

# *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.*

## **Minnie O'Shea's Story**

***Minnie's story begins on the next page***

## The trials and tribulations of Minnie O'Shea



Queen Victoria thrupenny

Queen Victoria, like Minnie O'Shea, was a widow, short in stature, and on the plump or "stout" side. There the resemblance ends. While Victoria's story and face are well known, Minnie's life and history are buried in the archives, with many of the keys to her story still shrouded in dust and cobwebs.



Minnie O'Shea 1912

The closest Minnie ever got to Victoria was when she handled a brass farthing or thrupenny bit or, perhaps on a good day, a few shillings or half a crown. Like much of Minnie's life - her husband, her children, her home, her work - these coins were impermanent fixtures, slipping through her fingers like water, paying for drink, or fines she incurred for public drunkenness. This account is an attempt to piece together Minnie's story, to give her permanence by restoring her to memory, no longer one of the "Forgotten Women".<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

## Introduction

### 1899 Early Implementation of the Inebriates Act in Middlesex

In August 1899, the Inebriates Act, which came into force at the beginning of the year, was discussed by a committee of the Southall-Norwood District Council in Middlesex.<sup>2</sup> Little was decided at that meeting, although they did recommend the agreement for the accommodation of Roman Catholic women with St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, in Ashford, Middlesex. Middlesex cases would be taken on for a payment of a shilling a day for each case admitted under Section 2 of the Act, and £10 *per annum* for each case admitted under Section 1 of the Act. The recommendation was subsequently agreed by the council.

### 1899 Minnie O'Shea's Committal to St. Joseph's

A few months earlier and about ten miles away, in May 1899, Minnie O'Shea, a 45-year-old charwoman was charged at Worship Street in Shoreditch, London, with being "drunk and disorderly in the public street".<sup>3</sup> Minnie was "well known" at the court and on this occasion had been "remanded on the evidence of the constable who had charged her ... under the new Inebriates Act". She told the magistrate, Mr. Cluer, that she "wished she could avoid the drink, but it was too tempting to her". He advised Minnie that she could be "sent to a home where she might be benefitted" and Minnie consented, replying that she "would be glad to go to a home". Minnie had some doubts about how long she might have to stay and was informed that, "if she behaved herself she would probably be let out in a few months". Having consented, and evidence being given to the court that Minnie had, as required by the Act, been previously convicted, "three times in the past twelve months" and that there were "at least twenty convictions against her", the magistrate prepared to make an order for committal. Mr Cluer was not sure whether London County Council would pay for Minnie's maintenance, but noted it was suitable to someone of her religion, Roman

<sup>1</sup> The illustration used here is an "artistic" impression based on Minnie O'Shea's photo from 1912 found in *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers 1912*. Only the background in this portrait is from the original photograph.

<sup>2</sup> *Ealing Gazette and West Middlesex Observer*, 12 August 1899, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Telegraph & Courier* (London) 21 May 1899, p. 10.

Catholic, and that he would make an order “for the longest term allowed by the Act”. He ordered Minnie’s detention for three years. Having originally been told she might be out in a few months for good behaviour, one can only imagine Minnie’s dismay and, as a Sheffield newspaper reported, “surprise”. “Three years! Then I’d better not consent. I won’t go”. There was little sympathy for her – Mr Cluer told Minnie, “You cannot help it now”, and she was removed from the court.

Minnie’s destination is not recorded in that original 1899 newspaper account but, two days later, on 23 May, the same newspaper reported on the operation of the Inebriates’ Act. It noted that Minnie O’Shea, the “drunken Irish charwoman”, an “inebriate, of several years’ practice” was bound for Ashford.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, Minnie, whose story went “viral” across England in 1899, is the Cork-born widow and tailoress found in St. Joseph’s Reformatory in Ashford during the 1901 census.<sup>2</sup>

Accounts of the “twenty convictions” that Minnie O’Shea amassed before her committal to St. Joseph’s in 1899 have not been located. Nevertheless, the name “Minnie O’Shea” appears occasionally in newspapers from 1890 to 1899 in reports of prosecutions for drunkenness in central and eastern London, and in various institutional records, up to and including a death in Bromley House in November 1916. Records identified between 1890 and 1916 suggest that Minnie experienced a downward spiral of alcoholism, residential precarity, and homelessness, interspersed with stays in a variety of institutions, including workhouses, prisons, and reformatories like St. Joseph’s.

Many of the records are sterile and can be read dispassionately; but Minnie is brought to life by newspapers which capture her voice, her cheekiness, and her temper, and by criminal records which allow us to see her face and demeanour. These, combined with social histories of the areas in which she lingered, humanise her, and it is difficult to view her with anything other than compassion. Sadly, for Minnie O’Shea, there does not appear to have been any cure at St. Joseph’s, and no little house with picket fence or “dresser filled with shining delph” for her final years.<sup>3</sup> By then, Minnie was found homeless in the worst and most dangerous streets in London where “Hunger walks prowling in its alleyways”.<sup>4</sup> Small wonder, you might think, that in 1899 Minnie would be “glad to go to a home” with a roof, a bed, and regular meals.

