

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in March 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who appear in the 1901 census for St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex and Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey¹.

Annie Dickenson's Story

“At West London, Annie Dickenson, widow, whose address was refused, was charged with having been drunk and disorderly. The magistrate was made acquainted with prisoner's character by the assistant gaoler, who stated that it was her third appearance that week. She was before Mr. Plowden on Friday and fined 10s. which was paid. The officer further stated that her husband, who had died recently, left her property amounting to several thousand pounds, and whenever she was fined she communicated with her solicitors, who paid the money. Her fines were always paid. Mr. Rose thought she ought to be sent to an inebriates' home to save her life, and said it was quite ridiculous to impose fines. Prisoner was remanded, to enable the magistrate, if possible, to send her to a home.²”

The magistrate was successful in the hunt for an appropriate home; the day after this report appeared in the Weekly Dispatch, on 3rd September 1900, Annie DICKENSON, was committed to the Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women in Horley, Surrey for a period of two years (discharged 2nd September 1902), the home's third patient, given that it had only opened on 28th August 1900³. The home, as it was on first opening, had a relatively small number of patients housed in an old mansion house, prettily furnished and with comfortable facilities including electric lighting and musical instruments⁴.

This sounds to have been an ideal place to send Annie DICKENSON, given her circumstances and background as described in the home's casebook. Annie was 30 years old, 5 foot tall and, at 140lbs (10 stone) in weight, clearly far from malnourished. She was described as "fairly well-educated", having attended a boarding school in Wallington (Surrey) and able to read and write well in addition to "understanding music." She was a widow, who had borne three children, two of whom were still living. She had brown eyes, a pale complexion and dark brown hair. On admission, however, she was also described as being in a wretched condition, dirty and ill clad, generally unhealthy and with an eczematous ulcer on her leg and bruises on her right arm⁵.

P.C. Peter COLLIE had arrested her as "guilty while drunk of riotous and disorderly behaviour."⁵ The Weekly Dispatch report above notes, of course, that she had made a number of previous appearances in court at which fines had been imposed. This is backed up by an earlier report in the West London Observer on 24th August 1900:

“Annie Dickenson, a married [sic] woman, living at 72 St Dunstan’s Road, Fulham, was charged with being disorderly, while drunk, in Lens Gardens. The prisoner told the magistrate that she would be a staunch teetotaller for the rest of her days. Mr. Plowden: You shouldn’t make rash vows, for they are only made to be broken. Prisoner was fined 2s. 6d. or 3 days.⁶”

What had happened to drive her to drink beer and brandy to such a point of inebriation? The Fairfield casebook records that, whilst such intemperance was frequent, it was only recent and she had no prior criminal record other than five convictions for drunkenness in 1900, no record of insanity and was not a user of tobacco or drugs⁵. The same document also records that she was drinking “because of domestic trouble and bereavement (both parents and husband within 6 months).” Her subsequent conduct at Fairfield is described as “quiet and inoffensive” but it is also recorded that on admission she had recently started having convulsions after heavy drinking and these fits (described as epilepsy) appear to have continued whilst she was at the home leaving her “very dazed always after fits” and of a “decidedly weak” mental condition⁵. There is a note that there was no news of her in 1909⁵, seven years after her discharge and no record of her has yet been found, neither in subsequent censuses nor in death records. Did she perhaps end up in another institution for more medical reasons?

