd, as both John George (at the older end), the two stepbrothers, and Ernest Sidney (at the younger end – there are seventeen years between them) were of conscription age. Presumably John George's job exempts him, as does one of the stepbrothers (engine fitter in a colliery), but I'm not sure that "clay grinder" or "cycle parts maker" would be protected.

We don't know anything about how Mary Ann spent the war.

1921

Skip forward to 1921 and Mary Ann's life has changed. We don't know why she left Warwickshire for a second time, but we find her at the Preventative Home (Portsmouth Church Council), 2 Gloucester Terrace, Southsea. It's not there now. But this time she isn't an inmate, but the deputy matron, working alongside head matron Eleanor Gertrude Starkey. This is a small unit: there are only five inmates, all local, all aged 14 to 18.

According to <https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/> it is properly called the Portsmouth, Portsea and Southsea Ladies' Association Home, St Thomas' Refuge - this was founded in 1878, and was for five "fallen and friendless girls" under 30.

Is she helping those who have been through the same things as she has? Very likely this also relates to her faith - it is certainly another religious establishment.

John and Emma continue at Yardley with Ernest Sidney; John George continues in Coventry, working for Triumph Cycle Company, in a different lodging house.

In 1923 Ernest Sidney marries Louisa Eleanor.

John Whitbread dies in 1927; John George dies a few months later.

Later life

In 1939, Mary Ann Whitbread is living at 44 Oval Gardens, Gosport (a few miles from Southsea) At 59, she is the "companion help" to Eleanor Starkey, who

had been above her at the Preventative Home. Starkey is a Lay Diocesan Worker. Had they spent the intervening eighteen years together? I think it quite probable.

Eleanor Starkey dies at aged 80 in 1950, still living at 44 Oval Gardens. She leaves her money to Mary Ann Whitbread and Elsie Cowan Stares, spinsters. Elsie is from Southsea, so presumably there is a connection there.

Mary Ann died in Gosport in 1963 – perhaps the same house?, aged 82. According to the Billion Graves cemetery index she is buried at Anns Hill, Gosport.

Sources

Ancestry.co.uk / findmypast.co.uk – 1861, 71, 81, 91, 1901, 11 censuses, 1939 register ; civil birth marriages and death records; parish baptism and marriage records, probate records, directories

findmypast.co.uk newspapers, 1921 census

<https://maps.nls.uk/os/> - Ordnance Survey Maps at the Scottish National Archives

<https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/>