

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.

Elizabeth Wannell's Story

Drunkenness amongst women, whether it be superinduced by alcohol, morphine, ether, or other intoxicants, is not only one of the worse, but it is the one of the most steadily growing evils of modern society, and is the root of more ghastly unhappiness in family life than any other evil that could be named. A drunken man is bad enough but a drunken woman is a sight to make the stoutest heart almost despair. If the drunken man has a sober wife the family may possibly be saved.....but where the wife, where the mother, is a drunkard, there seems no room for hope for the family at all.¹

The complex issues associated with female habitual drunkenness, its perceived threat to both family life and the health of the nation, is also the story of the social control of women, which can manifest itself in many ways. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries women increasingly found themselves judged against a series of highly constructed notions including morality, femininity and respectability.² It was against this backdrop that the Habitual Drunkards Act of 1879 was passed, allowing for the building of a '*series of institutions....somewhere between the care-home, asylum and prison*',³ as a substitute or answer to imprisoning habitual drunkards.

¹ Leicester Daily Post, Saturday 24 September 1892, Page 8

² Jennifer Wallis, 'A Home or a Gaol? Scandal, Secrecy, and the St James's Inebriate Home for Women' *Social History of Medicine* Vol. 31, No. 4 pp. 774–795

³ David Beckingham, 'An Historical Geography of Liberty: Lancashire and the Inebriates Acts', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2010, 36, 388–401,

Farmfield Inebriate Reformatory in Surrey opened on 28 August 1900,⁴ with the first female patients being admitted shortly afterwards. Detailed case notes were kept on each patient, the women were examined on admission with everything from their weight and height to the number of scars being recorded. The account of Elizabeth Wannell, the seventh patient to be admitted to Farmfield, on 18 September 1900, was typical of the reports written at the time.

Elizabeth was English, aged 36, and a widow. She had been born in Southwark, her parents, who were both deceased were '*temperate*' in their '*habits*' and their '*mental state*' was '*good*'. Her sister is noted as being Mrs Kidd of 91 Southampton Street, Camberwell, London. Elizabeth could write '*very imperfectly*' and her occupation was that of brush-maker, she had had ten children, six of whom had died. She had started drinking when she was 30 after constant quarrels with her husband, also noted as a drunkard, had led her to drink. She had neglected her children, who had been taken away from her and '*put to schools*'. Her mental condition on admission was stated as being fair but had previously been assessed as '*feeble*', Elizabeth was considered to have no self-control, was impulsive and most insolent. After an incident of '*bad behaviour*' towards an officer she underwent severe punishment, which had the effect of subduing her and '*bringing her to her senses*'. Prior to admission she used to drink regularly (mainly beer) and continuously when she was not in prison and had had 21 previous convictions and had committed five other 'misdemeanours'. This had resulted in her having been to prison some 18 times. She was 5ft 5in tall, weighed 155lb and had no scars or wound marks. Her mental condition was recorded as '*fair*' and her general health '*good*'. It was noted that she had not been in an insane or inebriate asylum, had not taken opium or other drugs and had no history of delirium tremens or alcoholic convulsions. Elizabeth's condition on admission was recorded as '*Dirty and ill-kept*' and her behaviour was noted as '*insolent and defiant*'. She had been sentenced for 18 months and during that time her general conduct was '*very bad and surely most of the time, violent and abusive and most defiant, but improved as time went on and learnt self-control*', she was given dietary and cell punishment to try and control these outbursts. She was discharged on license to work as a general servant on 27 February 1902 and was reported as doing well in her situation 12 months later. Unfortunately, in 1904 she was sent to the Eastern Counties Reformatory in Norfolk for three years but transferred to Farmfield on 29 November 1906 to complete her sentence, being released on 15 December the following year.⁵

Armed with this information I set off to find Elizabeth and discover what I could about her life so that her story could be shared. Elizabeth was the fifth of six children born to waterside labourer John Jones and his wife Mary Ann. Born on the 9 December 1863⁶ and baptised at

⁴ <https://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/farmfield.htm>

⁵ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/PH/MENT/4/34 Farmfield Reformatory for Female Inebriates - Case History Book - Vol 1 (Nos 1-181) - Patients admitted (1900-1904)

⁶ England and Wales Birth Indexes, GRO March Quarter 1864, St George Southwark District, Vol 01D, Page 123, Elizabeth Jones, mother nee Ross

