

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



Phoebe Bunn 1838-?

My 2x great aunt Phoebe Bunn came into the world just four months after the coronation of Queen Victoria. Phoebe was born in a rural Norfolk town to a couple who were of the lower social class. It was also a time before the benefits of modern medicine practices.

In 1855, Phoebe suffered a catastrophic injury. The shock together with the blood loss alone could well have proved fatal. Added to this was the high risk of infection.

Nevertheless, Phoebe survived. She found employment, albeit in one of the usual occupations for women at the time - a servant.

This is her story ...

Birth

Phoebe is the first known child of my great great grandparents, Augustus Bunn and Elizabeth Nelson. She was born in Wymondham, Norfolk on the 30th October, 1838. However at that time, Augustus and Elizabeth were not married.

Elizabeth Nelson registered Phoebe's birth on the 30th November, 1838. Phoebe's father is named as 'Austin 'Bunn. As 'Austin 'is found in several records for the name 'Augustus', I have no doubt that Augustus Bunn is Phoebe's father.

Parents' Marriage

On the 17th May, 1839, labourer Augustus Bunn married Elizabeth Nelson in the Parish Church in Wymondham. It is clear that Augustus and Elizabeth had little (or no) literacy skills as they both put their mark 'X' in the marriage register.

Following the marriage, Augustus and Elizabeth Bunn had a further eight known children. Their last child, a son Robert, was born in 1861.

1841 census

The census of 1841 captures 2 year old *Phebe* with her parents, *Austin* and Elizabeth Bunn, living at The Lizard, Wymondham. Just ten days prior to the census, Elizabeth Bunn had given birth to a son, William. Elizabeth's father, Stephen Nelson, is also with the family.

The Lizard is an area outside the main town of Wymondham. Many of those living 'on the Lizard' were housed in two rows of 'two-up, two down' cottages - Long Row and Short Row.

Further like many of the inhabitants of Wymondham, several of the people living on the Lizard worked as silk and worsted weavers. Many Wymondham families had been weaving for decades. However by 1841, as the weaving industry began to decline, several of the men were now working as agricultural labourers.

Augustus's late father, Owen Bunn, was one such weaver. Augustus found work as an agricultural labourer.

1851 census

Ten years 'later, the 1851 census finds 35 year old Augustus Bunn with his 34 year old wife Elizabeth and five children living in the Silfield area of Wymondham. I do not believe they are at The Lizard. However, Augustus is still working as an agricultural labourer.

Phoebe's brother, 9 year old William, is already working. His occupation is given as a farm servant. I have no doubt that 12 year old Phoebe is helping her mother 'with the house' and looking after the three younger children, Mary 7, Sarah 5 and John (my great grandfather) aged 2.

Phoebe and her siblings may have had little or no education. It was not until 1870 that education became compulsory.

Some four years later, in the summer of 1855, Phoebe is fighting for her life. The attempted murder of Phoebe Bunn was widely reported both in local and national newspapers.



In Service

Two years earlier at Michaelmas in 1853, Phoebe Bunn went into the service of local farmer Edward Lain. Phoebe was not far off her 15th birthday.

74 year old Besthorpe born Edward Lain lived with his wife Mary and 35 year old son Samuel in the Silfield area of Wymondham. Edward Lain's farm comprised some 24 acres. His son, Samuel Lain, farmed a mere 4½ acres.

Another son of Edward Lain, Bartholomew Lain, lived close by with his family as did Phoebe's family.

The Events of the 12th August 1855

The sudden 'turn of events' happened on Sunday, the 12th August, 1855. Phoebe is in the kitchen of the Lain's home with Edward Lain. Mary Lain is still upstairs in bed, apparently unwell.

Samuel Lain came into the kitchen. He had been out all night and had not returned home until around 9am on the Sunday morning. Apparently he was somewhat the worse for drink and was unsteady on his feet.

Shortly after, Edward Lain left the room. It was then that Samuel Lain spoke to Phoebe. He is reported to have said "*You have but one gut*", to which she responded "*I am as good as those who have two*". Samuel replied by saying "*We will see about that*", and he went to the drawer and took a common black handled razor.

As Phoebe went to the door, Samuel Lain caught hold of her and pulled her back. He then put his arm round her neck and cut it.

On hearing Phoebe's shrieks, Edward Lain came downstairs and managed to get Phoebe away from Samuel.