## Finding Minnie

The 1901 census provides us with our first series of facts about 46-year-old Minnie O’Shea. While religious denomination was not recorded in the 1901 Census of England and Wales, we know that she was a Roman Catholic from details of the institution where she was enumerated. She was a widow and tailoress, a “worker” rather than having her own business.<sup>5</sup> The census also records that Minnie was born in Cork, Ireland, although it isn’t entirely clear whether the city or county of the name is intended. Entries for other Irish-born women provide little clarity about what is intended. Ellen Sampson, enumerated immediately above Minnie, was born in Fermoy, Cork and other Irish-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Telegraph & Courier* (London) 23 May 1899, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* 22 May 1899, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Old Woman of the Road’, a poem published by Padraic Colum, in his collection, *Wild Earth and Other Poems* (New York, 1916), pp 14-15. Retrieved from Hathi Trust Digital Library <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t5k93t81p&view=1up&seq=25>. “Delph” pottery or china - also known as “Delpht”.

<sup>4</sup> *Echo* (London), 16 July 1901, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *1901 Census of England and Wales*, St. Joseph’s Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex RG13 1171 folios 12-13.

born women enumerated on the same page are recorded as being born in a specific county, like Ellen Carroll, a 41-year-old married laundress, born in “Co. Cork”.

Without knowing Minnie’s maiden name, and the name of at least one of her parents, it is not possible to identify Minnie’s origins. To date, no record has been identified containing that information. While there is one RC baptism of a Minnie Leahy in the parish of St. Mary’s in Cork city in 1857, with parents recorded as Denis Leahy and Catherine (O’)Toole, no marriage has been found in Ireland, England or Wales for a Minnie Leahy to a man named Shea or O’Shea in the period 1875-1901.<sup>1</sup> It is likely, although not certain, that she was actually christened Mary, becoming known as Minnie, a “pet name”. As ages of Irish people in documents up to the early 1900s are notoriously unreliable, Minnie’s date of birth could have occurred any time between 1855 and 1865. There are almost twenty thousand baptisms of Mary (and variants) in Co. Cork between 1855 and 1865, and more than eight thousand such baptisms in a narrower period 1855-1859: a veritable needle in a haystack!<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, efforts to identify Minnie in Irish records were set aside.

Records naming Minnie Shea or O’Shea in London were identified at FindMyPast and Ancestry, and examined for references to birthplace and/or nationality, marital status, religion, occupation, and approximate age, based on the details provided when Minnie was enumerated in 1901.<sup>3</sup> These records document ages with a year of birth anywhere between 1852 and 1860. One possible 1891 census record (Holloway Prison) potentially extends her year of birth as late as 1864. This variation, although frustrating for the researcher, is typical of those with Irish heritage in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of Minnie O’Shea possibilities were examined and traced through census and vital records but ultimately dismissed when the family was found intact in the 1901 census, and/or because the birthplace and/or religion were not consistent with what is known about our Minnie.<sup>4</sup> With numerous references and sources, the challenge has been to find *our* Minnie amidst an array of records, and determine which of these were part of *her* story. Would the evidence accumulated and presented here satisfy a court of law? Perhaps. You are the jury.

The weight of circumstantial evidence documented here suggests that Minnie’s trail has been found prior to and after her appearance in the 1901 census at St. Joseph’s. One cannot categorically state, however, that each of the records naming Minnie O’Shea refer to the same person. Nevertheless, mapping the locations throughout London where Minnie is found show a consistent decline in circumstances which is in keeping with a life increasingly out of Minnie’s control. Prison and police records, held at the London Metropolitan Archives, are perhaps the best source of determining whether many of these women are one and the same, especially where the admission and release records document physical characteristics. Unfortunately, access to these was not possible during this research.

The reported residences and areas frequented (c. 1890-1916), along with locations where offences took place, show a progression for Minnie O’Shea in time and space from Soho and Westminster (c.

---

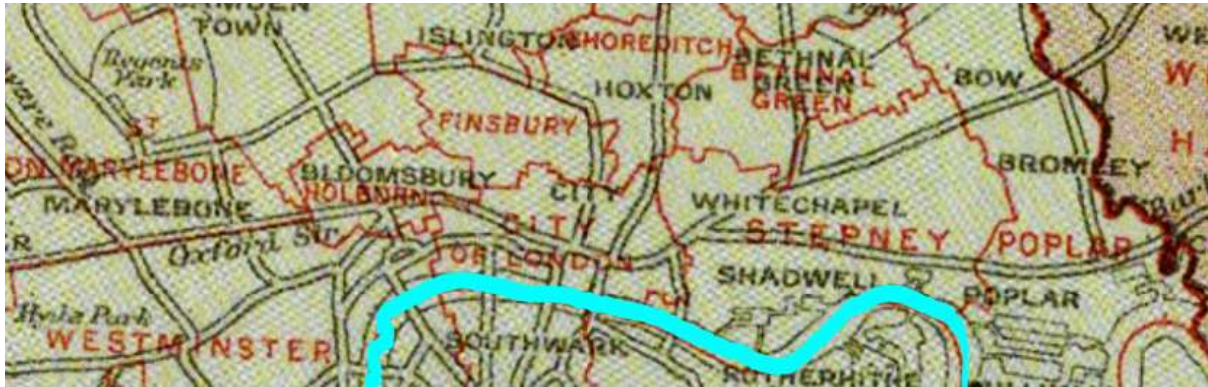
<sup>1</sup> National Library of Ireland, ‘Catholic Parish Registers’: Minnie to Denis Leahy and Catherine Toole, 11 April, 1857, St. Mary’s, Cork city, *Baptisms Nov. 10, 1852 – July 4, 1869*, p. 100; Microfilm 04783 / 02 <https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000633160#page/55/mode/1up>.

