

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



Florence (Florrie) Greaves



Florrie was born in 1865 in Barrow, a small village on the edge of the river Humber, in Lincolnshire although the Registration Town was Brigg/Glanford Brigg, some 20 miles inland. Grimsby was the main town of the area and port, some 20 miles to the west. She was the 5th child and 3rd daughter of Thomas Greaves and Ann Johnson, who had been married in 1856 at Holy Trinity Hull. In the 1851 census, Thomas was described as an Ag Lab, but by 1861 he was a

fireman, possibly on one of the locomotives that used coastal steamers/ferries linking Lincolnshire to Yorkshire across the River Humber to the port of Hull. Florence was baptised in 1870, aged 5 years at St James' parish church in Grimsby, along with 5 of her siblings. Her parents seemed to favour batch christenings, possibly prior to some of the children starting school. The move to Grimsby seemed to coincide with her father becoming a fireman on the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, before training as an engine driver (1891 Census). They were living in Cobden Street, when they first arrived in Grimsby, in one of the houses owned by the Railway Company. Later, they moved to Albert Street, where they were living before Florence got married, in another of the Railway company houses. This move may have been as a result of his promotion to engine driver.

Florrie was an elementary school teacher (1891 census) and was teaching a class of infants. I have not found any records of her training to be a teacher, so I assume that she was a pupil teacher, who learnt her skills on the job. As she left the school to get married, some of the parents wrote to her: 'Fridays are unlucky days for weddings' and 'all the children will miss you'. As the Marriage Bar was in place, she terminated her employment at Silver Street School the week before her wedding. The Headmistress wrote:

'Today is mingled with pleasure and regret. We feel the pleasure in offering you a remembrance of teachers and scholars in the accompanying cake dish and chair – but regret predominates'.

While the Chairman of the Governors also thanking her for her 10 years' service:

'During the ten years you have been teaching you have not only given the managers every proof of your high character, but you have also raised the

Infants under your care to a high state of excellence ad endeared them to yourself and the school.'

Florence married Charles Wharton, a master butcher in June 1895 at the parish church of Clee. Her father and her bridesmaid were the witnesses and they married by licence. They lived in a house on the Cleethorpe Road, and this was where their eldest son, William was born in 1896, a year following their marriage.

Florrie gave birth to another son, Francis in 1898 but unfortunately, he died aged 10 months of Cholera Infantum and James Blackhall Alcock, the Undertaker and Joiner, signed the death certificate as 'causing the body to be buried'. I don't know if Florrie and Charles were also unwell, or too upset to do this themselves.

Cholera Infantum is an inflammatory disorder of the alimentary canal of infants which was common in the summer months and in some areas, was the cause of much dread and anxiety amongst parents. The death rate in this disease of infants between the ages of one and two years was once fearful. A I Cummings, a doctor in Boston, wrote in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal in 1851 (November 26, 1851, Boston Med Surg J 1851; 45:341-344) describing the symptoms:

The trouble comes on apparently very suddenly, with great restlessness, fever ranging from 102 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit. There is much diarrhoea, the bowel discharges are accompanied with 'bearing down', straining at stool and considerable pain. Preceding the bowel movement, the child will gag or retch. The sickness of the stomach and all of the other symptoms gradually increase

until vomiting becomes frightfully severe. There is rapid emaciation and parents and friends usually give up hope of saving the little one.

The fate of Francis was that he spent 12 days in this state. The doctors believed that the colder weather improved the child's chances of survival and cholera was seen as a 'Summer Disease' usually occurring in July, August and September if the weather was particularly hot. The 'dry' summers were also seen to be a causal factor. A summer with an average of 13.8 inches of rain saw only 373 deaths from Infantile Cholera, whereas a summer with low rainfall eg 10.9 inches saw over 573 deaths from the disease. The extreme years recorded were 1891 (16 inches) with 203 deaths and 1895 (7 inches) and 819 deaths.

In addition to the lack of rainfall to replenish underground water supplies, the part played by artificial feeding also was seen as crucial. The Inquiry into Cholera deaths in Liverpool in 1892 found that of 1000 deaths of infants, only 30 had been breast-fed on breast milk alone, and a similar number died who had been combination fed (ie Breast and Formula). The mortality amongst those solely artificially fed was 22 times higher than in the breast/combo group. They also found that working mothers were more likely to leave their babies with someone who did not practise hygienic washing of the bottles and teats eg an older child.

Articles appeared in the press and the blame game began. Doctors particularly blamed the mothers with 'over feeding' a common reason given for why babies contracted these diseases. But as more research was undertaken, the environmental factors became more widely known and accepted. An article dated 1897, from the Ann Arbor district library points the finger:

No one supposed that cholera infantum is wilfully caused by mothers or persons who have infants in charge; yet in some places a large proportion of all children born die of that disease. That it results from causes that are preventable as shown by several facts:

- 1. Among the higher classes of people, the mortality is very much less than among the less intelligent and less provident.*
- 2. Infants who are nourished only by mother's milk are almost wholly exempt from cholera infantum.*
- 3. The disease is undoubtedly caused by changes in the infant's food or drink due to bacteria, fungi or some sort of micro-organisms.*

Diarrhoea. – What is true of cholera infantum is, in great part, true of diarrhoea. The great cause of infant mortality is largely due to ignorance and carelessness on the part of those who have the care of the children.

For Charles and Florence, it must have been the gossip that was so hard to live with. Did Florrie breast feed? I don't know – my mother was bottle fed as breast feeding was not seen as 'right' in company, whereas bottle feeding was acceptable. It was also a show of wealth if you could afford the formula milk, bottles and the Nursemaid to deal with all of this. Certainly, about this time Charles began to drink – as a butcher did people think that they could catch cholera from his meat.

After a 4-year gap, Florrie gave birth to another boy, Charles in 1905, but again disaster struck, as within the month, he had died of gastritis. This was not as severe as infantile cholera, but the little one must have suffered as he had it for 10 days before he died. His death certificate was signed by Fanny Moss, who was present at the death, and made her mark X. She gave her address as

the same as the child, so I assume that she was a live-in help of some kind, perhaps a nursemaid. If she was illiterate, was this the reason for the death? Was she not cleaning the bottles correctly or could she not read the instructions on the packet of formula to know how to make it correctly? I don't have any answers to these questions as there is no-one to ask who would know. My Uncle describes Florrie as a sad person, but a very determined woman. I cannot imagine that this educated lady would leave her children in the care of people who would be so careless with the preparation of the food and milk that her children were receiving. She was a supporter of women's education and although my mother failed the 11 plus examination, Florrie paid for her to go to the Grammar School, to ensure that she passed her school certificate and could get a good job.

Florence's surviving son, William was my grandfather who, despite being called up during the First World War, spent most of his time in London as he was a short-hand clerk and so was seen as being useful to the army. He was in the Army Service Corps and did not go abroad which must have been a comfort for Florrie to know that he was safe. He also survived the 1918 Flu epidemic; despite being hospitalised in a sanatorium in Hull for a few weeks. Florrie outlived her husband by over 10 years and my uncle remembers her living with them for much of this time ...something that did not always go down well with my grandmother!

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