

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in March 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who appear in the 1901 census for St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex and Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey.

Mary Slack 's Story

Mary was born on 17th May 1882 in Notting Hill, Kensington, according to her baptism record in the registers of St Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, Notting Hill¹ on 11th June 1882. Her entry records the family as living at 4 Manchester Street. Mary's birth was registered with the GRO in September 1882, in the Kensington registration district². She was the second child of David Slack and Margaret (sometimes Mary) nee Burke, both of whom hailed from the settlement of Kilfinane, Limerick in Ireland. David and Margaret had married on 14th January 1879 in Kilfinane parish church³. David was the son of Jacob Slack and Margaret the daughter of Richard Burke.

Their first child, James, was born in mid 1880 in Kensington, West London, according to the 1881 census⁴. From this it can be assumed that David and Margaret moved to England sometime between January 1879 and mid 1880 and moved into 1 Western Terrace, Kensington. Several families all lived in the same property, suggesting they would not have had access to many rooms.

However, James does not appear in the 1891 census and in two later newspaper reports about the family, Mary is named as the eldest child. According to the 1911 census when David and Margaret had been married for 30 years, they had had 11 children, 8 of whom were still alive. Mary therefore grew up in a large family but one that suffered the trauma of child death as was so common for the time.

By 1891 the next census recorded the family living at 21 Covent Garden⁵ with three children; Mary aged 8, Philip 6 and James who was 2, suggesting that James born 1880 had died sometime before 1889 but after 1885 as the name Philip had been chosen for the son born that year. David Slack's occupation was given as a labourer, nothing was recorded for Margaret, who for this census was recorded as Mary.

A search in the British Newspaper archive turned up two results for Mary Slack. The first was in the London *Evening Standard* published on Monday 17th December 1894⁶ on the front page, in the section headed "This Day's Law" under the Queen's Bench section. The article was entitled "Remarkable Slander Case - Curate sued by working man" and recounted the case of Slack and wife v Leake. Mary's father had taken the unusual step of bringing a case

of slander against Reverend James Leake, an assistant clergyman at St James's Notting Hill.

On 30th March 1893 the *Paddington, Kensington and Bayswater Chronicle* had published a letter from Rev. Leake about Mary and her family. This paper has not been digitised but considerable detail from the letter was published in the *Evening Standard* published on Monday 17th December 1894⁶. The reverend wrote that "I am asked to beg you to warn your readers against some people names Stock, who live in Convent-gardens (sic) and are systematic beggars. The girl does most of the begging, and clever she is at it, and most new comers in the neighbourhood are taken in by her piteous appeals. But she has been known here for more than ten years: and almost from the time she could walk she has been trained to beg". The Reverend admitted to writing this letter and stated that what he had written was true and that he had written it at the instigation of Rev. Canon Trench to whom he was curate. Rev Trench said that "he had known the child Mary Stack (sic) for some ten years....she did him the honour to wait upon him at his own residence. She came simply begging" He went on to say that he had seen her mother begging many years ago and that he had had words with her about sending the child, Mary, out to beg.

Some concern was raised that the Reverends were protestant, and the family were Catholic, it was asked why they had not contacted the family's local Catholic priest. Rev Leake said he had not contacted Father Sylvester as he "knew it had already been done". He said Father Sylvester had written to him but that he couldn't remember what he had said in the letter, but thought he had suggested the child had begged without the knowledge of her parents. He also said he had made enquiries about the character of David Slack and that he

was described generally as “a fair character” although someone had said he had been summoned before the magistrates for beating his child.

Several witnesses were called including a woman who lodged with the Slack family in Covent Garden. The lodger stated that although the name had been spelt differently, she was sure the letter referred to the Slack family. This witness had seen Mary giving money from begging to her mother and that her mother had “corrected her for begging”.

The consensus from several witnesses seemed to be that Mary’s mother was often seen “loitering” around the area Mary would beg in and many people seemed convinced that Mary’s mother knew she begged and encouraged it. There did not seem to be the same agreement about whether her father, David, knew she was begging.

Further detail is given in the *Evening Standard* on 19th December 1894⁷, this time on page 6 in “The Law Court’s” section headlined “A Curate sued for Libel”. This edition contained a lot of detail from witness statements including Mary and her parents. From the information provided it is possible to build up a picture of Mary’s early life.

She had lived at Covent Garden for the last 6 or 7 years; as of 1894 the family had 5 children and Mary was the eldest at 12 years old (the others being Philip 9, James 5, Margaret 3, and Kate, a baby) the weekly rent was 14 s and 16d. Mary had attended St Mary the Angels Roman Catholic School at Westbourne Place from about the age of five. She was only there for a year or so as she played truant. Her father David said he had beaten her for missing school and

had been remanded by a magistrate overnight for this but was then discharged. Mary was then sent to a much closer school in Buckingham Road, which was a protestant school.

