

# *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.*

## **Ellen C Bush's Story**

Nothing about attending The Grange School of Housewifery would have prepared Ellen Clara Bush to attend court in 1937, witness to a murder.

Ellen was a country girl who spent most of her life in the parish of Baltonsborough, Somerset where she was born in 1887<sup>1</sup> - and where the murder took place 50 years later.

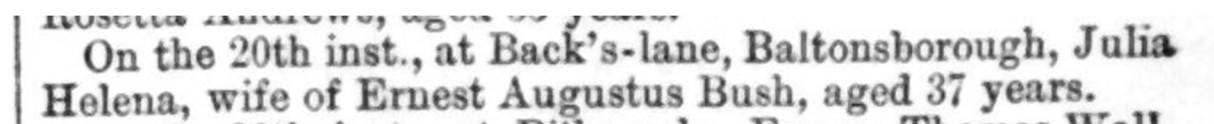
Baltonsborough's centre is small<sup>2</sup>, through the parish covers Southwood, where Ellen's father was born<sup>3</sup>, and Catsham where Ellen eventually died. It lies in a broad flat valley, where people worked in cider making and dairy farming, close to Glastonbury and some 5 or so miles from Street. Its claim to fame is as the birthplace of St Dunstan, to whom its church is dedicated.

Ellen was the second of seven children born to Ernest Augustus Bush and his wife Julia Helena, nee Witcombe. Ernest was born in 1861<sup>4</sup> and was just 3 years old when his father died<sup>5</sup>. By 1871 he was working as a labourer, though he was just 10, living with his mother, Harriet and other family members<sup>6</sup>. In 1881, Ernest lived with his mother, brother and one of his nephews and all 3 men were farm labourers<sup>7</sup>. Julia was born in 1862 in West Bradley<sup>8</sup>, some 2.5 miles away from Baltonsborough. She was the eldest daughter of Levi, a farm labourer<sup>9</sup>, and his wife Elizabeth. By 1881 she had moved east to Evercreech to work as a dairy maid<sup>10</sup>. In about 1882, Ernest started working as a labourer for cheese factors Messrs. Whitehead and Mullens<sup>3</sup> and on Christmas Day 1884 Ernest and Julia married in West Bradley's Parish Church<sup>11</sup>. Though a Christmas marriage may sound romantic to us now the truth was, as a traditional day off, it was a popular choice as a wedding day for people who couldn't afford miss work.

The following year their first daughter was born and called Harriet Elizabeth<sup>12</sup> after her grandmothers. Ellen Clara followed on 25 September 1886<sup>13</sup>, Frances Annie in 1889<sup>14</sup>, Augustus George in 1892<sup>15</sup>, Hilda Blanche in 1894<sup>16</sup> some 6 months after her sister Frances died<sup>17</sup>, Albert Isaac in 1896<sup>18</sup> and Julia Emily Dora in 1900<sup>19</sup>. Local newspapers that mention her father Ernest, give a picture of Ellen's family life. In 1889, at the Glastonbury Annual Great Market there were "prizes offered by the market committee as rewards for skill, and the encouragement of industry and good behaviour amongst agricultural labourers and domestic servants". £2 2s was awarded "to Ernest Bush, Baltonsborough, for having worked 10 years and eight months without taking intoxicating drinks"<sup>20</sup>. This may have stemmed from his religious beliefs, as Ernest worshipped at the Moravian Chapel in Baltonsborough

as well as being sexton there for many years<sup>3</sup>. In November 1892, he was one of 25 men who applied to the parish to requisition more land for allotments. He was described as “labourer, 4 children, had 2 lugs and 1/4-acre allotment, asks 1/2-acre”<sup>21</sup>. In 1897 he was elected as one of the Committee members of the local Temperance Society<sup>22</sup>.

In 1900 tragedy struck when Ernest’s wife Julia died<sup>23</sup> just a few weeks after the birth of their baby daughter - also called Julia.



On the 20th inst., at Back's-lane, Baltonsborough, Julia Helena, wife of Ernest Augustus Bush, aged 37 years.

**Death Notice, from the West of England Advertiser**

How must the family have coped with the loss of the mother of 6 children ranging in age from 14 to just a few weeks old? It may be that the eldest, Harriet, took care of her younger siblings. It seems other family members helped too, as 11-month-old Julia was living in the household of a maternal aunt in nearby East Pennard in 1901<sup>24</sup>. She had other children and could perhaps provide better care for a baby than Ernest or young Harriet at that time.

