

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written in August 2023 as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who enrolled in the first two cohorts College, Crewe [CCTCC]

Nellie Etches' Story



John Clifford Etches was an auctioneer and his family had lived in several areas since he married Jane Gillard in Birmingham in 1872. John came from Whitchurch in Shropshire, but had been working in Rugeley, Staffordshire which is presumably how he met his wife, Jane, who came from nearby Lichfield, where they started married life. John's father had been a solicitor but had passed away in 1869. Jane's father was an auctioneer, so John may have been working for him or perhaps knew him as they were in the same profession.

The family lived in Whitchurch, Shropshire and moved to nearby Broughall; next was Cheshire and the village of Wistaston near Crewe; then back to Lichfield and finally to Smithfield Road, Market Drayton in Shropshire, where Nellie Etches was born on 25 May 1891, the last of eleven children born to John and Jane Etches. She was baptised 3 months later, on 24 Aug 1891, at 'Drayton in Hales, Shropshire' – the old parish name for Market Drayton.

Sometime later the family moved 7 miles north to Paddock Lane in the village of Audlem, in Cheshire, where we find them in the 1901 census. Only three of the children remain at home – Mabel (25), Violet (13) and Nellie (9) – and John is described as an 'Auctioneer's Agent'. Their next-door neighbours are called Gouldbourne, which is the same surname as John's grandmother, so they may be relatives.

Nellie's elder sister, Violet, decided to become a dressmaker, but Nellie had set her sights on the teaching profession. She attended the County Secondary School in Crewe, where she passed her exams for admission to Cheshire County Training College, Crewe. She started her course on 15 September 1909

and completed her final examinations in 1911. She is recorded as a student on the 1911 census, living at home with her parents and older sisters, Mabel and Violet, in Holly Grove, Audlem.

Nellie was immediately successful in securing a teaching position, in the new Nantwich School, which opened on 26 July 1911. There had been 416 applications, 36 were interviewed and just 15 were appointed, so Nellie obviously impressed at her interview. She was appointed to the Junior School.

Nellie must have moved to teach in Audlem Church of England Day Schools, as there is a report in the Nantwich Guardian about a concert given in the local Public Hall by the school children and their teachers in February 1917. The purpose was to raise money for the Red Cross. Nellie and two of her colleagues performed a comedy sketch called 'Our At 'Ome Day'.

In the 1921 Census Nellie was still living at home with her mother and sister Mabel, again back in Paddock Lane, Audlem.

Nellie's mother, Mrs Jane Etches, passed away in 1922 and her funeral was reported in the Crewe Chronicle on Saturday 11 March 1922. Nellie's father, John Clifford Etches, had already died in 1914.

Nellie obviously enjoyed performing. In February 1923 she recited 'The Lost Galoshe' – a monologue – at The Women's Institute. In December 1924, at a 'Converzazione' held in the Public Hall in connection with Nantwich Cottage Hospital, she sang in a quartet and then performed in a sketch called 'The Area Belle'. In March 1927 she is mentioned in a Crewe Chronicle report when, at a

Parish Tea on Shrove Tuesday, she performed in another comedy sketch with two other ladies.

Nellie was also talented in craft making and it was reported that on one occasion in 1929 she gave her local Women's Institute a demonstration of all forms of raffia work, showing how each article in her collection was made. Yet another talent was dancing and in 1930 she conducted dancing classes at the Women's Institute. The members of Audlem WI were awarded a second-class certificate in the Country Folk Dancing Competition held in Chester in March 1930, after which Nellie was thanked for her 'able instruction'. She went even further at the parochial garden party at the vicarage that June, where her folk dancers gave demonstrations and her pupils from the Church of England Day Schools also entertained with Maypole dances.

In April 1930 it was reported in the Crewe Chronicle that at the Wirral and Eddisbury Singing Festival held at Chester, 20 children from the Audlem Church of England Schools obtained a second-class certificate. This was the first time the school had entered the competition and the conductor, none other than Miss N Etches, and the children were to be congratulated.

Nellie was clearly very involved with her local community, as the previous examples have shown. In September 1933 an article in the Cheshire Observer reported that a branch of the County Rural Library would be opening later that month in the staff room of the local grammar school. It would be under the control of the Audlem Parish Council and a Committee set up for the purpose – and Nellie was one of the members of that committee.

In January 1934 the Cheshire Observer reported that the current headmistress of Hankelow Church of England School, Miss Williams, was leaving to be married, and that Miss Nellie Etches, who had been Assistant Mistress in the Audlem Church of England Schools for a number of years, was to succeed her as headmistress, taking up her post in March 1934.

Nellie continued with her community involvement in her new role and was a member of the committee to organise Audlem Silver Jubilee Celebrations in 1935. Her amateur dramatics continued too, with her performing a monologue at the WI. It was reported that she acted as accompanist and games organiser at a Parish Christmas Party at Hankelow in December 1935 and the following February she again organised games at a social evening at Hankelow Mission and took part in a sketch performed by Mission members called 'The Tales They Tell'.

Nellie also played the organ at the Parish Church at Hankelow, at The Lantern Services being held during Lent in 1936. As part of the service, a series of lantern slides, using a 'Magic Lantern', were shown to illustrate the work of the church in various parts of the world. The Hankelow Village Fete of June 1936 was another opportunity for Nellie's pupils to show off their prowess in dancing, while during July Nellie served teas at Audlem Parish Church Garden Party at the vicarage.

In April 1937, Nellie, with the help of various Mission members, organised a whist drive and dance at Hankelow in connection with the Mission Church. The following month she was to be found with a couple of other Mission

members, running a stall selling children's clothing at a Rummage Sale held in connection with Hankelow Mission.

