

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.

Marjorie O'Brien

Marjorie is listed on the 1901 census as living at the Farmfield Inebriates' Home in Charlwood, Reigate, Surrey. She is a patient there and the information given about her is that she is married, age 30, her occupation is book folder/binder and she was born in Bristol.

Both the admissions book and case notes for Marjorie give us a small insight into who she perhaps was and what her circumstances may have been and also a physical description of her - 5 foot, 122 pounds, grey eyes, brown hair and fresh complexion. We know that Marjorie was admitted to the newly opened Farmfield on the 27th September 1900 for an 18 month period, after being convicted at Southwark Court at the age of 29. She could read and write as she had regularly attended various day schools and this education would have served her

well as a book folder which was her occupation. A book folder would have either folded the printed sheets as received from the printer by hand, putting them in numerical order and register, or for ordinary bookbinding used a folding machine. Marjorie must have had a liking for books as she maintained this occupation and later on in 1912 is noted as a book gilder.

Her place of abode was given as 64 Long Lane, Bermondsey, however when looking at the 1881, 1891 and 1901 census records for this address there is no one listed with the names of O'Brien or Daly (Daly is the name that Marjory has given as her mother's name). Neither is there anyone with those names at the address given for her mother - 4 Stuart House, Russell Place Bermondsey. Marjorie gave information about herself that she was married, 2 children living - 2 dead, she lives alone, left her parents at the age of 17 and commenced drinking at the age of 19 due to the bad company she was keeping. Her mother had been in an asylum and her father was dead - there were no siblings. I have been unable to find any trace of family for Marjorie which makes me think that the note in her casenotes which says 'no reliable history thus woman being most untruthful' is a true fact.

Upon admission to Farmfield her general condition is described as "dirty and degraded in the extreme. This could be the reason she is then thought to be a 'prostitute' as is written in her case notes. She is noted to be "healthy, quiet and respectful" and to have "continuous periods of intemperance, drinks brandy, mood when intoxicated: cheerful". More description is that she is "sane, general health good. Right hand slightly contracted from old injury". Her behaviour whilst at Farmfield is said to have been 'good' although she did receive 'dietary punishment'. She is also describes as 'morally bad with no intention of being better'. Marjorie was licenced to Wigan Hospital as a ward maid but had to

return to Farmfield and she was then "licenced to Miss Prentice preparatory to finding work for her." She was discharged from Farmfield on 26th March 1902 presumably taking up work that had been found for her.

In November 1903 Marjorie spends some time in Holloway Prison and then we come across her again in March 1904 as she is charged with being drunk and disorderly at Southwark Court. Marjorie is described in the Southwark & Bermondsey Recorder as a 'well educated young woman of smart appearance'. We are told that she had been convicted many times and had been to an inebriates home for 18 months (this is probably referencing Farmfield). She escaped from a place she had been sent to and always promised to behave better. It seems that when she was sentenced to 21 days' imprisonment that she was quite surprised and pleased with the sentence as a comment is made to that effect in the newspaper. The fact she doesn't want to return to a reformatory speaks volumes. She does say to the court on this occasion "I do try to keep myself straight but it seems no good".

Marjorie doesn't appear to have benefitted at all from her time at Farmfield as in 1904 she is now classed as a habitual drunkard and appears in the Police Gazette. She is homeless although lists her occupation as book-folder and is frequenting the area of Newington Butts and the neighbourhood around there. She is using aliases too - a rather fancy name of Valerie St. Quentin and not so fancy Marjory Swan. From her photograph she looks like an ordinary woman smartly dressed wearing a straw hat. Her physical description is that she is aged 34 years, 5ft 3in in height, medium build, fair complexion, brown hair, grey eyes, straight nose, oval face and scar and moles on her left cheek. On the 11th November 1904 she is convicted at Lambeth Court and committed to a certified inebriate reformatory for another 2 years.

In 1907 Marjorie makes another appearance in the *Police Gazette* for being a habitual drunkard. Her photograph shows her to look somewhat presentable, wearing quite an elaborate hat and clothing of the time period. She looks clean and her hair is tidy. The description given of her is that she is still using the aliases of Valerie St. Quentin and Marjory Swan and she has been residing at Haddon-Hall Street, Tower Bridge but known to frequent Deptford and Lewisham. She is 36 years of age and still going by the occupation of a book-folder. Interestingly a newspaper article in the *Lewisham Borough News* of the conviction of Valerie St. Quentin on the 16th May 1907 at Greenwich Police Court gives her age as 39. Her address given is 4 Steward's Place, Russell Place Bermondsey.

Upon sentence poor Marjorie (Valerie) begs not to be sent to another reformatory "save me from it" she says "send me to prison for 6 months. I have never been to prison for a long time and it will do me good." Sadly for Marjorie she is sent to Eastern Counties Reformatory at Harling for 3 years! Again this highlights the negative impact that Farmfield had had on her for her to beg to be sent to prison rather than go to a reformatory. Eastern Counties Reformatory was almost 100 miles away in Norfolk and this must have been a very traumatic experience for her to be sent so far away from what she knew. Marjorie always makes her way back to familiar places as on Monday the 15th April 1912 she is admitted to the Newington Workhouse on Westmoreland Road in Southwark. She is aged 41 years. She appears to be in a bit of a bad way as she is put on an infirm diet and is noted as being temporary disabled. The next day, Tuesday 16th April, she is sent to the infirmary probably due to her poor condition. This would have been the Southwark Union Infirmary which later became Dulwich Hospital. There is no trace of Marjorie after this date so unfortunately we don't know what became of her - whether she died in the

infirmary or went on to live a more happier life. Hopefully it was the latter although the statistics from her case don't lead me to think it was sadly - "46 convictions for drunkenness, 3 suicide (presumably attempted suicide yet they said she was sane!) 1 disorderly, 1 obscene language, 10 terms of imprisonment, 41 other sentences".

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Sources

1901 Census, Charlwood, Reigate, Surrey - Farmfield Inebriates' House

[Ancestry.co.uk - 1901 England Census](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)

UK Census Returns, address finder

Find My Past

Farmfield Admissions Report provided by the Few Forgotten Team

UK, Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes, 1834-1934

[Ancestry.co.uk](https://www.ancestry.co.uk)

Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder, Saturday 19th March 1904

British Newspaper Archives

Lewisham Borough News, Friday 17th May 1907

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Rev Harold Nelson Burden and Katherine Mary Burden: pioneers of inebriate
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