

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.

Harriet Watkins's Story

Harriet Ellen Watkins was born in 1874¹ and baptised at St Lawrence's, the main parish church of Ludlow, Shropshire on 8th June 1874². She was the second child of Thomas Watkins and his second wife, Clara, and the ninth of fourteen children in total fathered by Thomas. Thomas was a Ludlow man – baptised also at St Lawrence's in 1832³ and married both of his wives there (Mary Humphreys on 14th October 1855⁴ and Clara Grosvenor on 6th November 1870⁵).

At the time of Harriet's birth, the family was living in Lower Corve Street in Ludlow², probably at number 65 where they were recorded in the 1871 census⁶, and Thomas was a skinner². Writing about this area of Ludlow, Jonathan and Rosemary Wood say ""In the eighteenth century, rich glovers erected low-status

back buildings for their impoverished workers in what became a noxious tanning zone. They then moved up the hill into town to build or renovate grand houses reflecting their new social status. Speculators amassed fortunes or went bankrupt. Maltsters and brewers plied their trade, land was exchanged and murder was committed. Animals were auctioned, carriers and hauliers flourished, and Corve Street had its own 'red light district'.⁷



65 Lower Corve Street (the white door to the left of the picture)⁸

By 1876, however, the family had moved further north in Shropshire to the county town of Shrewsbury. The next child after Harriet was Walter, baptised at St Alkmund's church on 20th September 1876, at which point the family was living in St Alkmund's Square with Thomas now described simply as a labourer⁹. The family then continued to live in Shrewsbury, but had moved to Carnarvon Lane by 1878 when son Arthur was baptised at St. Chad's¹⁰. Caernarvon Lane, still in existence, is a medieval 'shut,' a narrow Shrewsbury passageway running from Mardol to Hills' Lane, in places with the upper storeys of surrounding

buildings actually built over it creating tunnels. The family were still there in July 1883 when the fourteenth and last of Thomas's children, Clara, was baptised at St Chad's¹¹. Thomas, having been listed as a labourer throughout the period 1876 to 1881 was once again described as a skinner on Clara's baptism certificate but his death was recorded just months later in the September quarter of the same year, at the age of 49¹² so leaving his wife a widow with five living children.



ing south by Natasha Ceridwen de Chroustchhoff - geograph.org.uk/p/1734088

Carnarvon Lane starts as an archway – front right with a blue sign over it¹³

By the time of the 1891 census, much had changed for the family. Clara senior had remarried in 1890, marrying John PROSSER, a widower and gravedigger at Meole Brace on 12th November¹⁴. She and John, together with three of her children by Thomas Watkins (Robert, Walter and Margaret) are found in the

1891 census living in one of the lodges at Meole Brace General Cemetery¹⁵. Harriet, however, was in rather different circumstances.

There are few available records about Harriet, but she seems to have made a reasonably auspicious start as a child. A local paper, reporting on the annual prize giving at St Chad's Infant School in March 1881 (when Harriet would have been not quite seven years old), noted "Harriet Ellen Watkins... had not been absent once during the past year and would receive special prizes."¹⁶ Ten years later, however, she is to be found in the 1891 census as a 16-year-old inmate of the County Industrial Home in Stafford¹⁷.

This institution, more formally known as 'Staffordshire County Refuge for Fallen Women, Sandon Road, Stafford' and 'The Staffordshire County Industrial Home for Discharged Female Ex-Prisoners and Friendless Women,' had opened in 1878, originally as a refuge for women discharged from Stafford Prison. By 1890, however, it was taking in girls and women from Staffordshire and further afield, with its aim now described as "to relieve girls who have fallen into crime or sin, or who need to be saved from surrounding danger, by bringing them under good influence and training them for domestic service."¹⁸ Quite why Harriet was there, one of eight inmates from outside of the county in which it was located, we do not know – no newspaper stories which relate to her have been found which might suggest why she was there or how long she was an inmate. However, five years later she was back in Shropshire, presumably in Shrewsbury as, sadly, her death at the age of 21 is recorded in the Atcham registration district in the March Quarter of 1896¹⁹. We do not know if her stepfather perhaps dug a grave for her at Meole Brace Cemetery.

Sources

- 1 Free BMD: Births Sep 1874 Ludlow 6a 557
- 2 Find My Past: Shropshire Baptisms Ludlow 8 Jun 1874
- 3 Find My Past: Shropshire Baptisms Ludlow 18 Jan 1832
- 4 Find My Past: Shropshire Marriages Ludlow 14 Oct 1855
- 5 Find My Past: Shropshire Baptisms Shrewsbury
- 6 Find My Past: 1881 census RG10 Piece 2725 Folio 54 Page 21 Schedule 102 (N.B. street name incorrectly transcribed as Cowe Street)
- 7 "The People and History of Lower Corve Street and St Mary's Lane, Ludlow" by Jonathan and Rosemary Wood, quoted on 3 January 2023 by the Shropshire Star (<https://www.shropshirestar.com/news/local-hubs/south-shropshire/ludlow/2023/01/03/colourful-past-of-ludlow-streets-exposed-in-new-history-book/>)
- 8 <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/6104398>: used under Creative Commons
- 9 Find My Past: Shropshire Baptisms Shrewsbury St Alkmund's 20 Sep 1876
- 10 Find My Past: Shropshire Baptisms Shrewsbury St Chad's 16 Aug 1878
- 11 Find My Past: Shropshire Baptisms Shrewsbury St Chad's 21 Jul 1883
- 12 FreeBMD: Deaths Sep 1883 Atcham 6a 372
- 13 <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/1734088>: used under Creative Commons
- 14 Find My Past: Shropshire Marriages Meole Brace 12 Nov 1890
- 15 Find My Past: 1891 census RG12 Piece 2113 Folio 62 Page 18 Schedule 91
- 16 Find My Past: Eddowe's Shrewsbury Journal 02 March 1881 Page 10 "St Chad's Infant School"
- 17 Find My Past: 1891 census RG12 Piece 2139 Folio 139 Page 36 Schedule 218
- 18 Walsall Observer 6 December 1890 p.5 col.f. as cited at <https://www.fewforgottenwomen.com/general-6>
- 19 FreeBMD: Deaths Mar 1896 Atcham 6a 463