<sup>2</sup> FindMyPast, ‘Ireland Roman Catholic Parish Baptisms’.

<sup>3</sup> Although Minnie is a diminutive of Mary in Ireland, for entirely pragmatic reason, Mary Shea/O’Shea records were not examined during this research. Exceptions were made where keywords like tailor, tailoress, Ireland, Irish, Cork were also found.

<sup>4</sup> A collection of Minnie O’Shea workhouse and hospital records in the Greenwich area, for example, were investigated, but that woman was eliminated from further investigation when her religion was identified as Church of England.

1890) in central London to Spitalfields and Whitechapel in the east (c. 1895-1916), along the northern banks of the Thames.<sup>1</sup> In the earliest Soho locations, Minnie might easily have brushed shoulders with Captain O’Shea, involved in a notorious case against the “Uncrowned King of Ireland”, Charles Stewart Parnell.<sup>2</sup> By the end, she is found amidst the “wasted human material” of Spitalfields and Whitechapel, wearing the “soul-sickening look which tells of a mind that has no ambition, no hope, ...”.<sup>3</sup>



Map of central London, divided by the river Thames<sup>4</sup>

## A timeline of Minnie O’Shea in the records: 1890-1916

### 1890

The first newspaper report found naming a Minnie O’Shea is in keeping with what we know of our Minnie.<sup>5</sup> It is clear from the reported speech in this account that Minnie O’Shea, a “little stout woman” of about 30 years of age, was Irish.<sup>6</sup> She was brought before the police court in Great Marlborough Street in January 1890, having had too much of the “crater” and being drunk and noisy in Broad Street, Soho, at half-past twelve on Sunday morning.<sup>7</sup> Minnie made her presence felt on the street in those early hours,

*...taking up a position in the middle of the thoroughfare, halloaed and yelled and screeched as loudly as she could. A constable had ordered her to desist, but she treated him to a bit of her tongue, called him “a bobby”, and then,*

<sup>1</sup> It is possible that these are two separate clusters but, as the distance between Soho and Whitechapel takes little more than an hour to walk, they are considered part of our Minnie’s story, at least for now.

<sup>2</sup> Robert McWade, *The uncrowned king : the life and public services of Hon. Charles Stewart Parnell*, (Philadelphia, 1891), p. 293. This book contains lengthy extracts from the “Parnell Commission”, where Captain O’Shea mentions being in Mrs. Lynch’s pub in Wardour Street.

<sup>3</sup> *Echo* (London), 3 September 1901, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> All maps were located and constructed from those published by <https://www.theundergroundmap.com/> Locations were identified using *The Post Office London Directory for 1895 – Part 2: Street Directory*.

<sup>5</sup> An earlier 1882 report names a Minnie O’Shea of Carnaby Street as a prosecution witness (*Shields Daily News*, 20 July 1882, p. 4). She is not found there in the 1881 census although her fellow witness, William Dowding is recorded there. In the 1891 census for Carnaby Street, William Dowding’s next door neighbour is a widow, Mrs Shea, with her children. Subsequent investigation eliminated her as a possible candidate.

<sup>6</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 18 January 1890, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Marlborough Street Magistrates Court was located at 21 Great Marlborough Street (indicated by the blue arrow on the map, Westminster). There were several Broad Streets in London at the time, in Soho, in Bloomsbury, in Ratcliff, and in Lambeth. Broad St., Soho, is the closest to the Magistrates Court and is believed to be the correct location here. (*The Post Office London Directory for 1895 – Part 2: Street Directory*, p. 226)



... “she started shouting again”.



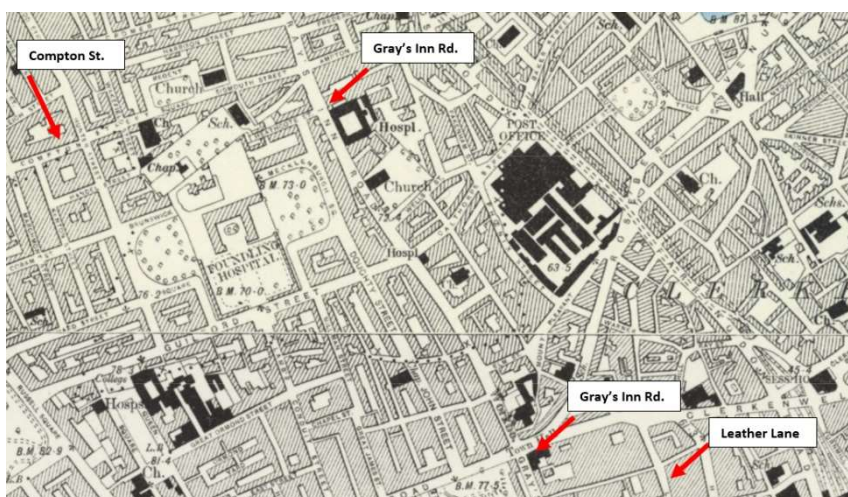
Map showing location of Marlboro Street court and two places called Broad Street

Minnie explained to Mr Hannay, the magistrate, that she had been laid up with the “fluency” (influenza) and “came out for the first time on Saturday”. Mr Hannay, the magistrate, reminding her that he had seen her before Christmas, fined her five shillings. The records are silent at this point, or at least not available during this research. Did Minnie have the five shillings to satisfy the court, plus the usual costs, or was she committed to Holloway or some other prison for a period of weeks or months because she defaulted on the payment? We simply don’t know. In any case, Minnie is absent from newspaper accounts for about fifteen months, although it’s unlikely she was in prison for this entire period.

