

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written, in April 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who can be found as prisoners or staff in Dorchester Prison in the census returns, or who appear in the prison's admission and discharge registers.*

## **Kate Coombs' Story**

Kate appears on the 1881 Census in Dorchester Prison, listed as being unmarried, aged 19 years, a prostitute from Brighton, Sussex. She was serving an 18-month sentence for felony (robbery), considered a 'serious crime' in Victorian England. She attended the Winchester Winter Assizes in 1879, charged with administering a drug to steal from the person. This was not her first conviction, so she was sentenced to 18 months hard labour in Dorchester Prison, one of the prisons that accepted female convicts.

Kate was born in Falmer, Brighton in January 1862 to James Coombs, a farm labourer and his wife, Sarah, (nee Budd). The family were living in Falmer, a village cut in half by the A27 today, with North Falmer on the site of Sussex University and South Falmer on the site of the University of Brighton. The main form of agriculture in the

area was sheep farming, and her father could have been a shepherd. The family appeared to regularly move around the area covered by the Downs, which stretch from Eastbourne to Winchester. Kate was baptised aged 4 years on the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1866, daughter of James and Sarah Coombs. Her father was a labourer, working in Portslade, just along the coast from Brighton.

In the 1871 Census, the family are living in Aldington, which is near Chichester, Sussex. Her father is again described as an agricultural labourer (ag lab), born in Hadley, Hampshire. Her mother was born in Pultham, Surrey and her two brothers, both working on the land, were born in Hadley, Hampshire. Kate, aged 9 was shown as a scholar, so she did have some education, which may have resulted from the 1870 Education Act being implemented. However, it is not known how much schooling Kate had, as she may have been working on the land, with her mother, prior to this.

We next find Kate back in Hove, a 16-year-old servant, who was charged with stealing 2 bags and the sum of £3 9s 6d from her employer, Mrs Collis at the home of George Collis on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 1876. She was tried at Hove magistrates court before Colonels Penton and Hansard, but on the 9<sup>th</sup> March her case was transferred to the Sussex Assizes, held at Lewes. On this occasion, she was acquitted of larceny and discharged, possibly Mrs Collis came over as confused or there was not enough evidence, or as Kate had already spent 6 weeks in custody, the court felt that for a first offence this was enough. It was interesting that the case was transferred to the Assizes, as longer sentences could be given and the seriousness of the case may have warranted the move.

As a result of this case, she might have found it difficult to find work again as a servant. It is unlikely that she would have received a reference from Mrs Collis and Kate may not have found another job as a result. A couple of months later, Kate is again in trouble. She was charged at Brighton Quarter Sessions with Larceny.

Kate and a man named John Smith, who was much older than her were both charged with robbing James Clapshoe, a fruiterer (greengrocer). Kate was charged with stealing his watch on the 8<sup>th</sup> April and John Smith with receiving the watch knowing it to have been stolen. Kate was possibly working as a prostitute as James Clapshoe went with her to a shed near the Aquarium. He fell asleep, as he was very drunk and when he woke, Kate had gone, and his watch and chain were missing (value £4). He informed the police, and Kate was stopped at her lodgings, in nearby Thomas Street the following day. She denied the charge but eventually admitted that she had given the watch to John Smith, who had tried to pledge (pawn) it, but it was refused. He had then left for Eastbourne to try his luck there.

Kate denied being on the beach at the time of the incident and John Smith denied knowing that the watch was stolen. He admitted that he had tried to pawn the items in Brighton, but then the couple had walked to Lewes, to try and pawn it there. Kate had left him at Lewes, and he had thrown the watch and chain into a stream, but Kate told the police that he had pawned it for 15s in Eastbourne. The case was remanded until the following week and the jury found them both guilty. Kate of stealing and John Smith for receiving. They were both given 6 months hard labour. This does raise some questions – was Kate working as a prostitute? Was John Smith her pimp? If James Clapshoe did not have any money on him, was the watch and chain her payment for services rendered?