Whist drives were a popular way to socialise and to raise funds for good causes. In June 1938, back in Audlem, Nellie presented the prizes at a whist drive in connection with the Tennis Club at The Green. Later that month a whist drive was held in aid of the Audlem Wolf Cub Pack, where Nellie was the Lady Cubmaster – yet another example of her commitment to the community. In February 1939 Nellie organised a whist drive and dance in aid of the Managers' Fund for the Church of England School – and won First Prize!

The 1939 Garden Party at the vicarage at Audlem provide another opportunity for Nellie's pupils from Hankelow Church of England School to perform, on this occasion a 'Nursery Rhyme Pageant'.

The summer of 1939 brought about the 1st Audlem Scout and Cub Camp, held again at Brynbach, North Wales, as in 1938, from July 29th to August 5th. The Rev. Hempton (Scoutmaster) and Miss Nellie Etches (Cubmaster) were in charge. Miss Muriel Kendall assisted with the Cubs. The weather was mixed but all returned home safely and seemed pleased with the camp.

1939, of course, marked the start of World War II. On 29 September 1939 a Register was taken in order to be able to carry out an accurate count of the population and produce ration books, issue ID cards and organise conscription. It was similar in some ways to a census and now gives us a good snapshot of where people lived, their date of birth and their occupation. Nellie, now aged 48 and unmarried, was still living in Paddock Lane with her sister Maud, now

aged 65 and recorded as incapacitated due to rheumatism. Nellie is recorded as a schoolteacher and a headmistress under Cheshire County Council. The Register also records that she was a First Aider in the Audlem branch of St John Ambulance and an Air Raid Precautions Warden. She was determined to do her bit for the war effort. In fact, in April 1940 there was a report in the Crewe Chronicle that Nellie and other members of St John Ambulance were presented with their First Aid Certificates.

In early December 1940 Nellie presented the prizes at a whist drive held as part of efforts to raise money for Lord Beaverbrook's Spitfire Fund – a total of £105 and 6 shillings was raised. Later that month a Nativity Play was performed by members of Hankelow Mission, including Nellie, who had also assisted the Rev. Hempton with the production.

In 1943 a report in the Crewe Chronicle shows us that Nellie was still involved with the local Scouts and Cubs and helped to organise a party for them at the Council School, at which a number of short plays and readings were performed before refreshments were served. After the war in 1947 Nellie was to be found again giving country dancing lessons, this time at the Church Fellowship.

The 1949 Hankelow School Christmas Party was reported in the Crewe Chronicle, with Nellie Etches (Headmistress) making the arrangements for tea, games and entertainment, along with some parents.

At some point Nellie and her sister Mabel had moved to Wellington Road in Nantwich, where in January 1954 Mabel, with whom Nellie had lived for many years, passed away very suddenly. Two of her ten siblings had died at a young

age, and her brother Robert, who lived in Dover, had also passed away very suddenly in 1930 at the age of just 51, but Mabel's death would have hit Nellie very hard due to their closeness for most if not all of their lives.

On 23 July 1955 the Crewe Chronicle reported that Nellie had retired after 21 years at Hankelow Church of England School. On 18 July the Vicar of Audlem had presented her with a gold watch on behalf of past and present pupils and parents. Nellie was also presented with an occasional table, vase and flowers by the ladies from Hankelow Church of England Mission Church. A decorated cake made by Mrs Denton was cut by Nellie during refreshments, which were provided by a ladies' committee. Tributes to Miss Nellie Etches' services were paid by Rev. Bellyse, Mr Birchall and Mr Major, the school managers. Nellie expressed sincere thanks for the gifts and the kind thoughts which inspired them.

Retirement from work didn't stop Nellie from continuing her involvement with the community - in June 1960 she was involved with a pageant presented by Guides and Brownies to commemorate Commonwealth Day.

One of Nellie's older brothers, Reggie, came to live in Nantwich with Nellie and Violet, her sister, when he returned home from living in Italy in 1962. A few months later he was admitted to hospital, where he passed away, aged 81. Brother Clifford attended the funeral with Nell and Vi and brother Charles' son, John. Wreaths were sent from siblings and their families living in other parts of the country.

Violet, born in 1887, had come to live with Nellie when she retired from her job as a State Certified Private Nurse. In the 1939 Register, Violet was employed by and living in the household of Dr Matthew Sayers, a retired medical practitioner and his wife, who lived in Station Road, Alsager, Cheshire. We don't know when she retired, but by 1962 when Reggie joined the household, she would have been 75 years old and it's quite possible she was already living with her sisters Mabel and Nellie when Mabel passed away in 1954.

Nellie Etches passed away at the Memorial Hospital in Crewe on 14 January 1967, at the age of 75. Her funeral was held on 18 January at Nantwich Parish Church, conducted by Rev. E.M.B Southwell, assisted by Rev. J.R. Bellyse. Present at the funeral were her sister Vi, her nephew John Clifford Etches and her nieces Muriel Etches and Vadne Etches, who were representing Nellie's older brothers Charles and Clifford, who were unable to attend. Representatives of many organisations with which Nellie had been or still was involved were there too and eight wreaths were sent from family and close friends and neighbours. Nellie was buried in the churchyard at Audlem.

Nellie's sister Violet lived on until she was 93 years of age. She died in October 1980 in Stamer House Nursing Home in Stoke on Trent, Staffordshire and her funeral was conducted at Nantwich Parish Church by Rev. J.J. Richardson. Like Nellie, she was buried at Audlem, the last of the eleven children of John Clifford Etches and his wife, Jane.

Nellie Etches certainly lived a very full life, and one where she served her community diligently. It was a life well lived.

Sources:

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