

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in October 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were working in the Ulster linen industry.

Margaret Ann Clarke's Story

Margaret Ann Graham was born in the townland of Clogharevan in the parish of Killeavy in County Armagh on 19 February 1865¹. Her parents were Thomas Graham, a weaver, and Sarah Jane Graham née Morgan. They had married in Camlough Church of Ireland on 15 October 1858¹. Thomas was a bachelor and weaver of full age and Sarah was a spinster aged 20, with no occupation given. As civil registration for births only commences in 1864, it is unknown how many children Thomas and Sarah had. However, from birth and death registrations on www.irishgenealogy.ie and www.geni.nidirect.gov.uk, it can be ascertained that Margaret Ann had at least seven siblings:

1. *James* b. circa 1860, who died on 24 May 1879 in Bessbrook. He was a bachelor, aged 19, employed in the mill. Cause of death was Phthisis Pulmonalis (Pulmonary Tuberculosis) which he'd had for 6 months. Father Thomas Graham was present¹.

2. *Mary Jane* b. circa 1863 was a witness to her sister Margaret Ann's marriage to William Clark in 1890. She died in Bessbrook on 19 January 1892 aged 28. Cause of death was Phthisis which she'd had for 10 months. Mary Jane was a spinner and a spinster. Incidentally, the term spinster originated in the Middle Ages and described a single woman who supported herself in the low-paying profession of making yarn so a spinner and a spinster were actually the same thing².

3. *William* b. circa 1866 based on aged at death but no birth registration found. William married Agnes Brown on 15 November 1889. They had two children – Thomas William b. 20 September 1890 and Agnes b. 20 January 1892, both at 58 Queen Street, Newry. Agnes died at 58 Queen Street on 22 May 1892. Death registration says she was 25 and the wife of a clerk, with cause of death 'possibly phthisis'. William died at the same address on 30 November 1894. He was a widower and a clerk aged 28 and had suffered from phthisis for 6 months. His brother David Graham of Bessbrook was present¹.

4. *David* b. 15 November 1868, Bessbrook. Father a weaver. He married Jane Freebourn on 4 February 1893¹. They had no children. From the 1901 census, he was a carding master in a mill at Maghernahely (the Bessbrook mill). His orphaned niece, Agnes, aged 9, was living with them. By 1911, David was a farmer and orphaned nephew, Thomas, had joined the household. Neither were working in the mill⁵.

5. *Robert* b. 18 March 1870, Bessbrook. Robert married Sarah Best on 13 July 1892 in Bessbrook¹. From the 1901 and 1911 census, they were living in Newry/Ballybot and Robert was a reeling master in a spinning mill. They had 9 children by 1911 (a 10th had died). The eldest two daughters were reelers in the mill whilst eldest son was a ticket clerk in the mill⁵.

6. *Sarah* b. 12 December 1871, Clougharevan. She died in Bessbrook on 20 October 1875, aged 3 years 9 months. Cause of death was dropsy which she'd had for 6 months.

7. *Maria* b. 20 March 1875, Clougharevan. She died at her brothers' home, 58 Queen Street, Newry on 29 November 1894, aged 18. Brother David of Bessbrook was present. Maria was a spinster and a preparer in a mill. Cause of death was Phthisis which she'd had for 4 months. The process of preparing flax generated a huge amount of dust. Constant inhalation of this dust caused coughs and chest infections as well as permanent damage to the lungs. Maria would have been extremely susceptible to Phthisis, both in her work and at home, given she was living with her brother and sister in-law who both died of Phthisis¹.

Thomas Graham died on 20 December 1889 in Bessbrook, aged 60. He was a married mill worker. Cause of death was heart disease which he'd had for a year. Son Robert Graham was present. His wife, Sarah Jane Graham died on 7 April 1902, in Bessbrook. She was described as the widow of a weaver, aged 61. Son, David, from Bessbrook, was present. Cause of death was cardiac failure due to chronic bronchitis and asthma for years¹.

Margaret Ann Graham, spinster aged 23, and William Clarke, bachelor aged 27, married on 11 January 1890 in the Meeting House in Bessbrook, according to the Form and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church. Margaret was a spinner from Bessbrook and William was a mill worker from Mullaglass¹. A spinner spun the flax into yarn for weaving. It was hot, wet, noisy work. In an attempt to keep cool, the women would work in bare feet but this led to foot issues and skin conditions. While they could compensate in one way for the noise by

learning to lip read, so they could communicate, deafness in later life would have been common. Margaret and William had only one child, a daughter named Sarah Jane, who was born on 17 June 1893 in Maytown¹. Her father, William, was a yarn bleacher and 'made his mark' when he registered her birth. It too could have been a hot, wet occupation if he was involved in the chemical process of steeping the brown linen in acids or boiling it in lye rather than just laying it out in fields to whiten.

William, Margaret and daughter Sarah Jane were living in house 10 in College Square, Bessbrook when the 1901 census was compiled. The village of Bessbrook is approximately 5km north west of Newry and straddles the townlands of Maghernahely, Clogharevan and Maytown. It is in the Civil Parish of Killeevy and the Church of Ireland parish of Camlough in the Barony of Orior Upper, electoral division of Mullaglass and Poor Law Union of Newry³. College Square East was in the townland of Maytown.

