

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.

Elsie Binning's Story

Elsie Binning was born on 17 October 1895¹ at Rodney Stoke near the town of Wells in Somerset and was baptised on 1 December² in the local parish church. The baptism entry records her parents as Richard and Annie Binning of Rodney Stoke, he was employed as a labourer. Richard and Annie had married during the previous year at nearby Draycott in March 1894³ according to the parish register. He was 23, she was 21 and both were single and living in Draycott. Annie's maiden name was given as Standfield. Elsie was their first child.

In 1905 Elsie was mentioned in the local newspaper; the Somerset and Western England Advertiser, dated Thursday 10th August. Under the heading of "Cheddar flower Show" Elsie is mentioned as having been awarded 2nd place in the Children's "Collection of Wild Flowers" category. Several other Binning's were also awarded prizes, although her parents were not amongst the winners listed. In the evening following the presentations there was dancing in the marquee to a local brass band, which went on to the "later hours of the evening", although I doubt Elsie aged 10 would have been allowed to attend this part of the celebration!

By looking at the census entries it was possible to see that by 1911⁴ Richard and Annie had been married for 17 years and that they had had 6 children, all of whom were still alive. Only Elsie was not living with the family at this time, as she was attending the Housewifery School in Street, Somerset. Elsie's siblings were Marian born 1898, Walter 1901, Ella 1904, Winnie 1907 and Elmer in 1910.

Elsie, aged 15, is recorded as being a pupil at the Abbey Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset⁵ under the headship of Louisa Acheson, who had been head since 1899. The census returns list two other teachers; Margaret Pearson and Isabel Cayley as well as 19 students in total, all, except one, aged between 14-15, the exception being 16 years old. Louisa, declared on the form that there were 20 rooms, not including those instructed to be ignored. This, together with the fact that the census records who was in the house overnight, suggest that the school was a boarding school. The image below curtesy of The National Library of Scotland shows the location of the school as being close to the centre of Street;



Figure 1; Abbey Grange, the site of the housewifery School, can be seen just off centre towards the top of the image; copyright National Library of Scotland⁶

The School Committee of Managers kept minute books which recorded details about pupils' success in gaining places as well as other things such as misbehaviour and suspensions. Reference to the minute book entry on 17th June 1910⁷ states that Elsie had been awarded a studentship which would allow her to attend after the summer break, when she would be 14, due to turn 15 in October.

A fellow student of Elsie's, Bessie Barrington, who had left the school by the time of the 1911 census, kept an exercise book from her time at the school in 1910⁸. In it she recorded the type of things the girls were taught which shows that the school was preparing the girls to be competent housekeepers either in preparation for marriage or for employment in service. This is confirmed in one of the minute books which states that their aim was to "...make the girls who pass through the school better fitted to be the wives of artisans or others of a similar class, or to be good domestic servants"⁹. It gives a good idea about the sort of thing Elsie would have learnt whilst at the school. The figure below summarises the chapter headings from Bessie's exercise book;

Chapter title	Advice
Income and how to spend it	including advice about putting leftover money at the end of the month into a Post Office Savings Account as interest earned on it means extra income
Food and how to cook it,	including the safe storage of foodstuffs.
Clothing, needlework, and laundry	including the properties of various fabrics, mending and stain removal.
The House and how to keep it	things to look for when choosing a house such as it being well maintained plus having a routine for daily and weekly household jobs.
Hygiene;	including healthy eating, exercise, and personal care.
Home nursing	including making home remedies, changing bedlinen with the patient in bed and giving bed baths.

Figure 2; a summary of Bessie Barrington's exercise book information⁸

After Elsie joined the school in September 1910 something must have occurred during this first term which put her continued attendance into jeopardy. There is a record from a meeting

of the Managers, recorded in the Minute Books, dated 19th December 1910, about a discussion which occurred regarding whether Elsie should return to the school after the Christmas holiday. The book records that it was decided that the matter should be left in the hands of two Committee members, the Chairman William Stephens Clark and Mr Somerville¹⁰. As Elsie is recorded as being a pupil in the 1911 census the matter was clearly resolved but there is no mention of what occurred.

Nothing more has been found regarding Elsie's time at the school and it is to be assumed that she completed her education there and left when she was 15 at the end of the summer term in 1911, as the census seems to suggest girls attended between the ages of 14-15.