Edward Lain's grandson, 12 year old William Lain, ran to fetch his father, Bartholomew Lain. When Bartholomew got to his father's house, he found Edward Lain in the yard holding Phoebe. She was bleeding from the neck. Samuel Lain was also there. When asked by his brother what he had done, Samuel made no reply.

Injuries

Phoebe was treated by a Wymondham surgeon, Mr Lewis. She remained in his care for some time.

Although Phoebe attended the court in Wymondham in the October of 1855, she had not fully recovered from the injury.

Mr Lewis told the court that when he first attended Phoebe, she was very faint from the loss of blood. He had no doubt that the wound was caused by a razor, a knife or other sharp instrument.

The wound (8 inches long) began at her right ear downwards to the spine of the back between the shoulders. In his opinion, Phoebe was 'in danger' for 9-10 days.

On Remand

Samuel Lain had been on remand at Norwich Castle since the event. He was brought by train to Wymondham to appear at the court sitting at The Bridewell in the town.

It was stated that Samuel Lain appeared to be 'a quiet and inoffensive sort of person except when under the influence of drink', to which (it was said) he was addicted.

His father, Edward Lain, reluctantly gave evidence to the court. Following a not guilty plea, Samuel Lain was re-conveyed to Norwich Castle to await trial.

The Trial

The trial took place during mid-December. Phoebe Bunn attended the trial. She told the court that she had lived in the house of Edward Lain for two years during which time, she and Samuel Lain were "*good friends all the time. He sometimes went out for a day or two drinking. When after that he returns home, he sits staring and stamps his feet*".

As it happens, Samuel Lain was found not guilty of the attempted murder of Phoebe Bunn. However he was found guilty of cutting and wounding her. Lain was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for two years.

We can only wonder how long it took Phoebe to physically and mentally recover from her ordeal. Did the incident have any impact on the rest of her life? Did Edward Lain cover the fees of the surgeon, Mr Lewis?

1861 census

The national head-count of 1861 captures 22 year old single woman Phoebe Bunn as a servant in the household of farmer Benjamin Cross in Right-Up Lane, Wymondham. Accordingly, we can assume that Phoebe had recovered sufficiently to be able to work.

Baptism

On the 12th October, 1862, Phoebe is baptised in the Parish Church of Wymondham. The baptism register records that Phoebe is 'of riper years' which concurs with Phoebe then coming up to her 24th birthday.

Did Phoebe's brush with mortality have some influence on her decision to be baptised?

Marriage Witness

On the 24th December, 1869, 31 year old Phoebe is a witness at the marriage of her brother, 28 year old William Bunn, to Jemima Scott.

It is no surprise to see that both William and Phoebe put their mark 'X' in the marriage register. I have no doubt that their literacy skills were somewhat limited, if indeed they had any at all.

Opportunities

Life choices for women in Victorian times were, of course, somewhat limited. Perhaps even less of so for those (like Phoebe) with little or no education. In addition, did Phoebe experience any lasting effects from the attack at the age of 15? We will never know.

It may be that Phoebe continued to spend most of her life in the service of others.

1871 census

The 1871 census finds Phoebe as a servant for 81 year old annuitant Mary Long in Church Street, Wymondham.

1881 census

Phoebe may well be the unmarried Phoebe Bunn aged 40, a servant, at the home of farmer, John Daniels, in Wortwell at the time of the 1881 census. Wortwell is some 20 miles from her home town of Wymondham. It is quite possible that she moved from Wymondham to Wortwell.

Although her age on the census is a couple of years out, her place of birth is correct. This is the last (reasonably) firm 'sighting' I have of Phoebe.

Unfortunately, I lose track of her after the 1881 census.

Heather Etteridge. August 2025

Sources:

Wymondham Parish Registers. Norfolk Record Office PD184. Viewed via www.ancestry.co.uk

1838 Oct 30. Birth Registration Image Phoebe Bunn. GRO

1841 census HO107/767/25

1851 census HO107/1817/349

1861 census RG9/1223/101

1871 census RG10/1 825/30

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15 December 1855 Norfolk Chronicle. Viewed at the Norfolk Heritage Centre, Millennium Library, Norwich

13 October 1855. Norfolk Chronicle. Viewed at the Norfolk Heritage Centre, Millennium Library, Norwich. Also available via The British Newspaper Archive website.

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