Quaker, John Grubb Richardson (1815-1891), established the village and the mill in 1845, having selected the area because of the availability of water power (the brook is on the outskirts of the village) and the large amount of flax grown in the area. John named the village after Elizabeth (Bess), the wife of a relative, Joseph Nicholson, who had a linen business in the district⁴. The village had spacious streets and squares surrounding the large linen mill. The majority of the houses were constructed of local granite and are still occupied today. Each house had an allotment garden to grow vegetables, though this land has now been built on⁴. John Richardson was a man ahead of his time. Bessbrook predates the more well known Bournville in England, built by the Cadbury family, by more than 30 years⁴. A cooperative store was established in the

village and a 300-acre farm, owned by the mill, supplied milk. Other shops in the village included a butcher, a baker, a general store, a post office and a milliner. Interestingly, a bank was also established and in 1876 was paying 5% interest on deposits! The company financed a doctor, provided a dispensary in the village and encouraged workers to subscribe to a medical club⁴. Bessbrook was founded on John Richardson's Philosophy of the 3 P's – no public houses, no pawn shops and no police. A social centre provided the opportunity for villagers to congregate, and a brass band formed. While the Police Service of Northern Ireland did have a presence in the village for a number of years, they left in 2012, so Bessbrook still has no pubs, no pawn shops and no police. Even after he retired, John continued with schemes to improve the lives of those living in the village, building a town hall, a library and a venue for meetings/lectures⁴.

As a Quaker, John Richardson wanted the village to be free of sectarianism. He provided ground for churches of each faith to be constructed – Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopalian etc. Of course, there was also a Quaker Meeting House and this was built in the grounds of The Woodhouse, the Richardson's residence. This desire was also applied to the village school, which was non-denominational, and to the mill work force which was 50% Protestant and 50% Roman Catholic. John Richardson brought in poor people, including beggars and the unqualified, to work in the mill. His philosophy was to encourage them to improve themselves, thus raise to a higher standard of living⁴.

Number 10 College Square, where the Clarke family lived, was in one of 3 rows of terrace houses (West, North and East) surrounding open land with the

school at the southern end of the west terrace. From the 1911 census it can be established that it was in the College Square East terrace⁵. The houses were built of granite with red brick features around the 3 front windows and the door. Unlike Charlemont Square, none of the homes had a window (and room) in the attic. The roof was of slate. Number 10 had five rooms – a kitchen and living room downstairs with 3 bedrooms upstairs. There was a shed to the rear, presumably containing the lavatory. The house would not have had the modern amenities of an internal bathroom or a hot water supply. Consequently, the houses in College Square were considered to be 2nd class dwellings. All three terraces still exist. In the middle of the square is a bowling green, a children's playground and parkland.

William Clarke was a yarn boiler aged 40 on the 1901 census⁵. It would have been hot, wet work either cleaning and preparing the fibre or preparing the woven linen for bleaching. Margaret Ann, aged 32, was a now a yarn winder. Unlike her husband, she could read and write. Had she already benefited from attendance at the school in the village? As a winder, Margaret would have been operating equipment which wound the yarn on spools for warp, and pirns for weft. The other occupants of the house were their daughter Sarah Jane aged 7; Margaret's mother, Sarah Jane Graham, a widow aged 67, and Margaret's nephew Thomas William Graham, aged 9 (who was an orphan)¹. Thomas and Sarah were 'scholars' so would have been attending the school on the opposite side of the square. They could both read and write. Margaret's mother could read only. The family were Presbyterian and all born in Co. Armagh. It would have been a reasonably comfortable existence for the family. 1901 was also a significant year for the Richardson family and

Bessbrook mill as it joined with other companies to form The Linen Thread Co. Limited.

Sadly, Margaret Ann Clarke died on 8 December 1902 in Bessbrook¹. She was married, the wife of a yarn man who 'made his mark' when he registered her death. Margaret died of Pulmonary Tuberculosis aged just 36. Many mill workers developed 'TB' due to the crowded working conditions and poor ventilation which facilitated the spread of the 'TB' bacteria, but it must be remembered that 'TB' was also prevalent in the general population at that time.

William remarried in 1908 to Mary Ann Kennell, a spinster and damask weaver¹. They were still living at 10 College Square on the 1911 census⁵ and had no children of their own. William and Margaret's daughter Sarah Jane was living with them. She was now 17 and employed as a linen weaver. Sarah would have operated a powered loom. She would still have been susceptible to a variety of afflictions both in the short term and long term – respiratory illnesses, repetitive strain injuries, musculoskeletal disorders and hearing loss. According to the Newry Reporter of Saturday 22 November 1941, William died in Newry hospital on 19 November, following an illness and operation⁶. He was still living at 10 College Square East, Bessbrook and his 2nd wife had pre-deceased him. The obituary mentions his daughter but gives no name. No son in-law or grandchildren are named. William was buried in the Presbyterian cemetery at Bessbrook.

Miss Sarah Clarke died in Daisy Hill Hospital after a brief illness on Sunday 30 September 1956 (Newry Reporter of Thursday 4 October)⁶. She was the

daughter of the late Mr & Mrs William Clarke and was buried in Bessbrook Presbyterian cemetery. Sarah was still living at 10 College Square East, her home for 63 years.

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Sources

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