

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.

Joanna Walter's Story

When the census was taken on 31 March 1901, Joanna Walters was an inmate of St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory at Ashford in Middlesex.¹ She was stated to be a widow and, at the age of 47, was one of the older inmates. She was the fifth listed and so may have been living in the reformatory for longer than most of the other women. Her place of birth was given as Clifton, Bristol, Gloucestershire, but it is likely that Clifton refers to the Roman Catholic Diocese rather than to the suburb of Bristol of that name. Joanna's occupation of "paper sorter" may indicate the level of poverty in which she was living prior to her admission to St Joseph's.

Unfortunately, no newspaper reports of her admission or of any misdemeanours in the area have been found to date, nor does she appear in criminal records, although searches are complicated by name variations.

On the basis of her marital status in 1901, she is probably the married Joanna Walters age 26 and born in Bristol, Gloucestershire, who on 3rd April 1881 was living in Thurnham, Kent, with her husband Edward Walters age 34, a farm labourer, who came from the nearby village of Boxley.² They were married on 5 Nov 1872 at the Holy Cross Church in the adjacent parish of Bearsted, Kent, and the certificate shows that Johanna Ragan was then aged just 17. She named her father as Daniel Ragan, a labourer, and Edward Walters, aged 21, named his father as George - also a labourer and one of the witnesses. The other was Edward's married sister Sarah Sharp, who was the only one able to sign her name and not simply make a X mark.³ Although Joanna Ragan was under 21 and it is unknown whether either of her parents were living in the area or aware of the marriage banns being called, her marriage to Edward Walters would have been valid unless one of her parents had actively objected to the marriage or she had given any false name or other information.⁴

Edward had been born in the area between the North Downs and the town of Maidstone in Kent (and in 1871 he was living in Bearsted with his parents and older brother⁵) but it is not known why Joanna was there or where they had met. Bearsted is on the A20 road from London and transport links improved further when its station opened on the extended London to Maidstone railway line on 1 July 1884.⁶ In 1871, she could be the 'Johanna Regan' who was a general servant in a grocer's household in Twickenham, although her place of birth was stated to be nearby Sunbury (near Ashford in Middlesex) rather than

Bristol and this is speculative.⁷ No other likely family members can be found nearby at that date.

Despite her young age, there is no evidence from a search of the GRO Birth Index that any children were born from their marriage and she could not be found living with Edward in 1891. However, on 5th April 1891, a “Joanna Waters”, “single”, age 36 and born in Bristol but with no stated occupation, was boarding at Diprose’s Yard, Pudding Lane in Maidstone with a family whose head was stated to be “ill”.⁸

No evidence has been found to explain why Joanna came to be living at St Joseph’s in 1901, nor whether her husband had died, bigamously remarried or emigrated. However there may be a hint of future problems in a newspaper report that a young labourer named Edward Walters had been fined for an assault outside the “Kentish Yeoman” at Bearsted in the afternoon on 12th October 1868.⁹

Joanna’s origins are equally uncertain, although there was a Catholic baptism on 26 June 1854 at St Mary on the Quay (Colston Ave) in Bristol city centre of Joanna Regan, daughter of Daniel Regan and his wife Catharina Fennell.¹⁰ Joanna’s date of birth was noted as 13 June 1854 and there is a GRO birth registration Sept 1854 in Bristol for a “Jane Regan” whose mother’s maiden name was Fennell.¹¹ A son Daniel was baptised by a couple of the same name in Cork, Ireland, in 1841¹² so possibly the family was not resident in England for either the 1851 or 1861 census. All that can be surmised is that Jo(h)anna(h) / Jane came from a poor Irish, possibly itinerant, background.

After 1901, when Joanna Walters was an inmate of St Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, there are no definite records of her further life or death.

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Sources

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- 3 England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915 from FreeBMD and Kent Archives Office; Maidstone, Kent, England; England, Kent, Parish Registers, 1538-1911 Accessed via Ancestry.com 24 March 2023
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- 5 1871 England Census Bearsted, Kent RG10; Piece: 939; Folio: 49; Page: 12;
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- 10 Bristol Archives; Bristol, England; *Bristol Non-Conformist Registers*; Reference: 37553/R/1/5 Ancestry.com Accessed 24 March 2023
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- 12 Cork baptisms - National Library of Ireland; Dublin, Ireland; Irish Catholic Parish Registers; Microfilm Number: 04778 / 05 Ancestry.com Accessed 26 March 2023