## 1891

Then, in 1891, two of Minnie’s court appearances at Clerkenwell Magistrate’s Court are reported in newspapers. The name, age, and location are quite similar: one reports Minnie to be a widow, occupation not reported, the other does not mention her marital status but reports her to be a tailoress.

The earliest of these occurs about two weeks after the 1891 census of 5 April. Minnie O’Shea, a 32-year-old widow, of Compton Street (St. Pancras) was brought before Clerkenwell Police Court for being drunk and disorderly and using “filthy and disgusting” language.<sup>1</sup> She was found at Leather Lane (near Smithfield Market) in Holborn, both locations near Gray’s Inn Road. The magistrate, Mr. Horace Smith fined her five shillings. As before, we do not know whether Minnie could pay the fine.



Map showing locations mentioned in the April 1891 report

<sup>1</sup> *Islington Gazette*, 20 April 1891, p. 3.

About a month later 34-year-old tailoress, Minnie O'Shea, of Wardour-street, Soho, was charged before the same magistrate, Mr Horace Smith, at Clerkenwell with being drunk and disorderly at Gray's Inn Road, about a mile from Wardour Street.<sup>1</sup> Despite the charge, her recent appearance before



Map showing locations mentioned in the May 1891 report

him, and her use of “bad language”, she was discharged with a caution. This report in May 1891 was the last mention of Minnie being charged or arrested until the 1899 report of her committal to St. Joseph's, although that account notes that she had been arrested at least twenty times.

One might imagine that, with two points of reference immediately after the 1891 census, Minnie O'Shea would be easily located. Sadly not.

### The 1891 Census

1891 census records for Westminster, Soho, St. Pancras, and Wardour Street and Compton Street (St. Pancras and Clerkenwell parishes) in particular, were examined to find more information about the Minnie O'Shea of these 1890 and 1891 newspaper reports. No person matching her details by name, age, marital status, origin, or even occupation is found at any of these places. Several Shea and O'Shea individuals and families were identified but subsequent investigation eliminated them for one reason or another.

However, there is an Irish-born prisoner named Minnie O'Shea enumerated in Holloway Prison.<sup>2</sup> The entry records that she is an employed factory tailoress. She is, reportedly, a little younger than the Minnie who appeared in court some weeks later for drunkenness, with a date of birth of approximately 1864. The largest inconsistency is that this woman is recorded as single rather than being a widow, or even a married woman. Despite this, she is the most promising lead identified so far, but archival research is required to determine whether or not she is *our* Minnie. Regardless, what do the quick changes of address from Compton Street to Wardour Street tell us about Minnie's circumstances? This type of instability may mean that Minnie, for whatever reason, had no fixed abode and was, in modern terms, “couch surfing”, until she could find somewhere to live.

### 1895

Perhaps a period in prison chastened Minnie, as she does not appear in the records again until 1895, when she was living at Dorset Street in Spitalfields. In January of that year, the *Echo* published a long piece describing the grim living conditions in Dorset Street.<sup>3</sup> It is invaluable as a social history of tenement life, and gives a sense of Minnie's circumstances at the time, a life that “knows little of

<sup>1</sup> *Islington Gazette*, 26 May 1891, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *1891 Census of England and Wales*, Her Majesty's Prison Holloway, Islington, London, Middlesex RG12 150 folio 132.

<sup>3</sup> *Echo* (London), 18 Jan. 1895, p. 1. This article is too long to include here but it gives a vivid insight into living and working conditions for residents of Dorset Street at this time. Excerpts are reproduced below.

either” “gleams of joy” or “moments of peace”. Rooms were rented at 10d. or 11d. a night with rent collected after midnight. For those without the means to pay the landlord, nights were spent sleeping in the streets or on the stairs of the buildings, which were “slippery with filth” and where the smells, presumably of human waste, were so overpowering, the author “was obliged to rush into the fresh air” as he was almost overcome by nausea.

On 22 July 1895, a Roman Catholic, 43-year-old Minnie O’Shea (entry 4507), living in a lodging house at 30 Dorset Street, widow of John, a tailor, was admitted to the Whitechapel Infirmary. This is the first reference to Minnie’s husband, and the name John O’Shea, appears on subsequent occasions. Minnie had apparently been settled in the district for three years prior to her admission due to a “corruption of head”.<sup>1</sup> This may have been a badly infected cut on her head but it was severe enough that she was hospitalised for almost a month. Such an injury may have occurred as a result of violence, given the nature of the area where she lived, or it may have been accidental if Minnie had fallen down the slippery stairs of the tenement building where she lived or on the street while drunk.

#### HOW SOME POOR LIVE

There is not a more wretched neighbourhood in the Metropolis than Dorset-Street, Spitalfields. It is quite a short thoroughfare, yet about fourteen hundred people are packed in it, a large proportion of whom are thieves, outcasts, or drunkards, and many all three combined. ...  
... Until late in the night one can see rough, bare-headed women dancing in the mud, idle men lounging in groups around lodging house doors, and ragged children darting to and fro; while scenes are witnessed under the yellow glare of gas light that one cannot describe in print. ...

She was finally discharged on 15 August 1895.

