

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.

Elizabeth ARNOLD's Story

When Elizabeth Arnold was taken to court in Clerkenwell on 7 November 1900 she was sentenced to 3 years at the Farmfield Reformatory for inebriate women. She was 37 years old and had been born in Sheffield. On admission, was fairly clean, but poorly clad, miserable and unhappy. She was quiet, subdued and appropriately respectful.

The women all had to endure a physical examination. Hers was unremarkable, just an abdominal operation scar was noted. At five feet tall she weighed one hundred and ten pounds, had hazel eyes, a fair complexion and brown hair. Routine questions ascertained she had no history of syphilis, scrofula or smallpox. She was vaccinated for smallpox. She had never had delirium tremens or alcoholic convulsions, and had not taken other drugs. There was no family history of insanity or drunkenness.

The questions seemed endless, she had to give her religion - church of England, and previous addresses - 10 Harrison Street, Grays Inn Road, and 77 Bridge Road, Harrow on the Hill. She had attended the National School at Bushey, near Watford, so was able to write and spell fairly and to read well. It was an ovariectomy, at the Royal Free Hospital, which left her with that large midline scar on her abdomen. (This operation, removal of an ovary, is now known as an oophorectomy and is often done for an ovarian cyst, for an ectopic pregnancy, or possibly cancer).

Ordinarily, as the doctor summarised, she was active and abstemious, with no tobacco or mental health issues. However, she had been drinking to excessive periodically for 18 months, with 6 convictions for drunkenness, which resulted in imprisonment twice and 4 other sentences. She had not needed to resort to prostitution or other crimes. Her tippie was brandy, which, in excess, made her gloomy and lachrymose. It had all started due to domestic trouble and an unfaithful husband. Three of her seven children had died. (No mention is made of the whereabouts of others.)

Looking back further Elizabeth was the 4th child in the family, with 4 sisters and 2 brothers. She was brought up by her grandparents (Again no explanation is offered.) Her father died from rheumatic fever and her mother died of old age. Both were abstainers. Aged 13 Elizabeth was sent out to work as a kitchen girl at the Manor House, in Bushey. She stayed 10 years and left to be head kitchen maid at Bentley Manor Hotel, Stanmore.

(In 1882 Frederick Gordon converted Bentley Priory into one of the Gordon hotels. Despite spending £48,000 to extend the Railway Line from Harrow to Stanmore to attract guests, the hotel was not a success. In 1908, the hotel was sold and Bentley Priory became a Girl's School, home to 70 boarders. It was later famed for its pivotal role as Headquarters Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain in 1940. Information from <https://bentleypriorymuseum.org.uk/> accessed March 2023).

However Elizabeth had to leave her employment after 10 months as she was to be married. She lived happily despite losing 4 of her 7 children, until her husband became unfaithful. Only after this, about 18 months prior to admission, had she started to drink. She got drunk periodically, a few days at a time with weeks between bouts.

At the time of admission she gave her occupation as charwoman. In the 1901 census, whilst at Farmfield Reformatory, it says she is a cook (domestic). Certainly the inmates did work of various sorts including dairy work.

Whilst at Fairfield her general conduct was excellent, she had been given no punishments. A clean, active and capable woman. A good cook, excellent cleaner and good needlewoman. A hopeful case as she was desirous of living the old happy life. Her sentence was due to end 6 November 1903, but she was thought to be doing well and therefore was licensed on 21 July 1902. Unfortunately she relapsed immediately and was brought back on 6th August.

On discharge she was given a position with Mrs Drum, Heathside, Lovell Heath, Henley. Sadly after a fortnight she again started to drink and had relapsed by 3

months. At 6 months after discharge she was 'not doing well'. On 13 September 1904 she was again charged but released to go to a situation on promise of good behaviour.

Unfortunately I have been so far unable to identify her in any other records. There are certainly workhouse records that could be her in the lead up to her conviction and after discharge. There is also an entry on the habitual criminals register which could be her but the description, height, hair colour, eye colour and birth date are not quite compatible. (4 ft 10 inches compares 5 ft, hair black not dark brown, eyes dark brown not hazel).

PLEASE do make contact if you are able to find her in other records, or have further information, so we can update this story.

Sources

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

Admission Register LCC/PH/MENT/4/29 Register of patients at Farmfield Reformatory for Female Inebriates (1900-1908)

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