

# *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.*

## **Ellen Sampson**

Ellen Sampson was supposedly born in Fermoy, in Co Cork, Ireland around 1857-60 and according to the 1901 Census, she was of the Roman Catholic faith, single and was working as a laundress. The latter is not surprising as Ellen was at the time an inmate of St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory in Ashford.

Griffith's Valuation of Ireland printed its findings for the Parish of Fermoy, Co Cork in 1852, at which point no Sampson families were recorded as living there. In fact, in Co Cork itself there were only 3 Sampson householders – Catherine, William and Patrick. William and Patrick were brothers and lived just outside Mitchelstown, Co Cork, north of Fermoy, William in Corracunna townland and Patrick in Coolnav townland, while Catherine lived much further south near Cobh.

Roman Catholic baptismal records would suggest that Ellen may actually have been born at Coolnav in 1850, daughter of Patrick Sampson and his wife, Ellen Sheehan.

There was one known elder brother, James and one known younger sister, Margaret. Births did not have to be registered in Ireland until 1864, and there were no other Roman Catholic baptismal records found which could be that of Ellen Sampson. However, this is not definitive proof that we have Ellen's correct birth family. We know nothing of Ellen's childhood, but at some point she moved to London. A record was found showing that an Ellen Sampson gave birth to son Henry on 29 March 1875, in St Pancras Workhouse<sup>1</sup>. We think this may well be our Ellen, although most of her life in London seems to have been lived around the Stepney area rather than St Pancras, so it may just be a coincidence in names.

Ellen was regularly admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse, Stepney and we find her there on 27 January 1880, with a son named Henry, who is 7 months old<sup>2</sup>. Clearly this is not the same Henry who was born in 1875. She is recorded as 'Destitute', with an address of 12 Station Place. She was also labelled 'Unfortunate', a term which was used to describe people who were poor, homeless, or otherwise destitute. In the context of workhouses, 'Unfortunate' was used to describe people who were forced to live in workhouses because they had no other means of support. At this point the thought is that if the first baby Henry did belong to our Ellen Sampson, then he must have passed away and Ellen then had a second child, whom she also named Henry – but no record of that second child's birth is apparent nor is the death of the first Henry. However, a Henry Sampson aged 5 was listed in the 1881 census in Strand Union Children's Establishment<sup>3</sup>. Could this be Henry no 1? Could Ellen have given him up when she became pregnant with Henry no 2, unable to cope with two small children? Or did a different Ellen Sampson give him up? We just don't know.

Records show that Ellen stayed with baby Henry no 2 in St George-in-the-East Workhouse generally for quite short periods of time and was usually discharged at her 'own desire'. Her addresses varied from 12 to 17 to 4 Station Place throughout

1880. At one point in September 1880 both are discharged from the workhouse into the Infirmary, but we don't know why.

On 21 February 1881 both Ellen and baby Henry were again admitted to the workhouse; Ellen was then discharged but Henry stayed at the workhouse until 2 March, when, aged just 2, he was discharged by the Board to Leyton Roman Catholic School. On 21 March 1881 Ellen was again admitted to the workhouse, and there was a note with her admission to say that 'her child is at Leyton School'. Again on 31 March Henry was discharged from St George-in-the-East Workhouse to Leyton RC School. Poor child - he must have been so confused with what was happening to him.

Ellen must have retrieved Henry from the school soon after, as throughout April 1881 Ellen and Henry were regularly in and out of St George-in-the-East Workhouse, but on 2 May only Ellen was discharged with an 'Order for Poplar Workhouse'. From 1871 The Local Government Board carried out an experiment whereby Poplar Workhouse admitted only able bodied paupers who would be subjected to a 'labour test' – where they had to perform hard manual labour in return for a subsistence allowance for their families. Discipline was strict and the diet was very basic. Any spare capacity Poplar had was offered to other unions and parishes. The scheme was effective, as an 'Order for Poplar' proved to be a strong deterrent to able bodied applicants. However, such Orders increasingly came to be used by other workhouses to get rid of troublesome or undesirable applicants. During this period, Poplar had an arrangement with the adjacent Stepney Union to accommodate its other classes of inmate, with the aged and infirm going to Stepney's workhouse at Bromley and the sick to the newly opened Poplar and Stepney Sick Asylum. The Poplar Experiment continued until 1882 when the increasing demand for accommodation in Poplar itself led to the union only taking its own residents.

