

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.

Annie Banks' Story

Annie's life is extensively documented through newspaper reports and the various criminal records available to the historian. But researching her life leaves as many questions as it provides answers. To start with, what was her real name? Over the years she was variously known as Annie Banks, Annie Williams, Annie Mullins, Annie Brooks, Annie Donovan and Ellen Donovan. (Helpfully some of the records note the different aliases, so we can be reasonably certain that they all relate to the same individual.) In some instances she was referred to as a widow, but it is unclear which, if any, of these names was her married name—never mind who she married— or which name she was born with. Her year of birth inferred from the ages given in different records ranges from 1850 to 1862, and no death has been located either.

Records show that she was frequently of 'no fixed abode' or homeless, and on the occasions where she is documented as having a roof over her head it was either that of a prison cell, a reformatory or a lodging house in one of London's most deprived areas, Spitalfields.

Some sources refer to Annie having committed well over thirty separate offences, nearly all of which involved drunkenness. This record, from 1886, typifies her behaviour:^{1,2}

"Annie Donovan, thirty-seven, of no occupation, was brought up for judgment as an incorrigible rogue and vagabond. Prisoner was apprehended in Kennington-road for begging, Mr Richard Gomm, chief officer of the Mendicity Society, proved a number of convictions against the prisoner dating from 1871, amounting to thirty-seven altogether, mostly for begging, assault, and wilful damage. He added that the prisoner was a most violent-tempered woman. On leaving prison she invariably commenced begging, and when she got any money she spent it in drink. After spending all her money she was in the habit of asking for drink on credit, and if refused she took her revenge in smashing everything in the bar that she could lay her hands on."

On other occasions she caused a public nuisance when drunk. In 1890, Annie Banks (aka Annie Mullins and Annie Brooks) appeared at Marlborough Street Police Court having been charged with being drunk and disorderly in Margaret Street. The newspaper report reads as follows:³

"The little woman, after being bundled neck-and-crop out of a public house, wandered about, and [...] took up her quarters on a doorstep

in Margaret Street, and hallooed and shouted so loudly that the whole neighbourhood was disturbed, and many of the inhabitants complained of their annoyance.”

She was fined 10 shillings, or 14 days in prison. There are further reports of similar offences at this time; in some she was discharged and others she was fined a few shillings. Some newspaper reports indicate that Annie was ‘of no fixed abode’ but one, from 1893, states that she lived in a common lodging house in Dorset Street, Spitalfields.⁴ A search for this address on Google Maps proved fruitless, but a more general search turned up a Wikipedia page describing Dorset Street as reputedly “the worst street in London”.⁵ What is more, it was the location of a murder committed by one of London’s most notorious criminals, Jack the Ripper. In the wake of this it was renamed Duval Street.

Several newspaper reports refer to Annie’s occupation as a flower-seller. While this may conjure up images of an Eliza Doolittle-type figure in the reader’s mind, the reality was far less romantic. In 1894 Annie was charged, along with another person, with disorderly conduct and begging of foot passengers at Green Lanes.⁶ Crucially, this reference reveals the nature of Annie’s occupation, as it states that she was selling ‘groundsell’ [sic]. Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) is a common weed of disturbed ground and roadside verges—hardly the type of flower to grace a vase on the table. A mid-nineteenth century survey of the occupations of London’s poor indicates that groundsel and chickweed were fed to small birds that were kept as pets:⁷

“They’re tradespeople and gentlefolks’ houses together that I sells to—such as keeps canaries, or goldfinches, or linnets. I charge 1/2d. a bunch for chickweed and grunsell together.”

By 1900 Annie had received so many convictions for being drunk and disorderly that she was admitted to the Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women on 29 September 1900. Her preliminary examination on arrival described her as “miserably dirty”, suffering from chronic bronchitis and weighing just 87½ pounds (barely 40kg).⁸ Favouring ale, her drinking spells were frequent and long, leading her to be violent when intoxicated. Unable to read or write, Annie had “always drank from a child”. She had no siblings and her parents were both dead, her father having died “drinking whiskey for a wager”.

While no newspaper report of the conviction that led to her being sent to Farmfield has been located, her admission record notes that she had already received 35 previous prison sentences along with four other non-custodial ones. On this occasion she had been charged at Bow Street with being drunk and guilty of riotous behaviour. She remained at Farmfield for eighteen months and was enumerated there in the 1901 Census.⁹

In the year Annie was released from Farmfield new legislation was passed aimed at controlling public drunkenness – the Licensing Act 1902.¹⁰ One of the provisions was to ban those convicted of drunkenness from public houses, which was implemented by means of the local police force circulating what was known as a ‘blacklist’. Landlords were subject to a fine of £10 for a first offence of serving alcohol to anyone listed, while those people on the blacklist trying to buy alcohol could expect a fine of 10 shillings. Sadly, Annie’s time at Farmfield did not reform her drinking habit, and in 1903 she was back in court charged with drunkenness.¹¹

“Annie Banks, a flower seller, when told that she too would be placed on the black list, begged the magistrate with tears not to adopt such a course and promised that she would “never, never drink any more”.