#### 1896

On 2 March 1896, Minnie O’Shea (entry 3032), a 39-year-old Roman Catholic living at a lodging house at 30 Dorset Street, and widow of John, a tailor, was admitted to the Whitechapel Infirmary.<sup>2</sup> She had a sprained ankle, and remained there until 11 March. Unlike the head injury, this was more than likely accidental. The record also shows that she had been settled in the district for five years. Despite the differences in the lengths of settlement (and age), it is almost certain that these admissions are for the same Minnie O’Shea who was admitted eight months earlier.

#### 1896-99

Although Minnie was absent from the newspapers over the next few years, and no workhouse or hospital admissions have been located, we know from her 1899 court appearance that she had been a regular at the magistrates’ court with appearances for drunkenness and, presumably, related public order offences. By May 1899 she had appeared more than twenty times before the Magistrates.

#### 1899-1902

Minnie O’Shea was regarded as an habitual drunk by the time of her committal to St. Joseph’s in 1899. This allowed the magistrate, Mr. Cluer to commit her for a period of three years in 1899, the maximum term allowed by the law.

<sup>1</sup> *Whitechapel Infirmary Admissions and Discharge Book*, (Book No. 25) London Metropolitan Archives; London, England, Reference Number: STBG/WH/123/027 p. 105, line 4507.

<sup>2</sup> *Whitechapel Infirmary Admissions and Discharge Book*, (Book No. 26) London Metropolitan Archives, London, England, Reference Number: STBG/WH/123/028 p. 71, line 3032.



### 1901 Census Minnie O'Shea in St. Joseph's, Ashford

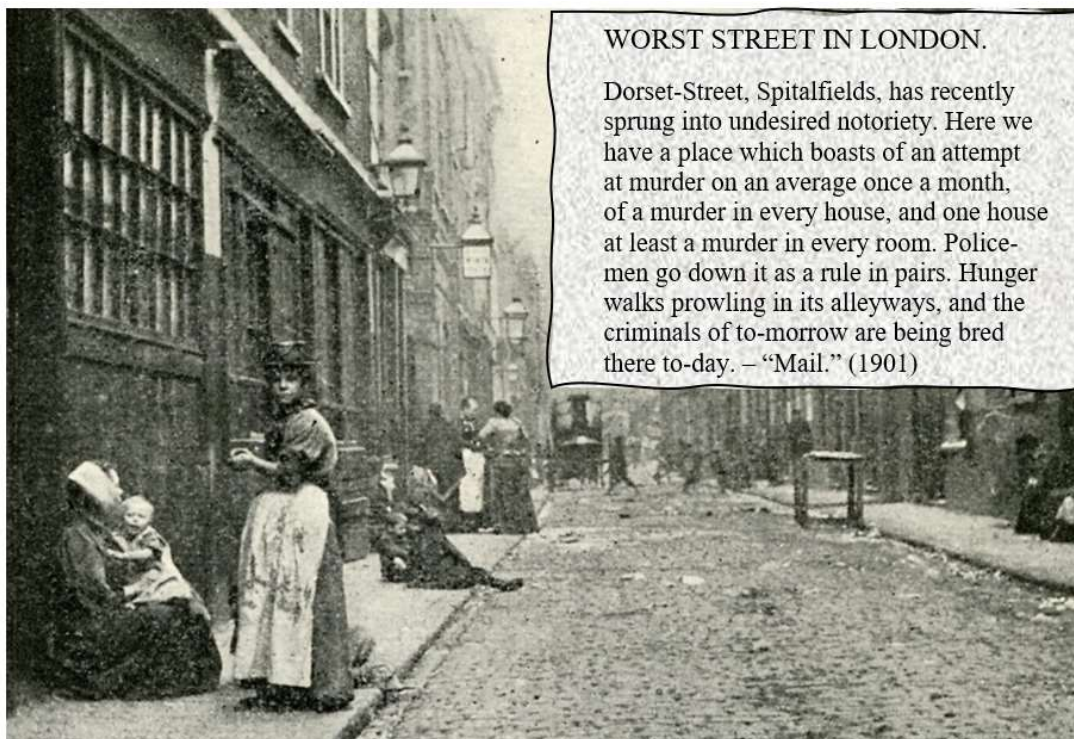
Only one woman called Minnie O'Shea is found at St. Joseph's reformatory on the night of the 1901 census. Despite the difference in occupation between charwoman and tailoress, there seems little doubt that Minnie O'Shea, 45-year-old Irish charwoman, committed to St. Joseph's for three years in May 1899 is anyone other than the Cork-born, widowed tailoress, Minnie O'Shea, aged 46, found in St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory in Ashford almost two years later, during the 1901 census.<sup>1</sup> She was due to remain there for another thirteen months or so, being discharged about May 1902.

### 1902

Some months after Minnie O'Shea's discharge from St. Joseph's, she was admitted to the workhouse, and from there referred to Whitechapel Infirmary on 12 December 1902 with bronchitis (entry 4926).<sup>2</sup> She is recorded as settled in the area for two years. Minnie is a 42-year-old Roman Catholic widow, and these details are consistent with those recorded in the 1901 census. There is, however, a discrepancy between this and other records: she is recorded as the widow of "Thomas", rather than John, but the occupation of tailor remains the same. Her hospital stay ended on 19 December 1902, and when she was discharged, the comment records her to be homeless.

### 1903-1904

After her December 1902 discharge into homelessness, perhaps Minnie sought relief from the workhouse or went back to the streets. Whatever events befell her, nothing is found in the records in 1903 or 1904. Clearly, the records' silence does not tell the whole story.



