

A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in January 2024, 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, Surrey.

Researching *Norah Fleming*

In January 2024 the Few Forgotten Women team decided to complete all the research projects we had started in early to mid-2023. Women had been allocated to a wide number of researchers and as expected not everyone had completed the research and written up the stories. Some names had been returned as the researcher had been unable to find much or any information. Such women where there was a small write up had already been added to the website in groups rather than individual stories.

Norah Fleming had proven difficult to research.

There are many reasons why our ancestors might be elusive. For example the name may have been mis-transcribed, or written down inaccurately in the first place. This might be particularly likely where the scribe had a different accent to an illiterate person. Here St Joseph's Catholic reformatory was run by catholic nuns, many Irish. Perhaps the name was mis-heard.

Many people changed their names. They were not regarded as set in stone. Many inebriate women were on the habitual criminals register and a skim of the register or the list of those investigated as part of this project shows that a significant proportion had used several names. Perhaps to evade the law, or to make a fresh start. Women, of course, also changed their surname on

marriage, or multiple times with multiple husbands. As Catholics, many would have chosen a “Communion name” as had been the tradition for centuries.¹ Such a new name reflects the new life and responsibilities taken on as part of the Catholic Church as well as often showing respect to a beloved saint who would be relied on to provide help and support through prayer.

So what do we learn from the 1901 census? Norah was in the inebriate reformatory, so had an alcohol problem of some significance. Only Catholics were admitted. Her birth year is estimated as 1862. The census tells us she was 39 years old, though it is possible this might say 30 years old. She had not completed the details herself so again a risk of inaccuracy, however, it tells us she was born in Vauxhall, London, was single, and was at the Reformatory, with her occupation given as flower seller. Census usually wants the current occupation, but we cannot be sure whether this was her occupation prior to being at the reformatory, or whether there was an opportunity at the Reformatory to sell flowers. Several inmates are flower sellers. However, it seems unlikely they were able to sell flowers whilst in the reformatory. Care was taken, even in church, to keep the inmates away from local residents.

She is not in the habitual criminals register with Fleming surname, and I have been unable to find her in the newspapers. I even resorted to looking for other people’s trees on ancestry, but nothing looked even vaguely right.

At this stage I was feeling a little despondent. Experienced genealogists will have spotted the obvious omission. Sat watching mindless TV I suddenly had one of those breakthroughs - perhaps... I knew her approximate year of birth, 1862, Vauxhall London. Could I find her in the General Register Office birth index online (a free resource)? Using the birth index for 1862 +/- 2 years and London, I discovered a baby called Honora Fleming was born in 1861. Could this be her? I would need to follow her through the censuses and hopefully find she was not elsewhere in 1901! As my husband went to bed I sat burning the midnight oil...

With the recent reduction in cost of digital images from GRO which are delivered instantaneously, it was too tempting not to spend £2.50 on this birth register entry.

¹ <https://cathedralctk.com/adults/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/12/8.-Choice-of-a-Confirmation-Name.pdf> accessed January 2024

Honora Fleming was born at home on sixth September 1861, daughter of Ellen (maiden name Murray) and William Fleming a labourer of 3 Park Row, Park Place. The date of birth sadly goes off the top of the digital image but certainly looks like sixth. The area for the address is also tricky to read, but it was registered in Newington, London which is close to Vauxhall, in October by her father. The plot thickens.

Sadly, despite following a number of people with similar names both before and after 1901, I could get go no further to prove this or any other similarly named person was the same Norah Fleming, inebriate, seen in the 1901 census.

PLEASE do make contact if you are able to find her in other records, or have further information, so we can update this story.

Helen Shields