

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.

Alma Willment's Story

Alma was born on 29 April 1885 in the hamlet of Henlade in Somerset. Henlade is a small settlement near the larger village of Ruishton and within five miles of the county town of Taunton. Henlade Wood is a peaceful area of ancient woodland on a hill which affords beautiful views overlooking the Somerset levels and the surrounding hills. Alma was baptised just under a month after her birth on 24 May 1885 at St George's Church in Ruishton. The church is notable because of its large but incomplete tower. Alma's mother was Rosa née Kettle who came originally from Hampshire and her father was William, a basket maker, who was born in Ruishton. Alma was one of five children. She had an older brother Frank (born in 1884), a younger sister Elsie (b 1886) and two younger brothers, William junior (b 1891) and Herbert (b 1901).

At the time of the 1891 census, Alma was either living with or visiting her maternal grandparents Walter and Ann Kettle in Basingstoke.

In 1901, Alma was aged 15 and she was a pupil at the School of Housewifery at Abbey Grange in Street, Somerset. She was in the middle of the age range of the pupils. Many were only 13, but there were two 17-year-olds. The school

was about nineteen miles away from Alma's family home. In 1901 the school had been in existence for four years and the Head Mistress was Louisa Acheson who taught cookery and laundry. Other members of staff were Margaret Crane who taught laundry and dressmaking, Pauline Calazel (cookery and laundry) and Emma Tyler who was the House teacher. The objective of the school was to train its pupils in the principles and practices of housework, including laundry work, elementary dressmaking, needlework and cookery. When they had finished the course, the girls could confidently apply for positions as domestic servants or they could use their skills to help at home and, in the future, they could become efficient housewives.

By the time Alma was there, thirty pupils were admitted to the school at a time, each for a full year. The girls were divided into groups of ten and they spent 12 or 14 weeks working in each of the following areas of the house: kitchen, laundry, general house and parlour work. On the 1901 census, it says that Alma's occupation was cookery so she was probably doing the kitchen part of the course at the time. Eight other girls were doing cookery. Each girl, as well as doing her mending and other needlework, was expected to make a dress for herself during her year's residence at the school. This was one of the hardest things for them to do, especially for the 13-year-olds, because they were still growing during their time at the school.

Probably towards the end of Alma's time at the school in July 1901 there was an anniversary celebration at the school. The event was reportedly blessed with glorious weather. From 1:30pm, there was an inspection by the visitors, and the pupils, probably including Alma, were seen at work in their respective classes. At 2:00pm, there was a short formal meeting on the lawn. One of the guests was Countess Waldegrave. She addressed the pupils on the subject of "Opportunities" or chances, that if used properly, would lead to success.

It appears that once she finished her course at the school Alma returned to living with her family. The 1911 census has them in Alma Street, Taunton. On the census record, which was filled in by Frank, Alma's older brother, her mother Rosa is down as the head of the household but also married, rather than widowed, and I cannot find a death record for Alma's father until 1913. Frank was working as a papermaker's clerk, Alma and Elsie were dressmakers working from home (and utilising the skills Alma acquired at the school) and William junior was a baker.

Ten years later, in 1921, Alma was still living at 45 Alma Street with her mother and her youngest brother, Herbert. She was again working from home as a dressmaker. A directory of 1923 puts it more grandly; it says Alma was a costumier. Alma's mother, Rosa, died in 1926.

The next record that is available for Alma is the registration of her marriage during the third quarter of 1931 when she was aged 46. She married Charley Webber, in Taunton. Charley had been married before and he had a daughter, Lucie. He worked as an assistant storekeeper on the railway. When the 1939 register was taken, Alma, Charley and Lucie were living at 45 Alma Street. Alma's record of course states that she was doing "unpaid domestic duties" so no longer earning a living as a dressmaker but perhaps drawing on some of her experiences at the School of Housewifery from many years before.

Alma's husband died in 1943. Alma lived for another twenty-two years as a widow. She died during the fourth quarter of 1965, aged 80.

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