Finding earlier records to consider Annie’s background was not easy as some of the facts in the Farmfield records and in the newspaper reports are incorrect, although whether because of incorrect recording or lack of knowledge of correct details is not clear. Her place of birth in the Farmfield casebook⁵ is given as “294 King’s Cross, London” but was actually Wantage in Berkshire⁷, before the family

moved in around 1868 to 294 Pentonville Road, Islington, London. Although she appears to have been called Annie consistently, she was registered as Anne⁷ and her married surname appears variously as both DICKINSON and DICKENSON. She is described as being the third eldest in the family, with one brother and seven sisters⁵, but was actually the fourth eldest, and appears to have had two brothers (although the youngest died before his second birthday) and five sisters. Her parents are said to have been poulterers and florists⁵ but earlier censuses show her father as an innkeeper or licensed victualler^{8, 9} and later records consistently refer to him as a fruiterer^{10, 11}. Whilst it may indeed have been the death of her husband on 18th November 1899^{12, 13} which sparked off the troubles which led to her drinking and her father, William SIMS, had indeed died six months earlier (buried 15th June 1899 in Islington)¹⁴, her mother, Mary Ann SIMS, had actually died ten years earlier (buried 3rd July 1890 in Islington)¹⁴.

Finding the name of her husband and her own maiden name was also not straightforward. Fortunately, the Farmfield casebook⁵ gave the name of a next of kin; the name “Mrs Dimsdale” is crossed out and the name and address of a married sister is given. The name of the sister was not clear, but the address clarified it through the 1901 census¹⁵ as Mrs SCROGGIE – Ellen, of 29 Gloucester Road, Finsbury Park. With such an unusual surname, the marriage of Ellen RIVERS, widow, to William James SCROGGIE in Islington in December 1897 was at least easier to find and gave the father’s name of William SIMS, farmer (yet another different occupation for him)¹⁶. From here, a family tree could be drawn up from censuses and GRO indexes.

William SIMS married Mary Ann TILEY in 1859 in Wantage, Berkshire¹⁷ and, as mentioned above, they went on to have eight children in total. The second,

Emily Beatrice, married Herbert Augustus DIMSDALE¹⁸, thus accounting for the crossed out name in the Farmfield casebook. The sixth, Ellen, was Mrs SCROGGIE. Annie herself married on 22nd November 1883 at St Andrew's, Islington. She was 19, living at 294 Pentonville Road, daughter of William SIMS, fruiterer. Her husband, Abel Arthur DICKINSON [sic] was 25, a farmer's steward of Hyde House Farm, Kingsbury, son of John DICKINSON, farmer. The witnesses to the marriage were Herbert Augustus and Emily Beatrice DIMSDALE¹⁹.

Abel Arthur DICKINSON was born in 1858 in St Pancras²⁰, although his name in records is subsequently sometimes given as Arthur²¹ or Arthur Abel^{22, 23, 24}. His father, John, seems to have been a man of some substance, farming and horse dealing at Williotts (Wyllyots) Manor in Potters Bar, Middlesex^{22, 25} and running stables, leaving £3,155 5s. 8d. on his death on 30th August 1895¹³. Arthur, whilst a clerk in 1881²² and a farm steward in 1883¹⁹ was described as "living on his own means" in 1891 by which point he and Annie were at 55 Ambler Road in Islington²¹. By the time of Arthur's death in 1899, they had moved to 37 Adelaide Road, Shepherd's Bush¹³. Newspaper advertisements from the 1880s, for the sale of a rocking horse and double permambulator²⁶ and a large retriever dog and kennel²⁷, and for the rent of the first floor at 5s. and second floor at 4s., together or separate²⁸, depict this as being a desirable residence in what Charles Booth's survey shows as a road inhabited by people who were "fairly comfortable" with good ordinary earnings^{29, 30}. Contrary to the Weekly Dispatch report², however, Arthur does not seem to have left Annie with "property amounting to several thousand pounds" as the Probate Death Index shows probate being granted on 16th March 1900 to Annie DICKINSON, widow, and Julian Tregenna Biddulph Arnold, solicitor in relation to effects worth just £350¹³.