St Mary's Church, Newington,⁷ Elizabeth was living with her parents in Clarendon Street in Southwark at the time of the 1871 census.⁸ She married brush maker Robert Wannell on 11th October 1880 at the age of 18 at St John's in Walworth, at this time she could only leave her mark rather than sign the register, the Farmfield record implied that she could read and write, even if '*imperfectly*', thus suggesting that in intervening years she must have acquired some skill in that direction. Her elder sister Mary Ann, by this time married to James Kidd, was a witness, Mary Ann it transpired would be very supportive of Elizabeth as her life spiralled downwards.⁹ Robert had already spent time in jail prior to their marriage, at the age of 17 some three years earlier, he had been charged with assault and sentenced to 14 days in Wandsworth jail. Robert was described as very pockmarked with a crossed flag tattoo on his left arm and three injured fingers.¹⁰ By the time the enumerator for the 1881 census came calling Elizabeth and Robert were living in number 9 Clarendon Street with their two-month-old son Robert.¹¹

The years between the 1881 and 1891 censuses saw the couple having a lot going on in their lives. Elizabeth gave birth to four children; Mary Ann was born on 21st February 1883, Emma on 16th January 1885, Charles on 8th March 1887, and Elizabeth who was baptised on 13th October 1889.¹² There was also some tragedy with two-year-old Robert and eight-month-old Mary Ann both dying of Scarlet Fever within three days of each other in 1883.¹³ In 1886 Robert, alongside Thomas Cook, was convicted of larceny and spent another four months at the pleasure of Her Majesty in Wandsworth.¹⁴ The census return of 1891 however, doesn't show the hardship the family had suffered in the previous ten years, to all intents and purposes Elizabeth was living with her brush maker husband Robert in Tabard Street, Newington and with three children Emma, Charles and Elizabeth.¹⁵ We genealogists and family historians regularly use the census returns to follow a family's life course and it is with some serendipity that we do so, but it is imperative that research into the years between

⁷ London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, St Mary's Newington

⁸ 1871 England Census, Southwark, Surrey, RG10, Folio 87

⁹ London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1938, St John's Walworth

¹⁰ UK, Prison Commission Records, 1770-1951, Wandsworth Prison Register of Prisoners PCOM2 283

¹¹ 1881 England Census, Southwark, Surrey, RG11, Folio 87; England and Wales Birth Indexes, GRO March Quarter 1881, St Saviour, Surrey District, Vol 01D, Page 49, Robert Wannell, mother nee Jones

¹² England and Wales Birth Indexes - GRO March Quarter 1883, St Olave's, Southwark District, Vol 01D, Page 238, Mary Ann Wannell, mother nee Jones; GRO March Quarter 1885, St Saviour, Surrey District, Vol 01D Page 41 Emma Wannell, mother nee Jones; GRO June Quarter 1887, St Saviour, Surrey District, Vol 01D Page 31 Charles Wannell, mother nee Jones; GRO December Quarter 1889, St Saviour, London District, Vol 01D Page 32 Elizabeth Wannell, mother nee Jones; London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, St John's Walworth, accessed via www.Ancestry.co.uk

¹³ England and Wales Death Indexes – GRO Reference 1883 December Quarter, St Saviour, Surrey District, Vol 01D, page 16, Robert Wannell, aged 2 years; GRO Reference 1883 December Quarter, St Saviour, Surrey District, Vol 01D, page 19, Mary Ann Wannell, 8 months 19

¹⁴ UK, Prison Commission Records, 1770-1951, Wandsworth Prison Register of Prisoners PCOM2 283

¹⁵ 1891 England Census, Southwark, London, RG12, Folio 24, this record has been mis-transcribed as Mannell rather than Wannell

census returns must be triangulated with other records in order to get a true picture, as demonstrated here.

If the decade between 1881 and 1891 was a difficult one for Elizabeth, then she had much worse to come. A few short months after the 1891 census was taken Elizabeth gave birth to a son who the couple called James, Robert's occupation was being recorded as a hawker of brooms.¹⁶ Two more children followed in quick succession, John in 1894 and Rachel in 1895.¹⁷ John unfortunately died within weeks of his birth.¹⁸ On 31st March little Rachel is admitted to the Evelina Hospital suffering from pneumonia, her address is noted as 32 Tabard Street, Southwark. She is treated with expectorants by Dr Wilcocks but sadly she died on 2nd April.¹⁹

Two months later in June 1896 Elizabeth Wannell, described as 36-year-old married women was charged with assault. She was accused of attacking '*a little woman*', Jane Noble, she hit her on the forehead with an iron poker, tore a clump of hair out and left Jane with a scratched face. Elizabeth denied she was the aggressor but was fined ten shillings.²⁰ During 1897 Elizabeth, Robert, and their children spent several periods at the St Saviour Workhouse, at one point Emma was removed from their care and sent to C Hill, or Champions Hill Children's Home.²¹ Elizabeth is in the Parish Street Workhouse, part of St Olave's Union on 24th June 1897, where she gives birth to William, the record notes that she is 33 years old and comes from Bermondsey parish.²² William is baptised on 9th July at St John's Church, Horselydown, with four other children, a note in the margin saying that they were all inmates of the Parish Street Workhouse. William's parents were noted as Robert and Elizabeth, whose address was 32 Staple Street, Horselydown.²³ Elizabeth and her three-week-old son William had an overnight stay on 15th July being released to Newington parish, but sadly little William died within a few weeks.²⁴ Later in the year in August Elizabeth with her children Elizabeth and

