

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in September 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon

Esther Mary Cluer's Story

We find Esther Mary Cluer in two places at once on the night of the 1901 census¹. It's not unknown, or even unusual, to find someone listed twice but it hard to ascertain which one is correct. Was she at home at 5 Church Vale in Forest Hill (now in Greater London) with her family – father Mark, mother Esther, siblings Mark, Winifred, Edith A and Ellen Louise? Or was she in the District Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor in Margate in Kent?

Let's go back a bit. She had been born on the 28th of April 1889³ to Mark Cluer and Esther Woods and was their oldest child. Mark, and his father before him, was a coachman and groom and, in the 1881 census², he was living with James and Susan Clark on Queens Road, in Forest Hill. He was a Suffolk man originally, born and baptised in South Bersted³. Esther, his wife, was from Thakeham in Sussex⁴. They had married on the 6th November 1886 in Croydon⁵. The 1891 census finds them on Peacefield

¹ 1901 RG13 824 folios 30-35 and RG13; Piece: 560; Folio: 92; Page: 21

² RG11; Piece: 737; Folio: 122; Page: 8; GSU roll: 1341172

³ Ancestry.com. *England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.

⁴ FreeBMD. *England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

⁵ Surrey History Centre; Woking, Surrey, England; *Surrey Church of England Parish Registers*; Reference Number: 2809/1/15

Avenue⁶. Mark is a servant/coachman/groom but clearly is not living in as he was in 1881. His daughter Esther Mary is just 2 and son Mark 4 months. I wonder what it was like for Mark and Esther when they discovered their firstborn was clearly different, and when they knew for sure that she was nonverbal and deaf? To whom did they turn? Well there was help to be had.

An Asylum for the support and education of the deaf and dumb children of the poor was established in London in 1792 by Reverend John Townsend. The institution was maintained by charitable donations. Its aim was to rescue deaf and dumb children from “a state of deprivation, ignorance, and inaction” and to prevent them from being a burden to society. The original Asylum was in Bermondsey, but it moved to Old Kent Road in 1809. It had strong links with “The Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor” in Margate, and, by 1902, the Old Kent Road premises had been sold off and all pupils removed to that institution in Kent. Pupils were taught using the Braidwood oral method, as set out in Watson’s guide “Instruction of the deaf and dumb; or, a theoretical and practical view of the means by which they are taught to speak and understand a language.” Charity pupils were instructed using sign language. Competition was fierce for places as the institution took children from all over the country.

The Old Kent Road site is where we next pick up Esther Mary.

Examining records available from the Institutions own records we see that Esther did have schooling in Old Kent Road. The Headmaster’s Register of Children: Old Kent Road (1891-1904)⁷ shows her name listed. It gives basic detail like date of birth, parents, health, disability, remarks etc. It suggests she may have been 8 months at another school (Christ Church School is mentioned in another source)⁸. It also gives the date she was sent to Margate (19th October 1898)⁹.

Another source - *Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate*¹⁰ - gives a date – 18th July 1896¹¹– of when “elected”. This seems to be when *selected* for specialist schooling. As alluded to above, pressure for places was fierce and a candidate had to be selected by the governors. The Register also gives her date of birth, her father, her address – in this record The Cottage, Church Vale, Forest Hill – a record of diseases contracted, or not, her condition – i.e. born deaf – and, crucially, the date she was sent to Margate Asylum. Which, on this record, was the fourth of February 1898.

Another Old Kent Road Register¹² is useful in that it devotes one whole page to each child. Some things we know such as date of birth etc, but this page has other detail. For example two gentleman under “Sureties”. These were a doctor named Arthur Grayling of Sunderland Road, and George T. Tye, jobmaster, of Church Vale, Forest Hill. It also gives the date of election, the date of admittance after election (16th September 1896), the date she left for Margate, and left Margate for good – 27th June 1905. There is also a report card detailing Esther Mary’s progress. 1896 shows her possibly almost at the bottom of her class, only Fair in Articulation and Lip Reading, also Fair in Sewing, and a B in Writing – Bad? But the following year shows a marked improvement – out of a class of 10 she is

⁶ The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891*; Class: RG12; Piece: 526; Folio: 49; Page: 24; GSU roll: 6095636

⁷ Ch192/R2/2/2 Page 67 Headmaster’s Register of Children: Old Kent Road (1891-1904)

⁸ Ch192/R1/1/1 Entry 5405 Admission Records Application for Admission 4325-7615 (1880-1925)

⁹ This date varies in different sources.

¹⁰ Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 128 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate

¹¹ This is the only time the 18th is used – other records give the 13th which I think we can attribute to transcription error.

¹² Ch192/R2/1/5 Entry 5351 Register of children: Old Kent Road [5256-5670] (with transfers to Margate)

fourth. Her Articulation and Lip Reading are now Good, as is her Writing, although her Sewing is still only Fair. This record lists examinations she can only have taken in Margate, highlighting the close association between Old Kent Road and that institution. From 1898, however, we see Esther Mary slipping back again in her examinations – which now cover several subjects – including Scripture, Arithmetic and Geography. She did, however, attain the Needlework prize in 1898.

Her leaving report in 1905¹³ is revealing. She is revealed as 4ft 10 inches tall and 5 stone 12lb in weight. She is 10th in her class (not helpful without knowing how many students were in that class) but her intellectual ability is described merely as “moderate”. She has been confirmed in Herne Bay Church by now. Her marks are in the 60-70% band but she is better at History/Geography, Scripture and Sewing/Drawing. Overall remarks: “Not very strong but has improved both in health and intelligence.” Her lip reading is rated 66% but is “not very intelligible”.