Annie had given birth to three daughters – Margaret DICKINSON [sic], born 1884 in Barnet³¹, Elsie May DICKINSON [sic], born³² and died³³ in 1885 in Barnet, and Cecilia Caroline DICKINSON [sic], born 21st (also given elsewhere as 10th or 27th) June 1888 and baptised on 28th April 1892 at St Matthew, City Road, Islington (at which time Arthur was manager of a horse repository and the family was living at 360 City Road)³⁴. In the 1901 census, with Annie now in Farmfield, Margaret, aged 16, is an assistant (and resident) at a large drapery establishment in North Hammersmith³⁵. Her younger sister does not appear to have gone by the name of Cecilia, as she is Caroline in the 1891 census²¹ and Cissie in the 1901 and 1911 censuses. In 1901, Cissie, aged 12, is a boarder at 3 Hetley Road, Shepherd's Bush³⁶; this is an address which also appears as one of Annie's addresses in the Farmfield casebook⁵ and was the home of the GILLARD family, whose son Arthur subsequently married Margaret Dickenson in 1905²³. Cissie married twice – Charles R. MAJOR in 1914³⁷ and Walter R. GEAL in 1923³⁸.

Assuming that Arthur did not leave “property amounting to several thousand pounds”², the sum of £350 is unlikely to have allowed Annie and her daughters to have continued to live in the sort of comfort which they probably had become accustomed to in Adelaide Road and may therefore account for the “domestic trouble” alluded to as one of the causes of Annie's drinking⁵. There is also a seemingly cryptic note in the Farmfield casebook “All her money taken by Arnold and Sismey.⁵” Noting that a solicitor called ARNOLD was involved in Arthur's probate application, newspaper searches quickly established why it was this did not need to be explained further at the time in the Farmfield records. Keighley, Arnold and Sismey were an established firm of solicitors – they were in fact advertising in Croydon's Weekly Standard on 8th July 1899 for any creditors of

the late William SIMS (Annie's father)³⁹. By the time that Annie was in Farmfield, they had, however, filed for bankruptcy as, in something of a cause célèbre Julian Tregenna Biddulph ARNOLD and Thomas Boulton SISMEY were tried at the Old Bailey, charged with conspiring to cheat and defraud clients in relation to misappropriation of trust funds. Both pleaded guilty to at least some of the charges; on 7th January 1901, ARNOLD was sentenced to a total of ten years penal servitude and SISMEY to 15 months' hard labour⁴⁰. Reporting on an earlier stage of the legal proceedings on 17th July 1900, the Morning Post stated that the initial charges related mainly to the funds of one client, the late Mr. Thomas John Domville TAYLOR, but also stated that "Mr. Carter, a solicitor engaged by Mrs. Taylor, succeeded in recovering from Arnold a sum of £2,608: but that was a portion of the proceeds of a fraud on the trust fund created under the will of Mr. William Sims, which would be the subject of further inquiry.⁴²" The London Evening Post, on 10th November 1900, then reported that "Referring to the Sims' Trust, Mr. Muir said that at the time of the death of Mr. Sims the Prisoners' firm was in the greatest possible difficulty..... Arnold was appointed as one of the executors under Mr. Sims' will, and the estate was to be divided between the testator's six daughters. The money was collected and paid to Arnold, who transferred it to the firm's account, and it was immediately applied to their pressing necessities. Arnold endeavoured to get some of the beneficiaries to re-invest their money, most of which had been spent. Some of them assented, and an entry was made in the books to show that it had been invested. In point of fact it had all gone. Fortunately, some of the beneficiaries did not want Arnold to re-invest their money, and a sum of £8000 was paid over for their benefit.⁴³"

Annie's circumstances therefore seem to have been a combination of grief following the death of her husband and father but probably also a change in her

financial prospects. She no longer had an income from a husband and perhaps had also suffered the loss of a not inconsiderable sum which may have been due to her from her father's trust fund if she were one of the daughters who Julian Arnold persuaded to re-invest her money – is this, perhaps, the “several thousand pounds” rather than a legacy from her husband? Sadly, though she appears to have been a quiet and compliant resident of Farmfield, her seizures and reduced circumstances may well have contributed to her disappearance thereafter.

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