

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in April 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women staff and female patients associated with the Fleming Memorial Children's Hospital, Jesmond, Northumberland.

Minnie Garrett's Story

Minnie Garrett was working as a laundress at the Fleming Memorial Hospital for Sick Children when the 1891 census was taken on 5 April that year¹. The return tells us she was single, aged 24 and born in Newcastle upon Tyne. Except there is no evidence of a baby called Minnie Garrett being born about 1867 in Newcastle, so she must have used a nickname.

A quick glance on the Internet shows that Minnie can derive from many women's names, usually Wilhelmina, but others include Minerva, Margaret, Amelia or Mary. A search for girls with the surname Garrett and variants, born around 1867 in Newcastle upon Tyne, brings up just 8 possibilities²:

2 Elizabeths, Susannah, Bridget, Mary Hannah, Martha Ann, Eleanor and Louisa. But which is our girl? Minnie is unlikely to be a diminutive for the first 3 options, or the last, and it's an unlikely nickname for Eleanor (and a simple check showed Eleanor Garrett died in infancy³). That leaves Mary Hannah Garret and Martha Ann Garnett. Could one of these have worked as a laundress at Fleming Hospital? Martha was living with her family and working as a dressmaker in 1891⁴, according to the census of that year, so the most probable option is Mary Hannah Garret(t). Mary Hannah was born on 19 March 1867⁵, to Stephen and his wife Catherine (or Katherine), nee Watson.

Catherine Watson was baptised on 7 August 1831⁶ and Stephen Garret was born on 20 November 1833⁷. They were both from Newcastle upon Tyne. In 1861 the census return shows Catherine was a servant in Elswick⁸, an area west of the centre of Newcastle, while Stephen, a waggon wright, lived in nearby Westgate with his widowed mother and a younger brother⁹. The couple married later that year¹⁰.

In 1871, they lived in Westgate with their children. By now Stephen was a wagon inspector, while Catherine was caring for their 2 boys and 2 girls. Their sons, William Watson and George Robert, were born in 1863 and 1865 respectively, on the other side of the river Tyne in South Shields and were both at school, while their daughters Mary Hannah and Evelyn Kate, both born in Newcastle, weren't old enough to attend¹¹. In 1881 the family had moved to Elswick, a little further from Newcastle's centre. Stephen worked as a joiner, William was a grocer, George was an ironmonger and 10 year-old Evelyn was at school. Catherine and Mary Hannah, who was 14, had no occupation recorded¹². Perhaps Minnie was assisting her mother at home, because the census shows

they had 2 other people living with them: Hannah Garret, Stephen's 74 year-old widowed mother, and John W Watson, Catherine's 20 year-old nephew, an able seaman.

In 1891 the family was living in the same house. Stephen was still a joiner, while William was by then a 27 year-old newsagent. Evelyn, who was 20 years old, had no recorded occupation¹³. Perhaps she had taken over from Minnie, helping her mother with the housework, especially as they now had 3 boarders and a lodger, none of whom seemed to be related to the family.

Minnie and her brother George were not living at home. George, by then an ironmonger's assistant, was married to Mary Elizabeth, nee Bradley, and living in Elswick with his wife and 2 daughters¹⁴. Minnie had moved to Jesmond, north of Newcastle's centre to work in the Fleming Memorial Hospital as a laundress.

There were 2 other women employed in the laundry, Ann Thompson, who was 50 and Nora Cotterill, the 18 year old laundry maid¹. It must have been hard work in a steamy-hot room, coping with the number of sheets needed for a hospital with nearly 50 patients. With only 3 women living-in and working in the laundry, it's probable the hospital had washing machines the staff could use. In the late Victorian era, women at home might use a wooden dolly to agitate cloth in water, a wash-board to scrub the cloth against, and a mangle to help squeeze out most of the water and aid drying¹⁵. Wealthy families and institutions like hospitals, hotels, and laundry services, would have invested in the latest machinery.