¹⁶ England and Wales Birth Indexes, GRO March Quarter 1893, St Saviour, London District, Vol 01D, Page 13, James Wannell, mother nee Jones

¹⁷ England and Wales Birth Indexes, GRO March Quarter 1894, St Saviour, London District, Vol 01D, Page 13, John Wannell, mother nee Jones; England and Wales Birth Indexes - GRO September Quarter 1895, St Saviour, London District, Vol 01D, Page 28, Rachel Wannell, mother nee Jones; London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, St John's Walworth; London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, St George the Martyr, Walworth; London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, Bermondsey Parish Church

¹⁸ England and Wales Death Indexes, GRO Reference 1894 July Quarter, St Olave, Wothwark District, Vol 1D, page 99, John Wannell, aged 0 years

¹⁹ Evelina Hospital Patient notes for Rachel Wannell accessed via <https://hharp.org>; England and Wales Death Indexes, GRO Reference 1896 April Quarter, St Saviour, Surrey District, Vol 1D, page 24, Rachel Wannell, aged 9 months

²⁰ South London Chronicle, Saturday 20 June 1896, page 8

²¹ London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²² England and Wales Birth Indexes, GRO March Quarter 1893, St Saviour, London District, Vol 01D, Page 13, James Wannell, mother nee Jones

²³ London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, St John's Horsleydown, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²⁴ England and Wales Death Indexes, GRO Reference 1897 July Quarter, Camberwell District, Vol 1D, page 537, Joseph Wannell, aged 0 years

James were once again in the workhouse, this time for five days and released at Elizabeth's own request, but the children were readmitted within days and released into the care of their father. In September 1897 Elizabeth and Robert, but without any children, were admitted to St Saviour's Union Workhouse and released at their own request after eight days. The workhouse records can be quite confusing and muddled to decipher, a further note against a record for Robert states that his wife was at St George's, and he had one child at 'Ch Hill'.²⁵

The recurring spells in various workhouses continue into 1898 with Elizabeth and children Charles, James and Elizabeth admitted on the 15th January until the 17th, Elizabeth left on her own request but the children were sent to Newington parish. In July after some time in the Mint Street workhouse Elizabeth is released into police custody.²⁶ She must have been heavily pregnant at the time as on 9th August, while a prisoner in Holloway, she gave birth to a baby boy, Joseph William. His birth certificate notes Elizabeth's home address as 9 Mowbray Buildings, Red Cross Street and the father Robert Wannell, a journeyman brush maker.²⁷ He was baptised in St George's, Tufnell Park on the 24th in what was marked as a private baptism by A K Ramsey, the 'Official Minsiter' of HM Prison Holloway.²⁸ There is no record in the online prisoner calendars of Elizabeth being in Holloway and no newspaper reports either.

Elizabeth was in the workhouse between 27th December 1899 and 8th January 1900, being discharged at her own request, only to be readmitted some weeks later when she spent a month at Mint Street, eventually released to the care of the police.²⁹ Robert died at the age of 40 at the workhouse in Bermondsey on 24th August 1900 and he was buried at the Brookwood Cemetery in Working a few days later.³⁰ Elizabeth was once again to be found in the Mint Street workhouse at the time of her husband's death.³¹

Elizabeth, as noted earlier in this account, was admitted to the Farmfield Inebriate Home on 18th September 1900, where she spent two years.³² She can be found on the census return for Farmfield in 1901,³³ two of her children, Elizabeth aged 11 and James aged 8 are enumerated in the Hanwell workhouse, both noted as a 'workhouse child'.³⁴ An image of

²⁵ London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²⁶ London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²⁷ England and Wales Birth Indexes - GRO September Quarter 1898, St Islington District, Vol 01B, Page 213, Joseph William Wannell, mother nee Jones

²⁸ London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923, St George's, Tufnell Park, Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

²⁹ London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁰ London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers, Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³¹ London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³² London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/PH/MENT/4/34 Farmfield Reformatory for Female Inebriates - Case History Book - Vol 1 (Nos 1-181) - Patients admitted (1900-1904)

³³ 1901 England census, Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Charlewood, Reigate, Surrey RG13, folio 152.

