

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]

Bessie Jones' Story

Bessie Jones was born in Upton near Birkenhead in what was then Cheshire (now the Wirral) on the 9th April 1891¹ and baptised on the 24th May². Her mother was Catherine Ann (nee Bailey) and her father Thomas Jones. In the 1901 census³ the family was living at 1 Rock Bank in the town and Thomas was a domestic gardener. There were 3 other daughters living there at the time – Margaret, May, and Mary (aka Ethel Mary or Mary Ethel). Going back ten years to the 1891 census⁴ (when Bessie was in the womb but about to appear) we find Thomas and Catherine living in rooms over the stables of Salacres House, a large mansion constructed in 1863 and lived in by Ellen the recently widowed wife of James

¹ 1939 Register

² Bishop's Transcript via Ancestry.com

³ 1901 Census via Ancestry.com

⁴ 1891 census via Ancestry.com

Ratchford de Wolf, a shipowner, and her family and servants. Thomas was a gardener with a son – Thomas – and a daughter Margaret. Why they moved to Rock Bank I don't know but Ellen died in 1896 and the house sold. Maybe Thomas and Catherine moved on at that time.



Saltacres House

Source: <https://www.upton.cx/index.php/buildings/the-salacres>

Let's move forward in time again to the 1911 census. Thomas, still a gardener, and Catherine are still living at Rock Bank with daughters May and Mary (Ethel Mary/Mary Ethel). They have 5 rooms which is large for a working family at the time. Daughter Margaret has married and Thomas hard to trace. Bessie, however, having attended Wallasey High School⁵ and gained her Preliminary Certificate and Oxford Senior Local⁶ is now to be found at 59 Brooklyn Street in Crewe where she is a boarder, along with a Bessie Symons, at the home of William Williams and his wife Catherine. The two boarders are described as Students (teaching)⁷. In fact they are enrolled at the Cheshire County Training College, Crewe [CCTCC]. Close by are other students who are attending the college and boarding out. The College had 52 rooms allotted to its women

⁵ CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe

⁶ CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe

⁷ 1911 census via Ancestry.com

students⁸ but that was at the cost of £10 annually. If a student boarded out women were awarded a grant of £20 per annum.



Image of Bessie Jones [1911]⁹

A pause now to consider how Bessie came to be enrolled. This is speculation. For a girl to be allowed to leave home and attend further education at this time is unusual. Her father was a working man, he had one son but mainly daughters. To put them to work to bring in income to support the family would have been the usual route, and a route taken by many families right up to the 2nd World

⁸ 'Cheshire County Training College, Crewe, Prospectus 1908-1914' Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe

⁹ Image, 1911, CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe.

War and beyond. Also, the idea of a girl gaining further education when she might be expected to marry, bear children, and stay at home may have been seen as a waste of time and effort for some. But for this family Bessie was allowed to go. Was her father Thomas far sighted? Was her mother Catherine wanting more for her daughter than she achieved? Was it Bessie's own force of will that made her dream happen? We will never know but there she is in the 1911 census having enrolled at the recently opened CCTCC on the 15th September 1909.

Not much can be found about her time there. She would have studied a wide range of subjects both academic and practical, been encouraged to listen to the latest theories on educational practice, take part in physical exercise and join the various on a campus clubs. I refer you to the Cheshire County Training College, Crewe, Prospectus 1908-1914.

Bessie left in 1911 after her final examination¹⁰ and returned to her roots on what is now (since 1974) the Wirral. The 1921 census¹¹ shows her back with her parents, still at 1 Rock Bank. Thomas is working as a gardener to Joseph and Ruth Bibby who own a mock Tudor mansion in Bidston, Catherine is on home duties, Ethel Mary their daughter works in the iconic Liver Buildings in Liverpool as a shorthand typist for the soap company Lever Brothers, and Bessie is a schoolteacher at Hoylake Parade Higher Elementary School on the Wirral.

The Parade School, was opened in January 1910 and built on sand hills facing the promenade in Hoylake. Mr Humphrey Lewis, formerly of the Llangollen

¹⁰ CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History of Cheshire, Crewe

¹¹ 1921 census via Find My Past

Council School was the headmaster. For 60 odd years the Parade served the community until a merger left the Parade as an annexe of Hilbre School. In turn that school decamped to West Kirby leaving the Parade as a community centre. Sadly, many of the records from the early days of The Parade were lost during the move from Cheshire to the Wirral in 1974¹².



The Parade School

Source: <http://www.hoylakejunction.com/history/hoylake-parade-school>

We know from the 21st Anniversary Book¹³ of the CCTCC that Bessie was single in 1929 and the fact she never married is confirmed by the next trace of Bessie in the 1939¹⁴ register taken just before war broke out.

Bessie, single, is living at 9 Church Road in Birkenhead with her widowed mother and her unmarried sister Ethel M. / Mary E. who is still a shorthand writer. Bessie is an assistant schoolmistress. But it is what is written in the margin that is so interesting. The entry is photographed to show the address, name, date of birth

¹² [History of Hoylake Parade School \(hoylakejunction.com\)](http://www.hoylakejunction.com)

¹³ *1908-1929, Souvenir of the 21st Anniversary, CCTCC, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History of Cheshire, Crewe*

¹⁴ 1939 Register via Ancestry.com

and occupation details so part of this entry falls off the edge but you can read “volunteered for part time se...as ambulance attendant A.R...”. Underneath is ditto to show that sister Ethel Mary has done the same. One can extrapolate from this entry that “A.R” probably refers to A.R.P. i.e. the Air Raid Precautions which was an umbrella term for a group of organisations that were assembled to counter a threat to civilian life during bombing, a circumstance expected by the authorities after the bombing in the Spanish Civil war. The organisation included wardens, ambulance crew, messengers and such who liaised with the police and fire services. Bessy and her sister were probably recruited via the Women’s Voluntary Service.

The damage the Wirral suffered in the war was considerable. The Luftwaffe concentrated on targeting Birkenhead docks but bombs fell elsewhere on the peninsular including one on Hoylake itself. And the bombing went on for months and months with great loss of life and massive damage to property. Bessie and her sister’s contribution must have been vital. One can only imagine what they saw.¹⁵ And let’s remember that in 1939 the family lived in Birkenhead itself.

There is no trace of Bessie after that. Online newspapers provide no clues (to date), and other online sources have proven negative. However, for future research, it may be possible to search the archives at Liverpool War Museum, for example in the recently donated Air Raid Warden Archive¹⁶, or the archives of the Women’s Voluntary Service¹⁷. Bessie may lie there undiscovered for now.

¹⁵ www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/whatson/merseyside-maritime-museum/exhibition/spirit-of-blitz

¹⁶ [Amazing Air Raid Warden Archive – Western Approaches \(liverpoolwarmuseum.co.uk\)](http://AmazingAirRaidWardenArchive-WesternApproaches(liverpoolwarmuseum.co.uk))

¹⁷ www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/about-us/our-history/heritage-collection/

So now to the final act. Bessie died in 1967 aged 76¹⁸. It was an age of the Mersey beat, the mini skirt, the Beatles, the hippy generation proclaiming love and peace, and a new generation immune to the hardship of the war. I wonder what Bessie thought of it all?

Narrative by Jacqui Kenton

¹⁸ GRO Oct-Dec 10a 105