One of the first major manufacturers of washing machines in the UK was T Bradford & Co. established in Salford, Lancashire in 1850. They also made dairy machines, which sounds incongruous, but both were built to churn the contents. By the 1880s, they sold washing machines in different sizes to suit their clientèle, including steam driven machines for large institutions¹⁶. At the Newcastle Show in 1887 the firm had a stand showing their steam laundry machinery.

NEWCASTLE SHOW

THOMAS BRADFORD and CO., Laundry and
Dairy Engineers will exhibit

DOMESTIC LAUNDRY MACHINERY (with recent important
Stand improvements), comprising “Vowel” Washing
No. 140. Machines, Wringers, Mangles, Drying and Airing
Closets, Laundry Stoves, &c.

DAIRY MACHINERY...

STEAM LAUNDRY MACHINERY, comprising Cleaning,
Stand Rinsing, Wringing, Drying, Mangling, and Ironing
No. 155. Machinery. Bradford’s New Patent “Crescent”
Ironing Machine will be shown in operation.

BUTTER FACTORY MACHINERY...

Estimates furnished for fitting up Laundries and Dairies,
hand power or steam power, complete.

NEW ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUES may be had at the
Stands or free by post.¹⁷

Hopefully, the Fleming Memorial Hospital, which opened in 1888, had such modern facilities. Even so, laundresses like Minnie and Ann, and laundry maids like Nora, would have needed to transfer the wet washing through the mangle to help dry it, hang the washing to dry almost completely, before ironing the sheets and any other laundry as required.

It would have been hard work and Minnie may have been grateful to escape it through marriage, as she did the following year.

In 1892 Mary Hannah Garrett married William MacClachlan Cheyne¹⁸. William, son of John Cheyne and his wife Elizabeth, nee Anderson, was born on 25 May 1868 in Aberdeen, Scotland¹⁹. By the mid-1870s the Cheyne family had moved to Newcastle upon Tyne²⁰, and in 1881 they were living in Byker, east of the city centre. William was at school and his father was working as a house carpenter²¹. William started work for the GPO as a postman and when the 1891 census was taken he was living with his parents. John was working as a joiner like Minnie's father Stephen²², and perhaps the men worked together on the docks.

Minnie's father Stephen was mentioned in the local papers in 1896, when his colleagues from the locomotive and waggon departments at Tyne Dock presented him with "a purse of money, a silk tie, and a pair of gloves" in appreciation for him "bringing them their daily papers to work during the last few years"²³. His elder son was a newsagent, so likely he was supporting his business.

By 1901 Minnie and William, who was still working as a postman, lived in Elswick. William was the head of the household and shared the home with Minnie, his parents John and Elizabeth, and a male boarder²⁴. The 1900s were touched by sadness, as both of Minnie's parents died; her father Stephen in 1902²⁵ and her mother Catherine in 1908²⁶. In 1905 Mary Hannah and William had a daughter called Minnie Watson Cheyne²⁷. Tragedy struck the family again when she died, at just 15 months old, of laryngitis and pneumonia²⁸.

By 1911 John and Elizabeth Cheyne had moved from the house they had shared with William and Minnie. The census taken that year shows they were living in one room of a shared house in Elswick²⁹. It also records that they had 8 children born alive, but only one - William - was still living. Minnie's brother, William Watson Garret, was lodging in Wallsend and was no longer a newsagent, instead he was working in the docks³⁰. Her brother George lived in Gosforth with his wife and 5 of their 6 surviving children³¹. The youngest sibling, their sister Evelyn Kate, lived in Jesmond and worked as a housemaid³².

Minnie and her husband William were more difficult to trace. In fact, only by disregarding their correct ages can we find probable records for them. (The incorrect ages may be because the census returns were completed by the householder, who may just have guessed.) William Cheyne was described as aged 38, an insurance agent who was born in Aberdeen and a lodger in a house in Heaton. The record shows he was married and has been for 19 years. It also noted he had one child, now dead³³. Minnie Cheyne was a boarder in a house in Stockton on Tees and worked as a canvasser. The census return gives her first name as Minnie, her age as 38, and says she was married for 9 years (not 19, but again this could have been misheard). It also said she had one child who had died³⁴.

