

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in September 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon.

Sarah Mildred Vernall's Story

Sarah Mildred Vernall, was born on 27 January 1889ⁱ two years after her brother Charles. Sarah and Charles were the two surviving childrenⁱⁱ of James Vernall,ⁱⁱⁱ a jobbing gardener, and his wife, Amelia Lawrence.

Two year old Sarah appears on the 1891 Census return as Mildred^{iv}, as she does in various other sources including the 1911 Census and electoral registers of the 1950s. So it is not clear which was her preferred name.

The family lived at 2 Dovedale Place, Sudbury Court Road about a mile south of Harrow-on-the-Hill, Middlesex. They had four rooms. James came originally from Whitbourne, Worcestershire (now Herefordshire) and Amelia from Paddington, London.^v

Sudbury Court Road leads up to Sudbury Court (circled right on the map below), so James may have worked there or maybe at nearby Gooden House (circled left) where Daniel Lawrence, one of the sureties given for Sarah's admission to the school worked and lived. It is probable that Daniel Lawrence was Sarah's uncle. The 1891 Census entry includes Amelia's mother and brother Daniel, a Gardener living with them. The address appears as Mutton Lane shortly before it was renamed Sudbury Court Road.



OS Six Inch 1888-1915 (CC-BY) Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

Sarah was the only deaf member of her family. She was born hearing and became deaf at the age of three after contracting German Measles (now called Rubella). She had also had Measles and Whooping Cough, and she had had surgery for Mastoid disease of both ears and was still suffering a slight discharge from one ear when she was examined for entry to the School for Deaf Children in July 1899.

Sarah had some previous education; she had been attending an ‘ordinary day school’ for two years.^{vi} The Register of Children admitted to the Old Kent Road school, records that she had a weak voice, some remains of speech but that it was hardly intelligible. This is perhaps what prompted the further comment that her apparent intellect “Appears very moderate”.^{vii} Sarah was recommended “to go to Margate directly (she was) educationally fit” which she was not able to do until January 1901, some sixteen months after she entered the Old Kent Road School on 4 September 1899. Within six months her teachers had worked out that although Sarah made “but little progress Orally as she is afflicted with Facial Paralysis,” she was “otherwise intelligent”.^{viii}

Sarah stayed at the school in Margate for almost six years and continued to make good progress. Indeed she won a prize for Progress in December 1901 and prizes for Needlework in both June 1901 and June 1902.^{ix} By the time she left the school in June 1905, her intellect was described as “fair”. She was fifth in her class with good marks for most subjects and her conduct in school was described as excellent. Physically, she was still a slight figure, just under five feet tall and weighing just over six stone.^x

From Margate, Sarah returned home to Sudbury Court Road and according to the 1911 Census put her needlework skills to use as a dressmaker. It is difficult to know how successfully she managed to earn a living as in the 1921 Census, her occupation is still given as dressmaker, but her father has entered her location of work as “out of work”. Interestingly this has been amended by the enumerator to “no fixed place” so it’s not clear if she really did struggle to find work.^{xi}

Sarah’s brother Charles married in 1919^{xii} and after her mother died in 1925^{xiii}, Sarah and her father continued to live at the family home.^{xiv} Quite possibly, it was her father’s death in 1934^{xv} that prompted Sarah’s move from Harrow. Sadly, her brother had died in 1924^{xvi} and the next entry in the records for Sarah is in the 1939 Register when she had moved from Harrow to Templar Street, Camberwell, in south east London where she lived with an older

married couple, James Edmund Newman, a Mercantile Clerk and his wife Annie. Her occupation is described as a domestic help.^{xvii}

It is interesting to note that in none of the census records for Sarah is there any indication of her deafness or other infirmity. In looking to see if there was any previous connection between Sarah and the Newmans, I discovered from the 1911 Census that both Mr and Mrs Newman were deaf; Mr Newman from birth and Mrs Newman from the age of two and a half. Like Sarah, Mrs Newman's deafness resulted from illness.^{xviii} So how did Sarah come to be living in Camberwell? Did either Sarah or the Newmans respond to an advertisement? Did they know each other through the deaf community?

Mr Newman died in 1940 and the trail for Sarah goes cold over the period of World War II. The next record is an entry in the electoral register for 1952.^{xix} By then she was living in the Prestonville area of Brighton. Number 42 Stafford Street was one of a terrace of substantial double fronted houses built in the 1890s. The other residents were a family of three and another single woman of a similar age. Sarah seems to have again reverted to being known as Mildred as she appears in the electoral registers for 1952 and 1954 as Mildred S Vernall. But tantalisingly when and why she moved to Brighton is not known.

Sarah Mildred Vernall died at the age of 65 on 9th December 1954 in the Royal Sussex County Hospital. She left a Will in which her entire estate was bequeathed to the Royal Association in aid of the Deaf and Dumb (RADD). Limited probate was granted to the Secretary to the RADD but not until August 1960 which suggests that there may have been a dispute about the Will.^{xx} She had no descendants or close family so perhaps it was unclear which charity supporting deaf people should benefit. She left the substantial amount of £399 5s, which would be worth around £13, 810 in 2024 if multiplied by the percentage increase in the retail Price Index.^{xxi}

So it would appear that Sarah/Mildred overcame the significant challenges of early ill health and disability that she faced as a child and made a successful life for herself.

Sue McCarthy

Sources

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- ⁱ www.ancestry.co.uk England & Wales Birth Civil Registration Birth Index 1889 Q1 3a p139
 - ⁱⁱ www.findmypast.co.uk Census 1911 RG14PN7091 RG78PN347 RD130 SD1 ED24 SN352
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Ch192/R2/3/1 Page 21 Headmaster's Register of Children 1895-1913
 - ^{iv} www.ancestry.co.uk Census 1891 RG12/1039/5/135/page 24
 - ^v www.findmypast.co.uk Census 1911 RG14PN7091 RG78PN347 RD130 SD1 ED24 SN352
 - ^{vi} Ch192/R1/1/1 Entry 5534 Admission Records Application for Admission 4325-7615 (1880-1925)
 - ^{vii} Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 261 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate
 - ^{viii} Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 261 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate
 - ^{ix} Margate Deaf Asylum Prize Giving Programmes (June 1901, Dec 1901, June 1902)
 - ^x Ch192/R8/1/3 Entry 151 Leavers Records: Registers of Children Leaving School (1902-1912)
 - ^{xi} www.findmypast.co.uk Census 1921 RG15/06560/49/Rd130 RS1 ED30/E28
 - ^{xii} www.findmypast.co.uk England & Wales Marriages 1919 Q3 3A 1011
 - ^{xiii} www.findmypast.co.uk England & Wales Deaths 1925 Q2 3A 283
 - ^{xiv} www.ancestry.co.uk Electoral Register London (Harrow) 1930 p808
 - ^{xv} www.findmypast.co.uk England & Wales Deaths 1934 Q1 3A 529
 - ^{xvi} www.findmypast.co.uk England & Wales Deaths 1928 3A 279

xvii www.ancestry.co.uk 1939 Register RG101/0350E/007/24

xviii www.ancestry.co.uk Census 1911 RG14/PN2482 RG78PN83 RD27 SD2 ED23 SN231

xix www.ancestry.co.uk Electoral Register Brighton Pavilion and Kemptown 1952 p551

xx www.ancestry.co.uk England & Wales National Probate Calendar 1960 p244

xxi <https://measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php> accessed 6/8/2024