

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.

Ellen Flynn's Story

By the time she was sent to St Joseph's Reformatory, Ellen Flynn (born about 1851-53) was a habitual criminal who had spent much of her adult life, and some of her juvenile life, in and out of prison; she was charged initially for drunken and disorderly behaviour, assault or stealing, and later for damaging property. Many of her 20 or more sentences between 1867 and 1874 were convictions for being drunk in the highway, which incurred a charge of between 2s 6d to 10 shillings and 3-7 days in Wandsworth prison.^{1 2} Her sentences also included 2-3 months for a couple of assaults in her late teens in 1868 and 1869; 21 days for stealing a jacket and a bonnet in 1867 and 1870; 6 months for stealing trousers in 1872; and 14 and 21 days for disorderly

¹ UK, Calendar of Prisoners, 1868-1929; Newington, Surrey, England 1874 Reference: HO 140/28

² UK, Prison Commission Records, 1770-1951

prostitution when she was about 20 years old.³ Her most serious convictions were 7 years Penal Servitude in July 1874 for stealing a purse and then, after being released early, a sentence for another 7 years Penal Servitude in June 1880 for stealing a watch.⁴

The London Calendar of Prisoners for Trials on 13th April 1898 lists her longer convictions and her various aliases as Ellen Cockling, Ellen Flynn, Ellen Sullivan, Ellen Green and Annie Green.⁵ Following the lengthy sentences, a tendency to damage windows began in August 1889 when she was committed to 6 months at Millbank prison as Ellen Green, aged 38. After eight more convictions for causing damage, at the 1898 trial she was sentenced as Ellen Green to 20 months hard labour at Holloway Prison for maliciously damaging a plate glass window valued at £12 10s. This may have been her last prison sentence before being sent to St Joseph's Reformatory for inebriated women where she was recorded there on the 1901 census as Ellen Flynn, aged 48, single and a laundress born in Camberwell London (~1853).⁶

An article in the Daily News (London) for 20 February 1904 entitled 'Drunkards request' states Ellen Flynn, an elderly woman, charged with drunkenness and disorder in the early hours of the morning, pleaded with Westminster magistrates to be sent back to an inebriates' home, to which she was committed for three years, and lately released on licence. It quotes Ellen saying "Thank you and God bless you" in response to the magistrate when he stated that her licence was forfeited.⁷

³ UK, Prison Commission Records, 1770-1951

⁴ UK, Calendar of Prisoners, 1868-1929; Newington, London, England Reference: HO 140/186

⁵ UK, Calendar of Prisoners, 1868-1929; Newington, London, England Reference: HO 140/186,

⁶ St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex 1901 Census RG13 1171 folio 13 Page 18

⁷ Daily News (London) 20 February 1904, page 5

A photograph of Ellen can be found in the UK Registers of Habitual Criminal and Police gazettes under the name of Ellen Flynn with a conviction date of 14th March 1905, committing her to a certified inebriate reformatory for another 3 years.⁸ She is described as 5ft 1in, fresh complexion and a laundress with no employer; this ties in with the descriptions of her on many of the Prison Commission records, except she is now described as having grey hair and grey eyes instead of dark brown hair and brown or hazel eyes. She is thin and does indeed look older than the 48 years of age recorded next to the photograph, and according to other records was probably more likely to have been 52-54 years old. The register also mentions she has no fixed abode and that she frequents the High Street, Southwark, and Vauxhall cross.

Given her many aliases and the different recordings of her age, it is difficult to determine when she died, or when she was born and who her parents were. A clue in the Prison Commission Records for 1872 states Nelson Street in Camberwell was the intended residence after release from Wandsworth Prison for Ellen Flynn alias Cocklin, a laundress aged 21, and 5ft 1in in height. In 1851 an Ellen Flynn aged 1 month lived in Nelson Street Camberwell with her sister Mary aged 2 and parents James and Mary Flynn (both born in Ireland: Kerry 1815 and Cork 1821 respectively), and also with her uncle John Flynn who was a bricklayer like his brother James.⁹ By 1861, the family had increased to include Johanna (aged 7), James (5) and John (3) and their mother Mary was described as a washerwoman.¹⁰ The mother's maiden name for all these children born in Camberwell was Murphy,¹¹ and the first child was likely to

⁸ UK, Registers of Habitual Criminals and Police Gazettes, 1834-1934; Reference: MEPO 6/79

⁹ 1851 census: HO107 1582

¹⁰ 1861 census: RG09 387 Folio 9 Page16

¹¹ FLYNN, ELLEN, MMN MURPHY, GRO Ref: 1851 M Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 04 Page 84
FLYNN, MARY, MMN MURPHEY, GRO Ref: 1849 J Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 04 Page 70

have been Patrick who died in 1848 before the age of one.¹² Johanna Flynn married Eugene Sullivan in 1873, and this may have prompted Ellen to use the alias Ellen Sullivan when she was convicted in July 1874 for stealing a purse. A problem with this scenario is that Ellen Flynn is recorded on the census with this family in 1871,¹³ even though she is also recorded in Wandsworth Prison as Ellen Cocklin born in Camberwell for the census taken on the night of 2 April 1871.¹⁴ Ellen Cocklin alias Flynn, 5ft 1/2in washerwoman aged 21 was committed to Wandsworth prison for 21 days from 25th March to 14th April 1871 for being disorderly.¹⁵ Perhaps Ellen was recorded twice or perhaps Ellen was a niece or other relative of James and Mary Flynn?

Many people from Ireland lived in Nelson Street Camberwell in London and two other Flynn families lived there in 1871. One was headed by Bridget Flynn aged 45, born ~1826 in Ireland (nee Doody).¹⁶ The other was headed by Daniel Flynn born in Ireland in 1843 who had married Caroline Thomas from Camberwell London.¹⁷ However they do not appear to have had a daughter called Ellen although they had other children born in Camberwell. Ellen may have been related to these families or to some of the few Sullivan's that lived in Nelson Street; however it is difficult to determine this.

FLYNN, JOANNA, MMN MURPHY, GRO Ref: 1853 D Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 01D Page 451

FLYNN, JAMES, MMN MURPHY, GRO Ref: 1855 J Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 01D Page 455

FLYNN, JOHN, MMN MURPHY, GRO Ref: 1858 J Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 01D Page 468

¹² FLINN, PATRICK, MMN MURPHY, GRO Ref: 1848 J Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 04 Page 64

FLYNN, PATRICK, died aged 0, GRO Ref: 1848 D Qtr CAMBERWELL Vol 04 Page 61

¹³ 1871 census: RG10 797 Folio 71 Page 12

¹⁴ 1871 census: RG10 714 Folio 40 Page 4

¹⁵ UK, Prison Commission Records, 1770-1951 Surrey, England

¹⁶ 1871 census: RG10 797 Folio 76 Page 21

¹⁷ 1871 census: RG10 797 Folio 78 Page 26

The alias Cocklin used by Ellen may have been an English spelling of the Irish name Coughlin; an Ellen Coughlin was born in Camberwell in 1851 however she appears to have died aged two.^{18 19}

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¹⁸ COUGHLIN, ELLEN, MMN COLEMAN ,GRO Ref: 1851 D Qtr CAMBERWELL Volume 04 Page 60

¹⁹ COCKLIN, ELLEN, died aged 2 GRO Ref: 1854 J Qtr CAMBERWELL Volume 01D Page 299