The records do not record where Kate was sent to prison, this could have been Dorchester Prison, as by this time, male and female prisoners had to be kept in separate prisons and the local prison at Lewes, was a male prison. However, there are no records of her time in prison as there are gaps in the records that are available on Ancestry. Certainly, when she was again charged with larceny in 1879, she was living in Portsea.

Kate and another woman, called Mary Richardson were charged with drugging and robbery. A seaman, named James Hughes was given a quantity of Scotch snuff. This was a potent form of nicotine, that gives a dopamine rush or 'high'. When mixed with alcohol (beer and lemonade) as given to James, it can produce enhanced effects of the alcohol and 'stupefy' the victim. Interestingly in 2025, this is the new fad in some bars in London, where alcohol is impregnated with tobacco during the brewing process. Once James was in this state, the two women were going to commit a felony and steal from him, and they were charged with drugging and stealing £8 10s.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1879, James Hughes, who had just received his wages of £8 17s 6d, most of which was in half sovereigns was standing outside the American Hotel when the two women came into the bar and spoke to him. He left and they followed him. He told them that he was going to buy a set of clothes, but they dissuaded him. The group went to the Lord Russell public house and afterwards to the Bedford Hotel. Latterly, they went to the Prince of Wales beer house in Surrey Street, Landport. The landlady gave them permission to go into the taproom, possibly women were not allowed normally to enter? But as the room was empty, they were given permission. They purchased lemonade and ale and stayed in the smoking room for some time. James said he drank the lemonade, and the women had the beer.

Nothing appeared to be wrong, but he could not remember anything after he drank the lemonade.

James said that he had only spent about 7s during the day, but when he recovered consciousness, he only had 6d in his pocket. The next day, he had to stay in bed until 4pm and was not well for another few days. Matilda Lees, landlady of the Prince of Wales said the party came into the beer house and Richardson asked for a bottle of lemonade and a pint of ale, which she paid for they carried the glasses into the smoking room. After about ten minutes, the women left and asked the landlord to keep James there until they returned. After a while, at ten to seven, the landlady heard a noise from the room and found James semi-conscious. Other accounts say that he fell and was lying on the floor, sneezing violently. She noticed on the table that there were glasses containing ale and lemonade (shandy?) and scotch snuff was on the table and in the glass. The police were called and shown the snuff. They helped James home.

Sarah Ann Lees, daughter of the landlord, told the court that she saw the women in the bar with James. She also saw one of the women take money out of a purse and show it to the other woman. James had his head on the table. Thomas Leeder, a tobacconist said that on the day in question, Coombs purchased a quantity of Scotch Snuff. PC Devon said that he went to the Prince of Wales and found James on the floor immobile. Arthur Aegell, an analyst said that he received a glass containing a powder and he found the same powder in the bottle. He found this to be snuff. There was also some yeast, which had occurred naturally. PC Hartmott said that he apprehended Richardson in Portsea and charged her with stealing a purse from James Hughes. The two women had travelled to Brighton that same night, but Richardson had returned. Richardson said that she had found some half sovereigns

(money) on the floor and had given them back to James. The PC continued that he then travelled to Brighton, where he found Coombs. Both women were committed for trial by the Assizes at Winchester.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> November, 1879 Mary Richardson was found guilty of drugging and felony and sentenced to 12 months hard labour and Kate Coombs was also found guilty but because of her previous conviction, was committed to 18 months hard labour, which is why she was still in prison when the 1881 census was taken in the April.

Interestingly, her age on the admission register was given as 24 years, the same age as Mary Richardson, when she was in fact much younger.

The next sighting of Kate Coombs is the following year, 1882 when she was admitted to the Infectious Diseases hospital, in Portsea from the asylum in Portsmouth. In reality, this was part of the same institution, the hospital having been established on the same site in 1879. She was admitted in June 1882, following her release from prison but died in the July. Her age was given as 32, but as this was not a family member who registered her death, it was probably just a guess, as she was in fact only 20 years old. It would be interesting to speculate what disease she had, possibly a sexually transmitted disease, but it must have affected her enough to warrant her admission to an asylum.

***Janice Brinley Codd April 2025***

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