#### WORST STREET IN LONDON.

Dorset-Street, Spitalfields, has recently sprung into undesired notoriety. Here we have a place which boasts of an attempt at murder on an average once a month, of a murder in every house, and one house at least a murder in every room. Policemen go down it as a rule in pairs. Hunger walks prowling in its alleyways, and the criminals of to-morrow are being bred there to-day. – "Mail." (1901)

Dorset Street (1902)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Telegraph & Courier* (London) 23 May 1899, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Whitechapel Infirmary Admissions and Discharge Book*, (Book No. 34) London Metropolitan Archives, London, England; Reference Number: Reference Number: STBG/WH/123/036, p. 115, line 4926.

<sup>3</sup> 'Dorset Street, 1902', By Jack London - <https://whitechapeljack.com/the-whitechapel-murders/mary-jane-kelly/>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32926255> Text from *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1901, reproduced in *Echo* (London) of the same date, p. 2.

## 1905-1908

By 1905 Minnie again meets the criteria for detention under the Inebriates' Act. Her face is captured when she is photographed and included in the *Habitual Criminals Register* - perhaps the first time in her life that she has posed for a photo.<sup>1</sup> She is wearing a dark-coloured straw hat, and dark jacket or coat with quite stylish leg-o-mutton sleeves. Curls escape from beneath her hat and, as Minnie's lifestyle had no room for curling irons, or ladies' maids, it is likely that her "black hair, turning grey", was naturally curly. Her head is tilted to one side, her lips are slightly parted, one side of her mouth hitched slightly upwards, as if she is biting the inside of her lip. Her blue eyes are hooded but she looks directly at the camera, seemingly with resignation or weariness, perhaps both. She has a double chin and looks older and wearier than her reported age of 46. Like the *Illustrated Police News* of 1890, she is a "little stout woman".<sup>2</sup> The *Register* describes Minnie as 4' 11", and "stout", with a round face, and records her as having a short thick nose with a scar. Other details in her entry tell us that she is an unemployed tailoress, resident in Dorset Street, Spitalfields.<sup>3</sup> Her marital status is not mentioned although it does state that Minnie frequented the Commercial Street, Whitechapel district.

The record notes that Minnie was committed for three years to a "certified inebriate reformatory" on 12 January 1905 at Worship Street, otherwise known as Old Street Police Court. Her committal on this occasion warrants no newspaper coverage and it is unknown where she was sent. It is possible that she was returned to St. Joseph's Reformatory to be part of "Our Lady's Class", operating the laundry on behalf of the nuns.<sup>4</sup> No newspaper entries or workhouse or hospital admissions are found for the twelve months after her discharge in 1908 but it seems that by 1909 she is, again, homeless.

## 1909-1912

On 10 February 1909, 50-year-old unemployed tailoress, Minnie O'Shea was convicted at Old-Street court and committed to a "certified inebriate reformatory" for a further three years.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that this is the same Minnie who was convicted in 1905 – the entry references her previous conviction (No. 727). Her residence at the time of her conviction is not known. In today's language we might say, she was of "no fixed abode". Her picture and details again appear in the *Habitual Criminals Register*. While her physical description is much the same as in 1905, it is clear from comparing these photographs taken four years apart that Minnie has lost some weight – her face once "round" is now "oval" and her "short, thick nose" is now "straight, short", but in other respects she remains "stout". Minnie is wearing a dark-coloured straw hat similar to the one she wore in 1905, but this time is wearing a woollen shawl or scarf, wrapped tightly across her throat. No coat is visible and, although it may simply be covered by her shawl, it could have been stolen, or she may have pawned it. While her entry in 1905 notes that Commercial Street was her usual area, the police note in 1909 that she was now found regularly in nearby Brick-lane. Again, like the 1905 entry, no destination is recorded, however, a woman matching Minnie's age, marital status, occupation, and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers 1905*. National Archives (U.K.) Metropolitan Police: Criminal Record Office: MEPO6/79, Prisoner no. 727.

<sup>2</sup> *Illustrated Police News*, 18 January 1890, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1901, reproduced in *Echo* (London) of the same date, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Lost Hospitals of London*, 'Ecclesfield (including St Joseph's Reformatory)', <https://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/ecclesfield.html>

<sup>5</sup> National Archives (U.K.) Metropolitan Police: Criminal Record Office: *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers*. 1909 MEPO6/83, Prisoner no. 1730 (identical with No. 727).

place of birth is found in the 1911 census in the Eastern Counties Institution for Persons Requiring Care and Control, located in Kenninghall, Thetford, Norfolk.

### 1911 Census, Minnie O'Shea in Eastern Counties Institution, Norfolk

Minnie is recorded as being a 51-year-old, widowed, former tailoress, born in Cork, Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The Eastern Counties Institution, where she was found on that night in April 1911, was located on the site of the former Guiltcross Workhouse in Kenninghall, Norfolk.<sup>2</sup> Her residence here in an institution for persons requiring "care and control" is perhaps a sign that Minnie is now too unruly to be managed by the nuns at St. Joseph's, who seem to have sought a more compliant inmate. Whether Minnie's behaviour has truly changed, or attitudes have simply hardened towards her and women like her, is not immediately evident.

Although no marriage record was found for Minnie, the 1911 record helpfully notes that she had been married 10 years, presumably before her husband had died, and had given birth to three children, none of whom were still living. The ten-year duration of Minnie's marriage may explain why it has been so difficult to find Minnie with husband and children in census records. A lot can happen in the ten years between one census and the next, including marriage, and the births and deaths of three children and a husband.

