

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written in August 2023 as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who enrolled in the first two cohorts [1908 & 1909] of Trainee Teachers at the Cheshire Country Training College, Crewe [CCTCC]

Ethel May Bayley's Story

Ethel May Bayley was born in Chesham, Buckinghamshire on the 13th of May 1892.¹ Her family seemed to originate in Macclesfield which is where she spent most of her life.

As early as the 18th century, Macclesfield was renowned for its silk production and soon became one of the largest producers of silk in the world. As prevalent as weaving was in the town, it notoriously exploited child labour. Many families sought better education for their children and therefore, to pursue a career in teaching for young unmarried ladies became largely respectable and actively encouraged.

Ethel's maternal grandfather James Leigh listed his trade in the 1851 census² as a hand loom silk weaver which would have been a very common occupation in the area at that time, but

¹ CCTCC Student Registers (1908-1935) CCTCC Archives-C/O The Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe

² 1851 census C/O Ancestry.com

by 1861³, his daughter Martha is listed as being a pupil teacher. Another daughter, Sarah appears in the 1871 census⁴ also as a pupil teacher.



Ethel May Bayley 1892-1974

In 1901⁵ the England census shows Sarah residing with her sister Priscilla Martin, and 4 children, Alice, Thomas, Winifred and Ethel May. The address given is 128 Burton Road, Macclesfield.

It is interesting to note that both Sarah and Priscilla have their occupations listed as retired School mistresses and that Priscilla aged 64 is 20 years older than her sister Sarah. Both are widowed despite Priscilla being 5 years older than her husband was.

Priscilla is listed in the England census of 1871 and 1881⁶ as being married to Arthur Martin, a schoolmaster and she appeared to work alongside him but I have so far been unable to source which school they taught at.

With Priscilla being significantly older than her sisters Martha and Sarah, it is possible that by marrying a school master, this may have encouraged her younger siblings to pursue the same career path.

³ 1861 census C/O Ancestry.com

⁴ 1871 census C/O Ancestry.com

⁵ 1901 census C/O Ancestry.com

⁶ 1871 and 1881 census C/O Ancestry.com

Also, the census of 1891⁷ shows that Priscilla is living with her mother Harriet in Macclesfield and are both shown as “Living on her own means” possibly meaning that Priscilla is either still working as a teacher or retired and living comfortably.

Ethel May Bayley enrolled in Cheshire County Training school on the 15th of September 1909.⁸ Following the same career path as both her parents and 2 aunts was probably to be expected. Especially as her 2 sisters also chose to become teachers, there were few other choices for someone her age except marriage. The college prospectus of proposed studies included history, geography, mathematics, science and physical activity. Other requirements which appear to be unusual include Greek and Roman mythology and that reading, and recitation will be taught and independently inspected!

After Ethel graduated as a teacher in 1911, it is unknown at which school she initially was employed but by 1917, she became the press secretary of the Macclesfield branch for the “Federation of Women Teachers,”⁹ having previously joined as a member.

The current topic focused on equal pay and at the annual meeting of 1919, spokeswoman Miss Ward stated that women must “take their share of in the reconstruction of national life,” by “not resting on their oars until women were enfranchised on the same basis as men.”¹⁰ These were powerful words in 1919, but with the end of WW1, women had shown that they were capable and willing to challenge unfair and unethical employment standards.

By 1925, Ethel was appointed as the recreation secretary of the local Teachers Association and that she currently was employed as a teacher at Athey Street school in Macclesfield.¹¹

Despite Ethel’s involvement with official bodies regarding teachers’ salaries, being unmarried with no dependants meant that she was free to spend her well earned money as she pleased, even though the 1939 census shows she still lived with her mother in Macclesfield.¹²

In 1939, an ill-timed holiday may have caused her great concern. Boarding the M.S Dempo,¹³ on 23rd of June with friend Josephine Bianchi to Marseilles in France, she enjoyed all the second-class luxury facilities that the cruise liner had to offer.

After arriving in France, Ethel probably felt the same fear and unease as the rest of Europe with the looming shadow of war. Arriving back on the 17th of July 1939¹⁴, only 6 weeks before England declared war on Germany was obviously a wise decision and 1 year later the same ship which had ferried her in such comfortable style was torpedoed by the Germans and sank to the bottom of the ocean a mere 30 miles off the coast of Algeria.

⁷ 1891 census C/O Ancestry.com

⁸ Information received from Family History Society of Cheshire

⁹ Macclesfield Times Newspaper 9th February 1917

¹⁰ Macclesfield Times Newspaper 7th February 1919

¹¹ Macclesfield Times Newspaper 4th December 1925

¹² 1939 Census C/O Ancestry.com

¹³ Passenger Records C/O Ancestry.com

¹⁴ Passenger Records C/O Ancestry.com

I can only hope that for the next few years, the war did not affect her life too much as Macclesfield was lucky enough not to be bombed during that time.

Ethel continued to teach and remained unmarried until her death in 1974.¹⁵

Narrative by Shelly Matthews

¹⁵ England and Wales Death Index C/O Ancestry.com