In December 1893 David Slack was made aware of Mary's supposed begging and lack of attendance at school. He had been told by some "gentlemen" and he saw the letter in the newspaper and knew it referred to him even though the name was slightly different. David claimed to have "corrected" Mary upon receiving this news, but he said he did not beat her with a buckle end of a strap and did not cause her face to bleed as had been reported to the school board. Mary's school had noticed her injuries and the School Board made a complaint against David Slack and he was remanded by the local magistrates and locked up for a total of two weeks and was bound over for good behaviour. Mary had been interviewed at the time and was again asked about this assault in court when she took the witness stand. Mary admitted to having lied about her father beating her with a buckle and said that her father had hit her with his hand and her face had hit a table which was why it had bled. She admitting to telling lies.

Mary also admitted to having gone out begging but said neither of her parents had ever sent her to do it and that she kept all the money she begged and spent it. She couldn't remember how old she had been when she first began to beg.

Margaret Slack contradicted many of the witness statements and said she had never sent Mary out to beg and that she did punish her for not going to school. She added that once Mary had reached about ten years of age, she had gained

some work cleaning doorsteps and this was the money Mary gave to her. She claimed to have no idea that Mary had gone out begging.

After just over an hour of deliberating the jury decided that the defendant, Rev Leake, should not be found guilty in the case of Mary's mother but they could not decide if Rev. Leake was guilty of slandering David Slack.

Nothing more can be found in the newspapers concerning Mary. Her next appearance in the records is that of an inmate on the 1901 census at St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, in Ashford, Middlesex⁸. Mary is recorded as being an inmate, single and 18 years old born Notting Hill, London. The same census has her family still living in Kensington, with Philip and James plus 5 younger children born since the previous census namely; Margaret 10, Kate 8, David 4, Teresa 2 and Michael who was only 6 weeks old⁹.

It appears from this that Mary must have been found guilty of being drunk to have been sent to St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, but no admission records have been found or trial reports which shed light on Mary's crime and if it was a first or repeat offence. Neither is it clear how long Mary was an "inmate" residing at St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory or where she went upon her release from this institution.

The next clue is found in the 1911 census which shows the schedule as filled in by her father David¹⁰. He mistakenly originally entered Mary onto the form with the rest of the family but then crossed out Mary's entry. It is though possible to see that he had completed some of the columns pertaining to Mary; she was still single, was 28 years old and was employed as a servant.

This suggests that Mary was in contact with the family but due to her employment as a servant maybe did not live at the house, or may have been away working that night, hence her removal from the family schedule.

This is the last occurrence of Mary Slack in any records searchable online. There is no mention of her in the 1921 or the 1939 Register under the surname Slack. It was not possible to locate any marriage records using online sites for Mary Slack with a birth in 1882, even widening the search in case Mary had married and lied about her age still proved fruitless. It was possible to find some death records for Mary Slack born 1882, most were in the United States and searches failed to provide any further information and so it is not possible to link any of these Mary's to the Mary born in Notting Hill in 1882 and who attended St Joseph's.

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Sources;

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- 2) Birth Registration; GRO Sept 1882; Registration District Kensington; vol 1a pg 111
- 3) Mary's parents' marriage record 14th January 1879 Kilfinane, Limerick; Ireland Catholic Parish registers 1655-1915; www.ancestry.co.uk ; Original data; National Library of Ireland; Dublin, Ireland; *Irish Catholic Parish Registers*; Microfilm Number: *Microfilm 02429 / 06* accessed 24th March 2023

- 4) 1881 census entry for the Slack family living at Western Terrace; 1881 England Census; www.ancestry.co.uk ; Original data; RG11; The National Archives; Piece 36 Folio pg 15; accessed 24th March 2023
- 5) 1891 census for the Slack family living in Covent Garden; 1891 England census; www.ancestry.co.uk : Original data; RG12; The National archives; Piece 27 Folio 37 pg 85 accessed 24th March 2023
- 6) Newspaper reports of David Slack's Slander case against Rev James Leake: UK Newspaper records; www.findmypast.co.uk ; Original source; London Evening Standard; Monday 17th Dec 1894; pg 1 "Remarkable slander case; curate sued by working man"; accessed 24th March 2023
- 7) Newspaper reports of David Slack's Slander case against Rev James Leake: UK Newspaper Records; www.findmypast.co.uk ; Original source; London Evening Standard; Wednesday 19th Dec 1894; pg 6 "A curate sued for libel"; accessed 24th March 2023
- 8) 1901 census entry for Mary Slack at St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex; 1901 England Census; www.ancestry.co.uk ; Original data; RG13; The National Archives; Piece 1171 Folio 13 pg 18 accessed 24th March 2023
- 9) 1901 census entry for Mary Slack's family living in Kensington; 1901 England Census; www.ancestry.co.uk ; Original data; RG13; The National Archives; Piece 6 Folio 123 pg 34 accessed 24th March 2023
- 10) 1911 Census entry for the Slack family; 1911 England Census; www.ancestry.co.uk ; Original data: RG14, The National Archives; Registration district 1; Registration sub-district 2 Enumeration district 14 schedule no 311 accessed 26th January 2021