### 1912-1915

About eight months after her confinement in Thetford ended in February 1912, Minnie was again before Old-Street court. She was committed on 25 October 1912 to a further three years in a "certified inebriate reformatory".<sup>3</sup> Again, there is no doubt that this is the same person: the record explicitly references her committals in 1905 and 1909. Now aged 53, she is of no fixed abode, but frequents the Spitalfields district. These photos show a pursed-lipped Minnie staring at the camera. Unlike her earlier entries in this collection, she no longer wears a shawl or hat, which allows her fringe, and curls to be seen. As with other entries in these registers, her destination is not recorded. She may have been returned to Thetford, although since 1911 it had changed its mission from reforming inebriates to accommodating children and others considered to have difficulties caused by psychiatric illness, or brain damage, or other poorly understood disabilities and medical conditions.

### 1915 -1916

Released in the winter of 1915, Minnie was now in her mid-late fifties but was probably older. She had been incarcerated almost constantly since 1899. When not detained behind institutional walls, Minnie was homeless, likely living hand to mouth and dependent on charitable and philanthropic organisations for food, shelter, and clothing. Whatever the means, Minnie survived that first winter, although it seems that her freedom was short-lived. Sometime between her release in October 1915 and February 1916, Minnie was committed to Holloway prison. No records or newspaper accounts have been located to understand the circumstances, and her presence there only becomes apparent when records of Bromley Hospital are examined.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1911 *Census of England and Wales*, Eastern Counties Institution Of National Institutions For Persons Requiring Care And Control, Kenninghall, Thetford, Norfolk RG14 11485 Schedule 9999.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, 'Guiltcross, Norfolk', <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Guiltcross/>

<sup>3</sup> National Archives (U.K.) Metropolitan Police: Criminal Record Office: *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers*. 1912 MEPO6/86, Prisoner no. 1730 (identical with No. 727 and No. 1730).

## March 1916

On, 3 March 1916, Minnie O'Shea, widow of John a tailor, and born 1857, is found in the records of Bromley House, in Tower Hamlets.<sup>1</sup> The reason for her admission on this occasion is not recorded but she was referred by the governor of Holloway Prison, Dr. Robert Paton. It is likely that she was in failing health, requiring care beyond the means or willingness of the prison authorities. Minnie's diet is assigned as "class 3" designated for women who are not in work.<sup>2</sup> The record notes that she is chargeable to Ratcliffe parish, formerly part of Stepney union.

## July 1916

On 27 July 1916, the Bromley records note a change of diet for Minnie to "class 4", a diet intended for infirm women not employed in work.<sup>3</sup>

## November 1916

The Bromley records note a further change of diet for Minnie on 24 November 1916.<sup>4</sup> She is now assigned a "class eleven" diet. Peter Higgenbotham's excellent website does not shed light on who might be designated this classification, but in light of events in the next few days, we may assume it was simply water, or perhaps bread soaked in milk. On Saturday 25 November, Minnie is recorded as having a "class ten" diet.<sup>5</sup> On Wednesday, 29 November 1916 at 4.45 a.m. Minnie died.<sup>6</sup> The record notes her class ten diet, that her clothing is number 343, and she was chargeable to Ratcliffe parish.

The bleakness of these entries does not capture the rituals of death and dying. As a Catholic, a chaplain of her religion would have attended to give her the final rites of that church, "Extreme Unction". It is likely that she heard prayers familiar from her childhood, "Hail Mary", "Our Father", and perhaps they brought her comfort as the priest uttered the words specific to these last and final rites of her childhood faith:

"By this holy anointing, and by His most tender mercy, may the Lord forgive thee whatever thou hast done amiss by sight, hearing, smell, speech, taste, touch, and walk."<sup>7</sup>

Unlike others who died in Bromley, Minnie was not buried "by friends", instead Minnie O'Shea, a 59-year-old Roman Catholic, was buried on 1 December 1916 at Leytonstone, probably a pauper's plot at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Cemetery in Walthamstow.<sup>8</sup> Her cause of death is recorded as cardiac disease, myocardial degeneration, bronchitis and general oedema. Minnie had been admitted from Holloway Prison and was formerly of 2 Flower Dean Street, in Whitechapel - a street once described

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bromley House: Admission and Discharge Register, 1916*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: STBG/L/134/24, image 133 of 822.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, 'Workhouse Food' <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/food.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> *Bromley House: Admission and Discharge Register, 1916*, Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*, 'Workhouse Food' <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/food.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> *Bromley House: Admission and Discharge Register, 1916*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: STBG/L/134/27, image 740 of 822.

<sup>5</sup> *Bromley House: Admission and Discharge Register, 1916*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: STBG/L/134/27, image 742 of 822.

<sup>6</sup> *Bromley House: Admission and Discharge Register, 1916*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Reference Number: STBG/L/134/27, image 752 of 822.

<sup>7</sup> Virgo Sacrata, 'Extreme Unction: Anointing of the Sick in the Light of Catholic Faith', <https://www.virgosacrata.com/anointing-of-the-sick.html>

<sup>8</sup> Stepney Union, *Register of Deaths in the Bromley Workhouse*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: Stbg/L/137/03, image 129 of 195.



as "the foulest and most dangerous street in the whole metropolis" because of its links with the so-called "Jack the Ripper".<sup>1</sup>

Minnie O'Shea's death is recorded in the Poplar registration district in the final quarter of 1916 on page 544 of volume 1c.