On 6 May 1881 Henry, who was still in the workhouse after Ellen was sent to Poplar, was again discharged by the Board to Leyton RC School. Ellen must again have retrieved the child at some point, as on 25 May Henry is brought in to the workhouse by someone called Ellen Welsh. He had been left with her by his mother “outside Lawson Robinson’s, St George’s Street about 12 o’clock at night on 24<sup>th</sup> May”. There was no sign of Ellen, but the very next day she turned up at the workhouse and was admitted as again being ‘Destitute’ and ‘Unfortunate’ – and was given an undesirable ‘Order for Poplar Workhouse’ and discharged the next day. In the midst of this, Henry was sent back from Leyton RC School to St George-in-the-East Workhouse on 8 June, with no explanation recorded, and the very next day they sent him to Poplar Workhouse to be with his mother. On 11 June they were both back at St George-in-the-East Workhouse, with Ellen again discharged with an ‘Order for Poplar’ and Henry sent to Leyton RC School on 21 June 1881. She obviously thought it was worth trying to be admitted to St George’s in the rather forlorn hope that she wouldn’t be moved on to Poplar.

On 28 June 1881 Henry was brought to St George-in-the-East Workhouse by a police constable, who informed them that Henry’s mother had been locked up for 7 days for being drunk. Ellen collected him from the workhouse on 4 July upon her release from prison.

On 7 July 1881 Ellen was admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse with son Henry, as ‘Destitute’ and ‘Unfortunate’, with an address of 8 Albert Square. She was immediately discharged with another ‘Order for Poplar Workhouse’, while Henry was sent back to Leyton RC School on 11 July. On 15 July 1881 Ellen was again admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse with son Henry, having left Poplar Workhouse that morning. Henry was sent back to Leyton RC School on 26 July.

Life for both Ellen and Henry continued in this vein and in June 1883 for the first time in the records Ellen was labelled as a prostitute when she was admitted to the workhouse. She still had Henry with her – he would by then have been around 4 years old. The addresses which she gave varied quite a bit - 6 Palmer's Place, 1 Palmer's Folly, 24 Devonshire Street, 3 Palmer's Folly.

On 6 April 1885 Ellen was again admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse as 'Destitute' and 'Unfortunate' and it was noted that she had '1 child at Plashet School'. Henry would by then be nearly 6 years old. Plashet Industrial School was opened in 1851 and was intended to accommodate 150 boys, 120 girls and 80 infants. The Admission and Discharge Registers for the school for the years 1856 – 1925, when the school closed, are held in the London Metropolitan Archives, along with Lists of Pauper Children and Creed Registers. These are not available online.

On 17 May 1885 Henry was brought to the workhouse by PC 368, having been found alone in Sutton Street, aged about 6. He was discharged back to Plashet School on 20 May. On 8 July he was sent back to the workhouse from Plashet School as his mother 'was in the house'. He also spent quite a bit of time at Leyton RC School during 1885, when his mother was in the Infirmary. Like most years, he spent Christmas Day with his mother in the Workhouse.

The admissions to and discharges from St George-in-the-East Workhouse continued, with regular sojourns in the Infirmary and with Henry on occasion mentioned as being at Leyton RC School. On 30 April 1886 Henry was discharged from the workhouse to North Hyde RC School, which it is thought was connected to St Mary's Orphanage at North Hyde, Southall, which had opened around 1854. However, both Ellen and Henry are back in the workhouse on 22 May 1886, with Ellen described as 'Destitute', 'Unfortunate' and with no home.

On 10 July 1886 Henry, aged 7, was sent to St Charles Roman Catholic School at Brentwood – the fourth school to which he had been discharged from the workhouse in his short life. He was there until 3 August, when he was sent back to the workhouse as his mother had again been admitted there.

Then it was found that on 29 July 1886 a Henry Sampson, aged 11, (the age that baby Henry no 1 would have been) turned up at St George-in-the-East Workhouse with his mate John Samuels, aged 13. Both had been remanded by police and sent to the workhouse. At the same time, Ellen and Henry no 2 were in the workhouse – they were discharged on 4 August, while Henry no 1 and John were taken away by police the next day. It is possible that both of Ellen's children, both named Henry, were in the workhouse at the same time? Or is it just a coincidence that a child of the same name and age as her first child appeared there at that time? We'll probably never know.

On 11 August Henry was brought to the workhouse by the police, as his mother was 'locked up drunk'. She turned up the next day to collect him. Later that month Henry was again sent to St Charles Roman Catholic School at Brentwood, where he stayed until 24 September, as Ellen had been sent to prison for a 5 day stretch - when she again was admitted to the workhouse later that month, she was recorded as having no home and being a prostitute. On 26 September Henry was brought to the workhouse by the police, having been found alone in George Street, and on 4 August 1886 he was again sent to Brentwood.