The decade brought more tragedy for the family, as Minnie's youngest nephew Ernest died aged 6 in 1916³⁵. Then, in 1918, her elder brother, William Watson Garret³⁶, father-in-law John Cheyne³⁷, and one of her nieces³⁸, died.

By 1921 Minnie was living with her husband again and they were boarding in a house in Newcastle upon Tyne. Only William was working, and now he was a press representative for Associated Newspapers³⁹. William's mother Elizabeth (who died the following year⁴⁰) was still living in the single room she had shared with her late husband. The census recorded she had a visitor, Minnie's sister Evelyn Kate Garret, who was out of work as the woman she had worked for as nurse housekeeper had passed away⁴¹. Minnie's surviving brother George was working as a mason's labourer and lived with his wife, 3 of their children and 3 grandchildren⁴².

In 1926, Minnie's brother George and his wife both died within weeks of each other⁴³. They were survived by 5 of their children⁴⁴, most of whom were still in the north east, though one of their daughters moved to Canada in 1924, married and set up her home there⁴⁵.

William's work as a press representative meant he spent a lot of time travelling. In 1930 he was involved in court case, accused of dangerous driving after colliding with a woman on a bicycle. During the case, which was dropped, he estimated that he had driven a total of 90,000 miles⁴⁶. Three years later, William died⁴⁷. Mary Hannah applied for probate and his estate was valued at £1067 18s 2d⁴⁸.

Minnie lived out the rest of her life in Newcastle, and died in 1943⁴⁹. She was survived by her brother George's children and their families, and her younger sister Evelyn Kate Garret, who died aged 84 in 1955 and was buried with her parents⁵⁰.

Sources

1. 1891 Census of England. Class RG12, Piece 4219, Folio 74, Accessed on Ancestry.
2. Search performed on Find My Past (FMP) for Civil Births. Following search terms used:
Surname: Garret (name variants box ticked), Year of birth: 1867 (plus or minus 1 year), Location: Newcastle upon Tyne (search radius exact). That generated 17 results, with 8 being girls' names.
3. England and Wales Death Index. Entry for Eleanor Garrett, Quarter 4 1869, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 9. FMP.
4. 1891 Census of England. Class RG12, Piece 4220, Folio 28. Ancestry.
5. 1939 England and Wales Register. Borough Newcastle upon Tyne, Schedule 138, Sub-schedule 1. Ancestry.
6. England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975. Baptised in Newcastle upon Tyne. Ancestry.
7. England & Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1936. RG4, Piece 2382, Tuthill Chapel. Ancestry.
8. 1861 Census of England. Class RG9, Piece 3814, Folio 93, Page 19. Ancestry.
9. 1861 Census of England. Class RG9, Piece 3814, Folio 71, Page 12. Ancestry.
10. England and Wales Marriage Index. Quarter 2 1861, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 185. Ancestry.
11. 1871 Census of England. Class RG10, Piece 5074, Folio 57, Page 33. Ancestry.
12. 1881 Census of England. Class RG11, Piece 5051, Folio 73, Page 16. Ancestry.
13. 1891 Census of England. Class RG12, Piece 4195, Folio 49, Page 32. FMP (not on Ancestry).
14. 1891 Census of England. Class RG12, Piece 4201, Folio 47, Page 32. Ancestry.
15. <http://www.oldandinteresting.com/history-of-washing-clothes.aspx>
16. [COSGB: T. Bradford & Co.](#)
17. Newcastle Daily Courant. 8 July 1887, page 1. Heading, Newcastle Show. FMP.
18. England and Wales Marriage Index. Quarter 1 1892, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 172. Ancestry.
19. Scotland, Select Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950. Baptised at St Nicholas, Aberdeen. Ancestry.
20. The 1871 census of Scotland shows William had a brother called John, born in 1869. His death was recorded in Newcastle upon Tyne. England and Wales Death Index. Entry for John Cheyne aged 5, Quarter 4 1874, Volume 10b, Page 104. Ancestry.
21. 1881 Census of England. Class RG11, Piece 5068, Folio 39, Page 19. Ancestry.
22. 1891 Census of England. Class RG12, Piece 4196, Folio 57. Ancestry.
23. Shields Daily Gazette. 21 December 1896, page 3. Heading, Local and District News. FMP.
24. 1901 Census of England. Class RG13, Piece 4769, Folio 123. Page 1. Ancestry.
25. England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 3 1902, South Shields, Volume 10a, Page 372. Ancestry.
26. England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 2 1908, South Shields, Volume 10a, Page 441. Ancestry.

