

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.

Elsie Coe Melliar's Story

Elsie Coe Melliar was the first of three children born to Austin James Melliar and his wife, Mary Anne, née Coe. Austin and Mary Anne had married in the summer of 1895¹ and were living in the Parish of Midsomer Norton when Elsie was born on 17 July 1895. On 2 May 1898 her sister, Ina Brace Melliar, was born, followed by her brother, Donald Austin Melliar, on 22 April 1899². Ina's usual second name was after her paternal grandmother, Elitheba Brace.

According to the 1901 Census, Elsie's father, Austin, worked in local government as a Rates and Tax Collector, while her mother was a housewife³. At the time of the 1911 Census, the family were still living in the Parish of Midsomer Norton and Austin's job now had the title of Assistant Overseer with the Urban District Council, but Elsie, now aged 15, was not living at home. She

was to be found at Street, and was a student at The Somerset School Of Housewifery⁴.

A Minute Book kept by the Committee of Managers of the School shows that at a meeting on 12 April 1910 it was noted that a number of girls had left the school and that 'Elsie C Milliar' (sic) of Midsomer Norton was one of the girls filling a vacancy. A meeting on 17 June 1910 noted that Elsie's Studentship had been renewed, so presumably she stayed at the school until June 1911. At a meeting held on 16th June 1911 "Ina B Melliar of Midsomer Norton" was listed as a reserve candidate, so it appears that Elsie's sister Ina may well have followed in her footsteps⁵. We don't know whether or not she did get awarded a place.

The Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery opened its doors on 15 July 1897⁵. An article in Pulman's Weekly News and Advertiser on 28 June 1898⁶ stated:

"The Somerset County Education Committee has done much good work during the years it has been in existence, but it never entered on a more useful enterprise than when it accepted the generous offer of Mr. James Clark and Mr. W.S. Clark of the use of the Grange at Street for the establishment of a school of housewifery, or, in other words, a school where girls from the elementary schools of the county may reside for 1 year, free of cost, and be trained in the domestic arts and all that pertains to the making of good domestic servants or economical wives."

The article went on to explain that the Grange was a renovated country mansion and was offered rent free for 7 years, on condition that a technical school for

girls should be carried on there. At that time there were 28 students, with provision for 30. Systematic instruction was given in “cookery, laundry work, general housework, simple dress-making and the elementary laws of health”.

By the time Elsie became a student at the school, it was well established. Each year a letter was placed in local papers by the C.H. Bothamley, County Education Secretary⁷, calling “the special attention of the public to the Studentships at the School of Housewifery”, along with an advertisement indicating the closing date for applications. There were 30 Studentships offered to girls “who were not under the age of 13” and each carried with it free board and lodging and tuition for a school year. The letter went on to explain what was taught and how useful it made the girls both at home with their parents, in domestic service and later, when they have homes of their own.

Each summer there was an annual gathering at the school, which was sometimes referred to as an Open Day, Fete or Visitors’ Day. The Western Chronicle in July 1906⁸ carried a news item about that year’s Open Day in which it reported that the school had been “thrown open for inspection from 1.45 to 2.45, the pupils being at work in their respective classes. At 2.45 a formal meeting was held on the lawn in front of the house.” It seems that Mr W.S. Clark presided and that there were many members of the County Education Committee present. In addition, a special speaker was Dr Page, medical officer of health for Yeovil, who spoke very highly of the work carried out at the school and was glad to know that the students were being taught the principles of “First Aid”.

Elsie's parents separated at some time between 1911 and 1920, and it seems that Elsie, her mother Mary Ann and her sister Ina moved to Bristol, where her mother came from. Mary Ann and Ina can be found in the 1921 Census, where Ina is recorded as working as a book-keeper for Fears Ltd., Jewellers and Export Merchants of 4 Bristol Bridge, Bristol⁹.

Elsie's younger brother, Donald, had been an ironmonger's apprentice when he joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve on 17 March 1917, ending his service on 19 Feb 1919¹⁰.