This is how Ellen and Henry's lives continued over the next couple of years, with multiple admissions to and discharges from the workhouse and the Infirmary, with Ellen working as a prostitute and also doing washing and 'char' and moving from lodging to lodging. Henry was in North Hyde RC School and Leyton RC School from time to time.

In June 1889 there was a final admission to and discharge from the workhouse, with a note that Ellen had no home, after which she decided to head back to Co Cork. There is no indication as to whether or not Henry went to Cork with her. He would have been around 10 years old.

On 25 November 1889 Ellen was sentenced to 1 calendar month in prison or a 40 shilling fine with 1 shilling costs at Fermoy Court in County Cork, where it was said she had been born and now lived. Her sentence was imposed as she was a prostitute and had been loitering in Fermoy. The description given of Ellen was that she was 5 feet tall, had brown hair and eyes and a fresh complexion, but had cut marks on her forehead. As she didn't have 40 shillings, she had to stay in Cork Female Prison for one calendar month.

On 20 May 1890 Ellen was sentenced by the Police Court to 7 days in Cork Women's Prison – she wasn't able to pay the alternative 10 shillings fine plus 1 shilling costs for using obscene language. Again she was listed as a prostitute, and it was noted that she could read and write.

By October 1890 Ellen was back in London and living at 3 Station Place, but there was no sign of Henry. There are no admissions to the workhouse for him over the next few years, so perhaps Ellen left him with family back in Cork?

Ellen's familiar routine began, where she was in and out of St George-in-the-East Workhouse and Infirmary, labelled as 'Destitute' and now stating she was working as a machinist. By February 1891 she was again homeless but a year later was living at 6 City Road, followed by a return to 3 Station Place. Her work as a machinist seemed to last until the end of 1892.

There are no entries apparent for Ellen in 1893, but when she was next admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse in May 1894, she described herself as a laundress, leading one to wonder if she had spent some time in St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, or a similar institution, where inmates work in the reformatory laundry. Over the next few years the usual pattern continued, with Ellen stating at various times that she was doing 'char' work, ironing, washing or working as a machinist. She seemed to be at 3 Station Place for much of this time. In May 1896 16 year old Henry was admitted to the workhouse, as he had no home and his mother was already in the workhouse. This is the first sign for around 6 years that Henry was still with Ellen.

In February 1898 Ellen was living at 35 Forest Gate and again was described as a laundress, so may have had another spell in a reformatory.

In February 1898 Henry Sampson, born 1879, was admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse. He was described as a shoemaker from Stepney and was 'Destitute'. He was discharged at his own request on 1 March but was readmitted the next day as having no home. He was again in the workhouse on 25 March, but was again discharged at his own request the same day.

On 12 Apr 1898 Henry, a 19 year old shoemaker, was readmitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse as 'Destitute', and then an entry is found showing that both Ellen and son Henry were discharged from St George-in-the-East Workhouse at their own request that same day. Later that month Henry was readmitted to the workhouse, with a note saying that his mother 'is absent'. He had his breakfast, and was discharged.

On 15 May 1898 Ellen was admitted to St George-in-the-East Workhouse and is discharged the same day to the police. Henry leaves the workhouse on his own.



Ellen continued her life as usual, but on 10 February 1900 she was committed to St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory at her own request, remaining there for a year, when she was let out on licence. Unfortunately she was charged with drunkenness shortly after and sent back to St Joseph's. Finally discharged from St Joseph's in January 1903, she went home to Cork.

On 31 Mar 1903 she was sentenced by Police Court, under the name of Ellen O'Keefe or Sampson, to 14 days in Cork Prison, or 90 shillings fine with 1 shilling costs, for being drunk. She said she had no next of kin and was a servant. She was released on 13 April 1903.

In February 1908, back in London, she was charged with drunkenness. A report in the East London Observer said that she admitted the offence, and the Assistant Gaoler informed the court that she had only just been released from Farmfield Inebriates Home after a 3 year stay. Mr W. Fitzsimmons, the Court Missionary, who it was said had taken a great interest in the defendant, recounted what had happened to Ellen since 1900. He told of her going to St Joseph's in 1900 at her own request, and on her discharge going home to Cork, where she remained for about 20 months. He said she then obtained work at Penarth, near Cardiff, where on a day off in 1904 she decided to go to Bristol, got the worse for drink and decided to walk to London! She got there on Christmas Eve 1904. Four days later she was once more charged with drunkenness and was sent to Lewes in Sussex, from where she was transferred to Farmfield. Mr Fitzsimmons went on to say that the defendant's son had been to see him, and expressed his willingness to take his mother to Ireland that night, if she was discharged. Mr Chester Jones, having heard the son, allowed the defendant to go. We can only assume that this was Henry who had intervened for his mother. We next hear of Ellen when on 28 June 1910 she 'wantonly, wilfully and maliciously' broke 10 panes of glass worth 15 shillings in Fermoy Union Workhouse in Cork. At Fermoy Petty Sessions Court she was sentenced to 1 calendar month of hard labour

in Cork Female Prison. She was described as 5ft tall, with fair hair and brown eyes, fresh complexion, scars on right wrist, second finger right hand, nose and over her right eye and had a wart on the back of her neck. Her son Henry was named as her next of kin - he lived at Abbeyleix, Queen's County (now Laois).

