

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.

Lily Ann Cotter

Ann Lily Cotter was born in Tiverton, Devon on the 24th February, 1896.¹ Her parents Elizabeth Annie Goodland and William Henry Cotter, a coachman, had married in July of the previous year in the parish of Weston all Saints in Bath, Somerset.² Ann Lily soon became known as Lily Ann and she was the eldest of 6 children born to Annie and William. The family moved from Devon to Norton in Wiltshire, then to Dover, Kent before settling around 1904 in Barton St David a small village near Wells and Annie's home parish. On the baptism records of some of his children William is described as a groom or a coachman.

The family appear to be quite poor, by the 1911 census Annie and 5 children were living without William at home and with Annie working as a charwoman.³ In the 1921 census Annie is still alone and describing herself as married and working at William's occupation because her children were now all working as agriculture labourers or domestic servants.⁴ No definite record of William is found although it is possible he was a patient in the Somerset and Bath Asylum, Colford Norton Firzwarren, Taunton in 1921.⁵ This was an asylum for paupers and William's occupation was recorded as groom.

It must have been a great relief to her mother when Lily Ann was offered a studentship to attend The Grange School of Housewifery in June, 1910.⁶ This meant that after the school summer holidays Lily would move into the Grange as a boarder and spend the year there learning skills which would enable her to find work as a high class servant and to be, later, a good and competent housewife.

The School of Housewifery in Street which was originally called the Somerset School of Cooking and Housewifery opened in July 1897. It was run by the County Council and girls from working class families could apply for a studentship for the year. There was no cost to the parents. The school was housed in the Grange, a building dating back in parts to the 17th century and it was owned by C. & J. Clark Ltd. who paid the taxes and for any building repairs. Somerset County Council were the occupiers who paid the rates. The building was in close proximity to Messrs C & J Clark's Boot and Shoe Factory. As a result, the staff and students would become used to the chiming of the factory clock every 15 minutes!

In July 1911, towards the end of Lily's time at The Grange, there was the annual Visitors Day when parents, the local community and previous pupils were invited to see the students work, enjoy some refreshments and be entertained by the local brass band. There is a detailed report of this event in the Central Somerset Gazette where praise is heaped on the headmistress and her staff.⁷ The reporter states that

'The girls are taught general housework, cooking, laundry-work, dress-making, hygiene. Their physical health is looked after and, what is more, their moral development'.

His report then goes on to describe the laundry room where dresses are washed, starched and ironed to the 'utmost degree of perfection' and where 'astonishing examples of ways of cleaning and polishing silver and plates' were seen.

A far less flowery and practical example of activities undertaken by the students can be seen in an exercise book kept by fellow student Bessie Barrington in 1910 which had the following chapter headings.⁸

- 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.

We have no record of Lily's achievements at The Grange or where she went after she left. We do know that by the time of the 1921 census she was living at the Bear Inn in Street.⁹ Lily was described as a Lady's help to the manageress of the Inn, Mary Leach, and was working as a waitress. The Bear Inn was a temperance hotel, established in 1878 and owned by C & J Clark Ltd, who were Lily and Mary's employers. The Inn had boarders who at the time of the 1921 census were all women and two were teachers in local schools.

The Inn would have catered for the workers at the Clark's Boot and Shoe factory as well as the town as a whole. Looking at newspapers between 1910 – 1930 it is obvious that many local organizations and societies held meetings there. In 1918 a new canteen was opened at the Inn for the workers and local residents to purchase a good dinner at a low price – this was an example of the Quaker values by which C & J Clark Ltd. operated.¹⁰

Lily would have had many opportunities to get to know people who worked at the factory and who lived in the town. Perhaps this is how she met her future husband, Charles Henry Hannam. Charles was born in Dorset about 1865 but by the age of 15 he was an assistant stockkeeper at the Boot and Shoe Factory.¹¹ He was to work there until his retirement in 1929 when he was a foreman at the factory. His first marriage to Mary Tucker lasted 37 years until Mary's death in 1926.¹² They had one son, Arthur Charles Hannam (1892-1970). In his retirement Charles continued to work as an agent for the Somersetshire Permanent Benefit Society as well as serving as a local councillor for several years.¹³

Lily and Charles married in 1931, there is no record of their marriage in the papers so it would probably have been a quiet affair.¹⁴ At the time of her marriage Lily was 35 and Charles was 66. Lily and Charles had no children together, however in the 1939 register there were two children, Joyce and Emma Gray, living with them.¹⁵ They were possibly evacuees; no further information has been found.

The Hannams lived at 113 High Street not far from the factory and were well established members of the community. In 1949 Lily resigned as Secretary of the Street Mother's Union after serving ten years on the committee, due to ill health. Her resignation was accepted 'with regret' and as a mark of appreciation Lily was presented with a pearl necklace and earrings from the committee members.¹⁶ There are also accounts of Mrs Hannam attending whist drives, winning prizes at local fetes for her jams and cakes and being involved in the war effort.

Sadly, Lily died suddenly on 24th April 1954 in the yard of her home in the High Street after suffering a coronary thrombosis.¹⁷ She was 58 years of age and her funeral took place a few days later at Barton St David's where she was buried in the churchyard there.¹⁸ Charles was unable to attend her funeral, but her stepson and family were present as well as all her surviving siblings. Lily had made a will and left her brother William Ernest, farmer, just over one thousand pounds.¹⁹

Charles survived Lily by less than a year, he was 90 at his death in April 1955 and his funeral service was held at the Mission Church. No burial details were given.²⁰

Lily used the skills and knowledge learnt in her time at the Grange enabling her to have a secure job and later to be a 'good housewife' in her marriage to Charles.

Andrea Knowles

Sources

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⁴ 1921 census for Annie Cotter The National Archives RG15 11279 119 findmypast

⁵ 1921 Census for William Cotter The National archives RG15 11233 10 findmypast

⁶ South West Heritage Trust, Somerset Heritage Centre, C/E/1/146, Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery – Minutes 1897 – 1916

⁷ Central Somerset Gazette 14 July 1911 Findmypast

⁸ Somerset Heritage Centre; A/DEQ/1, Domestic Economy exercise book of Bessie Barrington, whilst attending The School of Housewifery, The Grange, Street, 1910

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- ¹¹ 1881 Census Charles Hannam the national Archive RG11 2414 60
- ¹² Central Somerset Gazette 21 July 1926 findmypast
- ¹³ Central Somerset Gazette 1 April 1955 findmypast
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- ¹⁵ 1939 Register Reference: *Rg 101/7038a Findmypast*
- ¹⁶ Central Somerset Gazette 13 May 1949 Findmypast
- ¹⁷ Death of Lily Hannam GRO Ref1954 Jun WELLS 07C 227
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