³⁴ 1901 England Census, Hanwell Workhouse, Hanwell, Middlesex, RG13, folio 141

Elizabeth can be seen in the *'Habitual Drunkards: Portraits and Descriptions'* record set at Ancestry,³⁵ the narrative on the form suggesting further drunken episodes as Elizabeth, it is recounted was readmitted to a certified inebriate reformatory on 16th December 1904, convicted at Southwark court, her haunts were noted as Tabard Street and neighbourhood.³⁶ This is further corroborated by her Farmfield record which states that on discharge in 1902 she entered domestic service as a general servant and was doing well in her situation for some 12 months. However, in 1904 Elizabeth was sent to the Eastern Counties Reformatory in Norfolk for three years, being transferred to Farmfield for the last part of her sentence.³⁷

An Elizabeth Wannell was recorded in the Poland Street workhouse, being admitted, and discharged a number of times between May and July 1908, where she was noted as being ill and destitute. The entry in June is actually the daughter Elizabeth as there is a note in the margin to say her mother is in custody. Whether all the entries are mother or daughter, is it unclear as no age is given.³⁸ Elizabeth junior married on 31st May 1909 in Battersea to bootmaker Joseph Osmond, her uncle James Kidd was a witness, as previously noted her mother's sister Mary Ann Kidd and husband were supportive of the family and this is perhaps another example.³⁹

By 1911 Elizabeth senior was a patient in St Luke's Home for the Dying in Pembridge Square, Notting hill. There is a sad note on the census sheet, which states that *'patients are all in a dying condition, therefore the accurate employments etc are not known'*.⁴⁰ St Luke's which was opened in July 1893 was established by a Miss Davidson. London was said to be honeycombed with hospitals and homes of many kinds but except for St Luke's there was no special institute in the city that gave care to the dying poor. The home was a development of the West London Mission and would take in and care for those who were incurable and whose lives would be very short on earth. There were two qualifications for admittance, the applicant must be either more or less destitute or almost dying. In opening the home Lady Battersea mentioned the awful discomfort of people dying who were poverty stricken, their lack of comfort and *'dainties'*, so necessary in times of illness, the ceaseless noise and clamour, all aggravated by the possibility of the entry of a drunken man or woman. The home would therefore not only be a blessing to such people, continued Lady Battersea, but also to the many who were in good health, for the effect of continual sickness, by visitation of the air, on those who attended a sick person was extremely harmful. The dying of any creed or nationality would be admitted *'of course, with the mentioned stipulations as to poverty and*

³⁵ See - <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/234655:61812>

³⁶ UK Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes 1834-1934, Accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁷ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/PH/MENT/4/34 Farmfield Reformatory for Female Inebriates - Case History Book - Vol 1 (Nos 1-181) - Patients admitted (1900-1904)

³⁸ London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

³⁹ London, England, Church of England Marriages, 1813-1923, St George's, Battersea, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

⁴⁰ 1911 England Census, RG14, Kensington Central, Middlesex, piece number 140

approaching death, a minister of their religion would be permitted to visit. As with many middle class philanthropic endeavours of this period the individual involved always had an eye on how their contributions enhanced their own social status, which is embodied in the last line of the report, Lady Battersea stating *'many of her friends had been delighted with the arrangement, and one poor woman whom she knew, a Roman Catholic, was anxious to enter the home on learning that her priest would be able to visit her there.'*⁴¹

Elizabeth's death was not as perhaps as imminent as being in St Luke's suggested, as she was still alive in 1921, a 58-year-old inmate of unknown birthplace at the Long Grove Mental Hospital in Epsom.⁴² Elizabeth eventually died at Long Grove at the age of 66 on 22nd February 1930, as recorded in the records of the asylum on the Epsom and Ewell History Explorer website and buried at Horton Cemetery, Epsom the same month.⁴³

Elizabeth's adult life is an extremely sad and sorry story, moving as she did from workhouse to workhouse, prison, inebriate reformatories, a home for the dying and eventually a mental asylum, along the way bearing ten children, losing some to scarlet fever and others to the state. I wonder if her daughter Elizabeth, son James or sister Mary Ann ever visited her in either St Luke's or Long Grove, I like to think that perhaps they did and that she was not alone or forgotten in her final days.

Margaret Roberts

Few Forgotten Women Team

⁴¹ Methodist Times, Thursday 20 July 1893, page 21

⁴² 1921 England Census, RG15, Stamford, Woodcote, Epsom, Surrey, piece number 03110; for information on Long Grove see <http://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/longgrove.html>

⁴³ Epsom and Ewell History Explorer <https://eehe.org.uk/>; Mental Hospital Records, Exploring Surreys Past https://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/subjects/mental_hospital_records/access_to_mental_hospital_records/