27. England and Wales Birth Index. Quarter 1 1905, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 52. Ancestry.
28. England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 2 1906, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 157. GRO. Cause of death from digital image of certificate. Informant's name was William Cheyne.
29. 1911 Census of England. Class RG14, Piece 30584, Schedule 79. FMP.
30. 1911 Census of England. Class RG14, Piece 30712, Schedule 95. FMP.
31. 1911 Census of England. Class RG14, Piece 30863, Schedule 449. FMP.
32. 1911 Census of England. Class RG14, Piece 30570, Schedule 92. FMP.
33. 1911 Census of England. Class RG14, Piece 30690, Schedule 50. FMP.
34. 1911 Census of England. Class RG14, Piece 29559, Schedule 243. FMP.
35. England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 2 1916, Castle Ward, Volume 10b, Page 461. Ancestry.
36. England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 1 1918, Tynemouth, Volume 10b, Page 292. Ancestry.
37. England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 1 1918, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 74. Ancestry.
38. George R Garret's daughter, Louisa Mary married George Jewitt in 1915. Record of Louisa M Jewitt's death recorded on England and Wales Death Index. Quarter 4 1918, Castle Ward, Volume 10b, Page 675. Ancestry.
39. 1921 Census of England. Class RG15, Piece 25359, Schedule 219. FMP. William is indexed as William McCheyne.
40. England and Wales Death Index entry for Elizabeth Cheyne aged 82, Quarter 1 1922, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 149. Ancestry.
41. 1921 Census of England. Class RG15, Piece 25272, Schedule 178. FMP.
42. 1921 Census of England. Class RG15, Piece 25589, Schedule 315. 2 of the grandchildren living with George and his wife Mary were his late daughter Louisa's children. FMP.
43. England and Wales Death Index entries for George R Garret aged 61, Quarter 4 1926, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 116 and for Mary E Garrett aged 61, Quarter 4 1926, Castle Ward, Volume 10b, Page 379. Ancestry.
44. On 1911 census George R Garret said they had 7 children still living, 2 died subsequently (see above).
45. May Garret's emigration in 1924 recorded on U.S., Index to Alien Arrivals at Canadian Atlantic and Pacific Seaports, 1904-1944. Marriage to William Wilvert 21 August 1926 from Ontario, Canada, Marriages, 1826-1940. May Wilvert's burial recorded on the Canada, Find a Grave® Index, 1600s-Current.
46. Shields Daily News. 4 June 1930, page 1. Heading, In Seaton Delaval Avenue, Newcastle Motorist has an exciting time. William's surname recorded as McCheyne. FMP.
47. England and Wales Death Index, Quarter 2 1933, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 187. Ancestry.
48. England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995 shows amount of effects in administration granted to Mary Hannah Cheyne, widow. Ancestry.

49. England and Wales Death Index, Quarter 3 1943, Newcastle upon Tyne, Volume 10b, Page 90. Ancestry.
50. UK and Ireland, Find a Grave® Index, 1300s-Current. The image of the gravestone for Stephen Garret and his wife Catherine in Harton cemetery, South Shields, also includes an inscription for their daughter.