By 1911 and the census of that year¹⁴ Esther Mary is back home, which is now 37, Trilby Road in Forest Hill. Father Mark is a coachman and jobmaster. A jobmaster is a keeper of a livery stable who rents our horses and equipment. One wonders if the jobmaster George Tye, who acted as surety for Esther Mary, is a colleague. It appears Mark does not own the stables as he says he is a worker. Nevertheless the five room house in which the family live shows that Mark is not at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Possibly partly, or wholly, because some of his children are now working. Son Mark is a draper’s porter and sister Edith Annie is a domestic servant (presumably out of her own home but not *living in*). Also present are Ellen Louise, now 10, and Florence May, the youngest, who is 8. And, of course, we find Esther Mary, born “deaf and dumb”, Esther Mary has “no occupation”. Presumably, being a girl, she helps with household duties but a career or job for such a girl is out of the question at this time.

This inequality is further highlighted ten years later in the census of that year. What a step change we see in 1921¹⁵. The family is still in Forest Hill but father Mark’s world as a coachman has disappeared. We are now in an era of cars, trams, and trolley buses. His world has changed utterly, and we now find him a warehouse porter at J. Sainsbury Provisions shop on London Road (the same road upon which he lives). His daughter Winifred is a waitress at Express dairies in Hatton Garden, and Edith Annie works for the same company but in St Bride’s Street. Ellen Louise, meanwhile, is a shorthand typist for Shell Mex on Oxford Street. How modern it all sounds with companies we recognise. What opportunities for unmarried women we see here (note the *unmarried*). But where is Esther Mary? At home, as usual, with her mother, now 32 and labelled “Invalid. Incapable.” It is heartbreaking. Whereas she may have felt at home at the School in Margate she is surely now lonely and isolated.

The next time we pick her up is in the 1939 register¹⁶ (the 1931 census being lost). On 43 Lettsom Street, Peckham we find Esther Mary living with her sister Edith A. Surridge and *her* daughter Joan E Surridge (later Wilmott). Edith had married Ernest G Surridge in 1921 but he had died in 1936¹⁷. Also in the household is Esther Mary and Edith Annie’s mother Esther, now widowed after Mark’s death

¹³ Ch192/R8/1/3 Entry 139 Leavers Records: Registers of Children Leaving School (1902-1912)

¹⁴ Find My Past RG14/2830/286/96

¹⁵ Find My Past. RG15//02939/204/RD29/RS4/ED28

¹⁶ The National Archives; Kew, London, England; *1939 Register*; Reference: RG 101/85C

¹⁷ General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 1d; Page: 736

in 1935¹⁸. He left £478 19s 1d¹⁹. A good sum for all his efforts. But Esther Mary has no occupation and is unmarried.

In fact she never married and died in November 1966. Aged 77²⁰. What sort of life she lived after 1939 history does not relate. The only reference to the family I can find in available online newspapers is one small piece published in August 1899²¹ about young Mark coming third, or fourth, (hard to establish) in a 100-yard race for the employees of cabman and jobmasters, run by the “Sydenham and Forest Hill Charitable Fete and Dinner for 400 Aged Poor”. As with all law-abiding working families, references to their lives are few and far between. Did Esther Mary watch her brother puffing hard, legs pumping, arms swinging as he crossed the finishing line? Did she see the silent cheering from the crowd? Did she herself cheer for him in her silent fashion? Did she know even *then* that her life would be circumscribed by her disability? That her potential would never be realised?

Sources

- ¹ 1901 RG13 824 folios 30-35 and RG13; Piece: 560; Folio: 92; Page: 21
- ² RG11; Piece: 737; Folio: 122; Page: 8; GSU roll: 1341172
- ³ Ancestry.com. *England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.
- ⁴ FreeBMD. *England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.
- ⁵ Surrey History Centre; Woking, Surrey, England; *Surrey Church of England Parish Registers*; Reference Number: 2809/1/15
- ⁶ The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; *Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891*; Class: RG12; Piece: 526; Folio: 49; Page: 24; GSU roll: 6095636
- ⁷ Ch192/R2/2/2 Page 67 Headmaster’s Register of Children: Old Kent Road (1891-1904)
- ⁸ ¹ Ch192/R1/1/1 Entry 5405 Admission Records Application for Admission 4325-7615 (1880-1925)
- ⁹ This date varies in different sources.
- ¹⁰ Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 128 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate
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- ¹³ Ch192/R8/1/3 Entry 139 Leavers Records: Registers of Children Leaving School (1902-1912)
- ¹⁴ Find My Past RG14/2830/286/96
- ¹⁵ Find My Past. RG15//02939/204/RD29/RS4/ED28
- ¹⁶ The National Archives; Kew, London, England; *1939 Register*; Reference: RG 101/85C
- ¹⁷ General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 1d; Page: 736
- ¹⁸ General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 1d; Page: 1089
- ¹⁹ Principal Probate Registry; London, England; *Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England*
- ²⁰ General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 5c; Page: 157
- ²¹ Forest Hill and Sydenham Enquirer, 1st September 1899.

¹⁸ General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 1d; Page: 1089

¹⁹ Principal Probate Registry; London, England; *Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England*

²⁰ General Register Office; United Kingdom; Volume: 5c; Page: 157

²¹ Forest Hill and Sydenham Enquirer, 1st September 1899.