Life continued and in February 1901, at an Annual Winter Tea in association with the Gospel Temperance Society, some of the family helped provide the entertainment. The programme included “The New Coat’ by Harriet Bush and Annie Wilkins ... recitation by ... H Bush [and] Ellen Bush”<sup>25</sup>.

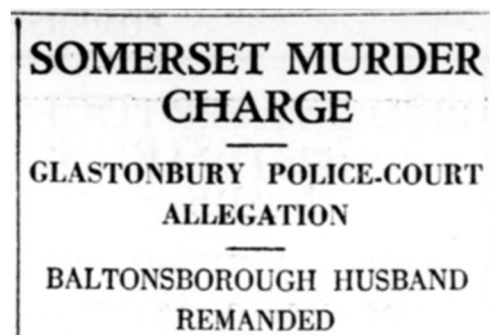
Just a few weeks after that event Ellen Clara Bush left home, moving some 5 miles west to Street where she became a pupil at The Grange

School of Housewifery. She was there, studying cookery, when the census was taken on 31 March 1901<sup>26</sup>. Minutes of a meeting by the school's Committee of Managers on 29th March 1901 show that Ellen was invited to join the school after two students left. She took one of the vacancies<sup>27</sup>.

Back in Baltonsborough in 1901 Ellen's family lived next door to her father's 83 year old mother and his brother. Only Ernest, Harriet, Augustus, Hilda and Albert were in the household<sup>28</sup>. Then, in 1902 Ernest married again. His new wife was a widow called Ellen Small, nee Burge. She was a widow, with 2 children of her own<sup>29</sup>.

There is no record of how long Ellen Clara Bush remained at the Grange School of Housewifery, or whether she worked as a cook after leaving. The next record we find is her marriage to Arthur Helps in 1909<sup>30</sup>, around the same time as her sister Harriet married Bertie Higgins<sup>31</sup>. Arthur was an agricultural labourer, born in East Pennard, though by 1901 he was living in Lottisham, near Baltonsborough<sup>32</sup>. In 1911 Ellen and Arthur were living in Southwood and Ellen's brother Augustus George was lodging with them. Both men worked as farm labourers<sup>33</sup>. By 1921 they had moved again, the census shows their postal address simply as Lottisham<sup>34</sup>, which indicates how small a community it was. It was in 1934 in Lottisham Green that a shocking murder took place.

Somerset County Herald, 1 May 1937.



The newspapers recorded how William Rendell, a 70 year-old labourer, had moved in with his 53 year-old wife Lily, in March of that year. Then on 23 April they had argued and he allegedly later told the police, “I hit the ‘Missus’ on the head with the chopper and I then cut her throat with a razor which I used to cut my corns”<sup>35</sup>. The report of the trial at the Somerset Assizes in June gave a good account of the witness statements, including those from Ellen and her sister Harriet. The prosecution explained the murder happened in a group of 3 cottages, formed of one building that had been partitioned. “Neighbours heard a scream and groans, and two women living next door to the Rendell’s were so alarmed that they ran to the next-door cottage to fetch a Mr. Billing.”<sup>36</sup> The 2 women were Ellen and Harriet, who were both called as witnesses. “Mrs. Ellen Clara Helps, of Lottisham Green, said the house she occupied was separated by only a thin partition. She had heard loud talking as though they were angry. Mrs. Harriet Elizabeth Higgins, who lived with Mrs. Helps, also gave evidence...”<sup>36</sup> The jury found Rendell guilty of murder, but recommended mercy. Despite that, the judge sentenced him to death<sup>37</sup>. Later reports show that the Home Secretary recommended a reprieve<sup>38</sup>.

We can presume that with the death of Lily Rendell, who had owned the cottages, Ellen and her husband had to move. Certainly by 1939 they were living in nearby Catcham<sup>39</sup>. The couple featured in no other newspaper articles, until the ones informing of their passing, and we can suppose Ellen was grateful not to be involved in such a case again. Arthur passed away in 1950<sup>40</sup>, followed 7 years later by Ellen, who had been ill for some time<sup>41</sup>. They had no children and were survived by siblings, nieces and nephews.

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