Mr Plowden [the magistrate]: I don’t in the least understand your agitation. You are evidently frightened of the word “black”.

The prisoner (still crying): I am black enough as it is, sir.

Mr Plowden: Well, this is really a whitening and purifying process, which is to last three years.”

A few months later Annie was back in court. The heading of the newspaper article was “black list no preventive”:¹²

“Annie Brooks—otherwise Banks—45, flower seller, with no home, was charged with being drunk and incapable at Clarence Road.

The prisoner admitted having had a drop of rum, but denied being drunk. She also denied the gaoler’s allegations that she was on the black list; and when her portrait was shown her she said, “That’s not me!”

Mr Marsham—Let me look at it.

The Magistrate looked at the picture, and said there was no doubt that the portrait, especially the full-faced one, was her.

The police said the prisoner had been many times at this Court; she was put on the list at Marlborough-street, and been bound over at Bow-street.

Mr Marsham fined her 10s, or seven days.

The photo that the Magistrate would have been shown can be seen in the Register of Habitual Criminals.¹³

Annie's offending continued, and on 29 October 1904 she was convicted at Bow Street of drunkenness in locations including Covent Garden, Primrose Hill and Haverstock Hill. She was committed to a certified inebriate reformatory for three years.¹⁴ Once again this proved to be no deterrent to further offending, and in 1909 Annie Mullins (alias Banks) appeared at Tottenham Petty Sessions charged with drunkenness. As with the previous case, she was committed to a certified inebriate reformatory for three years.¹⁵ This time we know that Annie was sent to Brentry Certified Inebriates' Reformatory, Westbury-on-Trym near Bristol, since we find her enumerated there in the 1911 Census.¹⁶

Annie seemed incapable of turning her life around, and on 30 January 1913 she was again convicted at Bow Street of being drunk in Holborn and New Oxford Street and committed to a certified inebriate reformatory—this time for two years.¹⁷

The last known record that has been located for Annie is for a Poor Law Hospital Admission. Annie, by this time aged 70, was admitted to the Ladbroke Grove Hospital on 6 March 1916.¹⁸ She was described as a hawker with no friends or family. No further cases of her offending appear in the newspapers after this time but no obvious death record has been located.

Addendum

The records of Annie's convictions show that she frequented many parts of London. This map has been created showing [Annie's London haunts](#), with orange pins indicating the approximate locations of the crimes she was convicted of and the purple pins the addresses where she is known to have lived. It has been compiled using the records of her court appearances, in some

cases supported by checking locations using historical maps on the National Library of Scotland website.¹⁹ To provide some context, Edmonton is some eight miles north of Spitalfields while Westminster is around four miles to the west.

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¹ *Illustrated Police News*, 16 January 1886, page 2

² A Mendicity Society was a charitable organisation which worked to suppress street begging, which was viewed by the middle classes as spreading disease, encouraging immorality and threatening the incentive to honest hard work. While other charities often excluded street beggars from their work, these societies specifically focused on the 'mendicant poor'.

³ *London Evening Standard*, 2 August 1890, page 6

⁴ *Islington Gazette*, 27 October 1893, page

⁵ [Dorset Street \(Spitalfields\) - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ *London Evening Standard*, 17 February 1894 page 1

⁷ *London Labour and the London Poor, Volume 1*, Henry Mayhew, 1861. [TEI | London Labour and the London Poor, Volume 1 | ID: 73666f96f | Tufts Digital Library](#)

⁸ Industrial Farm Colony for Inebriate Women and Babies Haven, later Lady Henry Somerset Homes or Children's Village Homes (case 19201): correspondence and papers; A/FWA/C/S/255/001, Register 15, London Metropolitan Archives

⁹ Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey. 1901 England Census RG13 629 folios 151-152

¹⁰ [Licensing Act 1902 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ *Bournemouth Daily Echo*, 29 January 1903, page 3

¹² *Islington Gazette*, 11 May 1903, page 2

¹³ UK Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes 1834-1914, MEP06 77 45, 1903, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁴ UK Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes 1834-1914, MEP06 78 247, 1904, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁵ UK Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes 1834-1914, MEP06 83 78, 1909, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁶ Brentry Certified Inebriates' Reformatory, Westbury-on-Trym, Gloucestershire. 1911 England Census RG14, Piece 15158, Schedule 67

¹⁷ UK Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes 1834-1914, MEP06 87 31, 1913, accessed via www.ancestry.co.uk

¹⁸ London, England, Poor Law Hospital Admissions and Discharges 1842-1918; record for Annie Banks

¹⁹ [Ordnance Survey Maps - National Library of Scotland \(nls.uk\)](#)