Perhaps it was the "First Aid" that caught Elsie's attention, as she decided to make a career in nursing. She is listed in the General Nursing Council for England and Wales 'Register of Nurses' as having trained at Bristol Royal Infirmary from 1918 until 1921¹¹.

The General Nursing Council was set up in 1920¹². The minimum age for registration was 21, and applicants had to produce evidence of good character for the previous three years. Existing nurses had to have at least one year of training in a general hospital or Poor Law infirmary, and two years' post-training practice. By 1923 almost 23,000 nurses had applied to join the register. Elsie finally registered as a nurse on 21 September 1923¹¹.

Elsie is also listed in The Midwives Roll as having passed her C.M.B examination and enrolled as a midwife on 10 April 1922. The address given for Elsie is 102 City Road, Bristol – a large 4 storey terrace house, which nowadays is converted into flats. In the Midwives Rolls of 1931 and 1935 she is still recorded Elsie Coe Melliar and living at this address, which we will see shortly was not the case¹³.

The C.M.B stood for The Central Midwives Board, which was set up by the Midwives Act of 1902, whose provisions prohibited unqualified and unregistered women from being midwives. The aims of the act were 'to secure the better training of midwives and to regulate their practice'. Only midwives certified under this act could practice in England and Wales¹⁴.

Elsie's mother Mary Ann, died in April 1925¹⁵. That year, Elsie was recorded on the Nursing Register as living at High Lawn, 155 Wells Road, Knowle, Bristol, quite an imposing semi-detached villa, set high above the road¹¹. On 4 September 1926 Elsie married Morley Ernest Wright at Old King Street Wesleyan Chapel¹⁶.

Elsie's registered address on the 1928 Nursing Register is 44 Arley Hill, Bristol and her name is given as Elsie Coe Wright née Melliar. In 1929 Elsie gave birth to their daughter and by 1931 they had moved again, to 19 Woodbridge Road, Knowle, Bristol. They then settled at 34 Metford Road, Redland, Bristol and this was the address on the Nursing Register from 1934 onwards¹¹.

In 1939 war was looming. The 1939 Register was taken on 29 September 1939 and the information was used to produce identity cards and, once rationing was introduced in January 1940, to issue ration books¹⁷. Morley and Elise were still living at 34 Metford Road, and Morley was described as a Wholesale Drapery Warehouseman. Elsie was noted as being in the Civil Nursing Reserve¹⁸.

The Civil Nursing Reserve was set up at the start of World War II. The military estimated that they would need up to 5,000 trained nurses and it was expected

that nearly 70,000 would be needed to cope with casualties from air raids. This was more than the number of nurses that there were, so the Civil Nursing Reserve was set up with 7,000 trained nurses and 3,000 assistant nurses. In addition, there were places for nursing auxiliaries, who were given 50 hours training in hospitals before they started work¹⁹.

It was interesting to note in the 1939 Register that Elsie's father Austin had re-married and was living with his wife Ada in Poole, Dorset and living with them was Elsie's sister, Ina, who was recorded as doing unpaid domestic duties¹⁸. Sadly Ada died in late 1939 and Ina died in 1941¹⁵. Austin married for a third time in 1943. His spouse was Margaret Bather¹⁶. Austin passed away in 1948 in Poole, Dorset¹⁵.

Elsie's brother, Donald, had married Elsie Rose Adelaide Brown after World War I¹⁶ and they are recorded on the 1939 Register as living in Benfleet, Essex, where Donald was working in a similar job to the one his father had held – he was working for the local council as a Rating and Valuation Officer¹⁸. He died in 1976¹⁵.

Elsie is recorded as having passed away on 16 April 1944, at the age of 48¹⁵. Her daughter was just 15 when she lost her mother. We don't know what caused Elsie's death. Her husband Morley died in 1990, at the grand age of 93¹⁵.

Sources

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