### Conclusion

Minnie's trail has taken us from an 1891 census record in Holloway Prison to her burial in December 1916. Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it has not been possible to take her story back to her birthplace in Cork, nor has it been possible to identify where and when she married or the names of the children she bore and buried. Minnie, the little Irish woman who lost husband, children, and home before she turned 50, is buried in a pauper's grave in Leytonstone. Spare a thought for her and her story when you're nearby.

---

<sup>1</sup> This street no longer exists but in earlier maps it ran between Brick Lane and Commercial Street.

## Sources

### Primary Sources

*1891 Census of England and Wales*, Her Majesty's Prison Holloway, Islington, London, Middlesex RG12 150 folio 132.

*1901 Census of England and Wales*, St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex RG13 1171 folios 12-13.

*1911 Census of England and Wales*, Eastern Counties Institution of National Institutions For Persons Requiring Care And Control, Kenninghall, Thetford, Norfolk RG14 11485 RG78/626.

*Bromley House: Admission and Discharge Register, 1916*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Retrieved from Ancestry.com. *London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

- Reference Number: STBG/L/134/24, image 133 of 822 (microfilm).
- Reference Number: STBG/L/134/26, image 457 of 822 (microfilm).
- Reference Number: STBG/L/134/27, image 740 of 822 (microfilm).
- Reference Number: STBG/L/134/27, image 742 of 822 (microfilm).
- Reference Number: STBG/L/134/27, image 752 of 822 (microfilm)

National Archives (U.K.) Metropolitan Police: Criminal Record Office:

- *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers 1905*. National Archives (U.K.) Metropolitan Police: Criminal Record Office: MEPO6/79, Prisoner no. 727.
- *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers*. 1909 MEPO6/83, Prisoner no. 1730 (identical with No. 727).
- *Habitual Criminals Registers and Miscellaneous Papers*. 1912 MEPO6/86, Prisoner no. 1730 (identical with No. 727 and No. 1730).

National Library of Ireland, *Catholic Parish Registers: St. Mary's, Cork city, Baptisms Nov. 10, 1852 – July 4, 1869*, p. 100; Microfilm 04783 / 02

<https://registers.nli.ie/registers/vtls000633160#page/1/mode/1up>

Stepney Union, *Register of Deaths in the Bromley Workhouse*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: Stbg/L/137/03, image 129 of 195 (microfilm). Ancestry.com. *London, England, Church of England Deaths and Burials, 1813-2003* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.

*The Post Office London Directory for 1895 – Part 2: Street Directory*, p. 226. Published online by the University of Leicester, Special Collections

<https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/27291/rec/7>

*Whitechapel Infirmary Admissions and Discharge Book*, London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; Accessed at Ancestry.com. *Workhouses and Institutions, 1894-1895 London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921* [database on-line].

- Book No. 25, Reference Number: STBG/WH/123/027 p. 105, line 4507.
- Book No. 26, Reference Number: STBG/WH/123/028 p. 71, line 3032.

*Whitechapel Infirmary Admissions and Discharge Book*, London Metropolitan Archives, London, England; Book No. 34, Reference Number: STBG/WH/123/036, p. 115, line 4926. *Workhouses and Institutions 1902*, (Stepney, Tower Hamlets). Accessed at Ancestry.com. *London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

## Newspapers

*Daily Telegraph & Courier* (London) 21 May 1899, p. 10.

*Daily Telegraph & Courier* (London) 23 May 1899, p. 9.

*Ealing Gazette and West Middlesex Observer*, 12 August 1899, p. 2.

*Echo* (London), 18 Jan. 1895, p. 1.

*Echo* (London), 16 July 1901, p. 2.

*Echo* (London), 3 September 1901, p. 1.

*Illustrated Police News*, 18 January 1890, p. 3.

*Islington Gazette*, 20 April 1891, p. 3.

*Islington Gazette*, 26 May 1891, p. 3.

*Sheffield Evening Telegraph* 22 May 1899, p. 5.

*Shields Daily News*, 20 July 1882, p. 4.

## Other sources

### Maps

<https://www.theundergroundmap.com/>

### Miscellaneous

Colum, Padraic, 'Old Woman of the Road' in *Wild Earth and Other Poems* (New York, 1916), pp 14-15. Retrieved from Hathi Trust Digital Library

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t5k93t81p&view=1up&seq=25>

McWade, Robert, *The uncrowned king : the life and public services of Hon. Charles Stewart Parnell*, (Philadelphia, 1891).

### Photographs

Jack London: Dorset Street, 1902', By Jack London - <https://whitechapeljack.com/the-whitechapel-murders/mary-jane-kelly/> , Public Domain,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32926255>

### Websites

FindMyPast, 'Ireland Roman Catholic Parish Baptisms'

FreeBMD, Civil Registration index of births, marriages and deaths for England and Wales

<https://www.freebmd.org.uk/>

Irishgenealogy.ie 'Church Records', <https://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/>

*Lost Hospitals of London*, 'Ecclesfield (including St Joseph's Reformatory)',  
<https://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/ecclesfield.html>

Rootsireland.ie 'Baptismal/Birth Records for Co. Cork (North & East)',  
<https://rootsireland.ie/corknortheast/>

Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*:

- 'Workhouse Food' <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/life/food.shtml>.
- 'Guiltcross, Norfolk', <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/Guiltcross/>