Reference to the Ancestry website provides information about the next stages of Elsie's life. According to the GRO indexes Elsie married Leslie Frederick Collins sometime during the October 1920 quarter in the Wells Registration District¹¹. Ancestry has digitised the 1939 Register, which showed the family still living in Somerset, in Priory Road Wells¹². Part of the document is closed but one of the names is partly uncovered and shows a record for Pamela presumably their daughter, then there are two more, fully closed records. This led me to search for baptisms of any children of this marriage. The GRO indexes for this time period very helpfully list the mother's maiden name which makes searching a lot more exact and it was possible to find that they had 5 children in total, two of whom had died by the time of the 1939 register.

After this date it gets more difficult to follow families as many baptism records are for times before the mid 20th century. I did look at some trees on ancestry and found references to this family which had details which tallied with what I had discovered. These trees seem to suggest that John married and had three sons of his own, one of these boys also married and had children. However, no details are provided for living relatives and it is not possible to tell if these trees are complete or if they only contain detail for some of the siblings. What it does seem to suggest is that Elsie had grandchildren and great grandchildren.

By searching for online GRO death records it appears that Elsie's husband Leslie died in January 1968, the family were still living in Wells. The inclusion of the middle initial F makes

it likely this is him. As Elsie's birth date of 17th October 1895 is known this makes it easier when searching for more recent GRO death indexes, so it was straightforward to search for her death entry. She died in October 1977, but was no longer living in Wells but had moved to Plymouth¹³.

If the GRO indexes are further consulted the following can be found; her daughter, died in Plymouth on 18th Oct 2011. I am sure this is the right family as the names and especially middle names and ages fit. It is therefore logical to assume that after Leslie's death in 1968, Elsie went to live in the same area as her two daughters and their families.

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Sources;

- 1) Birth date obtained from the 1939 register available to view on the Ancestry website; original data; The National Archives; Kew, London, England; 1939 Register; Reference: Rg 101/7045f; www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 9th January 2024
- 2) Baptism entry for Elsie in the local parish church obtained from the Ancestry website; original data; Somerset, Church of England baptisms, 1813-1914; Somerset Heritage Service; Taunton, Somerset, England; Reference Number: D\P\rod.s/2/1/5; www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 9 January 2024
- 3) Marriage entry for Richard and Annie at Draycott parish church available to view on the Ancestry website; original data; Somerset, England, Marriage Registers, Bonds and Allegations 1754-1914; Somerset Heritage Service; Taunton, Somerset, England; Somerset Parish Records, 1538-1914; Reference Number: D\P\dcot/2/1/3; www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 9 January 2024
- 4) 1911 census entry obtained via Ancestry website shows the Binning family living in Draycott; original data; The National Archives; Kew, Surrey, England; Census Returns of England and Wales 1911; Class RG14; Piece; 14520; www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 9 January 2024
- 5) 1911 census entry for Elsie Binning at the School of Housewifery in Street Somerset; The National Archives; Kew, Surrey, England; Census Returns of

England and Wales 1911; Class RG14; Piece; 14542;

https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/2352/images/rg14_14542_0233_04?ssrc=&backlabel=Return&pid=55339267; accessed 9 January 2024

- 6) Map extract to show the location of Abbey Grange, site of the school in the town of Street, Somerset; original data; Ordnance Survey; OS 6 inch England and Wales 1842-1952; surveyed 1902 and published 1904; The National Library of Scotland; <https://maps.nls.uk/view/101461582> accessed 9th January 2024
- 7) Reference to Elsie being awarded a studentship to the School of Housewifery 17th June 1910; original data; C/E/1/146 Somerset School of Cookery and housewifery, Committee of Managers Minute book 1897-1916; South west Heritage Trust, Somerset Heritage Centre
- 8) Bessie Barrington's exercise book outlining chapter headings and advice given to the girls whilst at the school; original data; Somerset Heritage Centre; A/DEQ/1, Domestic Economy exercise book of Bessie Barrington, whilst attending The School of Housewifery, The Grange, Street, 1910
- 9) Quote from Minute books; original data; Somerset Heritage Centre; C/E/1/146, Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery – Minutes, 1897-1916
- 10) Minute book entry 19th December 1910 regarding whether Elsie Binning should continue at the school after the Christmas holiday; original data; Somerset Heritage Centre; C/E/1/146, Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery – Minutes, 1897-1916
- 11) GRO Marriage entry for Elsie and Leslie Collins in the Wells Registration district; original data; England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916-2005; General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 5c; Page: 1151
www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 10 January 2024
- 12) 1939 register entry for Elsie and Leslie Collins in Priory Road Well's' Original data; The National Archives; Kew, London, England; 1939 Register; Reference: Rg 101/7045f; www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 10 January 2024
- 13) GRO death entry for Elsie Collins, October 1977; original data; England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916-2007; General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 21; Page: 1803; www.ancestry.co.uk accessed 10 January 2024.