On 12 Jun 1912 she was drunk and disorderly and was sent to Mountjoy Prison, Dublin for 7 days. She was described as 4ft 10 ¼ tall, brown eyes, fair or grey hair and with a fresh complexion. She had cut marks on her right wrist. She was born in Fermoy but was currently of no fixed abode. Her son 'Harry' is named as next of kin – he now lived in Castleconner in Sligo. Her occupation was given as 'laundress'.

On 29 Mar 1913 Ellen was found drunk on the public street in Fermoy. She was still of no fixed abode and on 31 March 1913 was fined 1 penny with sixpence costs at Fermoy Petty Sessions.

On 21 Mar 1914 Ellen was fined sixpence plus sixpence costs at Galbally Court for being drunk on the public street in Galbally, Limerick.

On 2 Jul 1914 she was sentenced at Galbally, Limerick to 14 days in Cork Female Prison (or 10/6 with 1 shilling costs, which she couldn't pay) for being drunk on the street, it being her 2<sup>nd</sup> offence in 12 months. Her son Henry was next of kin – he is again living at Abbeyleix. Ellen, still of no fixed abode, was released on 15 Jul 1914.

On 28 Feb 1917 Ellen, still homeless, was sentenced to 7 days prison without hard labour in Cork Female Prison (or 2/6 fine with 1 shilling costs, which she again couldn't afford to pay) at Galbally, Limerick for being drunk and incapable on the public street. Her next of kin was named as her son Harry, but his whereabouts were unknown. Ellen would by now have been around 60 years old. No further record of her has been found.

What Henry had been doing in the last few years wasn't clear until attestation papers for the Australian Imperial Force came to light. Henry Samson (no P in his name) was said to have been born in London on 11 May 1880, a labourer with a next of kin named Ellen Samson, who lived at 42 Princess Street, Fermoy, Co Cork. Henry lived at 27 Bourke Street, Melbourne and this was his Attestation Paper for the 3<sup>rd</sup> District Guard which he joined on 11 February 1918. On this paper he stated that he had served 8 years 117 days with the colours and a further 7 years 275 days with the Army Reserve. His service no was 5392 and his Regiment was the Hampshire Regiment. He stated that he had been declared unfit for service due to sickness. It seems fairly certain that this is the correct Henry Sampson, son of our Ellen Sampson.

Henry was said to be 5 feet 4 inches tall, with hazel eyes, fair hair and a fresh complexion. He weighed 137 lbs and his chest measurement was 36/38 inches. He was of the Roman Catholic faith. He had 3 vaccination marks on his left arm and scars on his abdomen. He was examined and declared fit for home duty but not active service. His service number was 74135.

However Henry's service was to last just one month, at which point he was invalided out with chronic bronchitis and emphysema, most marked on exertion. It was stated that the disease was aggravated by intemperance, and the hospital report after his admission stated that he was suffering from chronic bronchitis and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O. It was stated that he was a munitions worker but had been in hospital for several weeks prior to being discharged as unfit. C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>O is the chemical formula for ethanol, which is commonly known as alcohol. Ethanol poisoning can occur when someone drinks too much alcohol in a short period of time. Symptoms of alcohol poisoning include confusion, slurred speech, vomiting, seizures, and unconsciousness.

Henry's record of service in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Hampshire Regiment didn't survive the burning of many records in WWII, but his service number indicates that he joined up in 1898 or 1899. He served in WWI and a number of records exist such as his medal card, which shows he was entitled to the 1914 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. He served in France, landing on 31 Aug 1914 but was wounded and evacuated back to England. He was listed as being in 1<sup>st</sup> London General Hospital, Camberwell on 7 October 1914, which made him eligible for a wound stripe. He was discharged from the army on 1 December 1914 as no longer being fit for active service. He was thus entitled to a Silver War Badge, and his was number 82753.

It is not known if Henry ever came back to Ireland from Australia, or if he ever saw his mother Ellen again. No date of death has been found for either of them, but the search continues.

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