

# *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, Surrey.*

## **Mary Jane Allen's Story**

When Mary Jane Allen was admitted to Farmfield she gave her age as 23 and her place of birth as Sawtry, Peterborough (or Huntingdonshire). However no records can be found of her birth in 1877 in either Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, the most likely counties to find her in.\* There are also no 1881 census entries that can be found for her. This unfortunately means there is no record of her parents' names. According to her admission record her father was dead of phthisis by the time she arrived at Farmfield, although her mother was still alive. She came from a temperate family and was described as quite a nice woman who would like to live a different life if her circumstances were more favourable.

Upon her arrival at Farmfield Mary Jane was described as weighing 11 stone, being 5ft 4 inches tall and having brown hair and eyes, with a fresh complexion. She was English, of Protestant religion and could read and write imperfectly. The doctor diagnosed her as slightly rheumatic, with signs of having had syphilis. She had given birth to one child who had died.

Mary Jane's story, apart from her birth, starts when she is 10 years old in 1887 and admitted to a Dr Barnardo's home, suggesting that her father had died by then and her mother was struggling. It is believed that she had just one sibling, an older brother. The most likely home for her to be sent to was the Barnardo's Girls' village home in Barkingside, Essex.

When she was 16 she left Barnardo's for a position in service found for her by the home. Sadly within 2 years she has fallen into bad company and started drinking ale on a regular basis. She fell into prostitution too.

Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women opened on 28 August 1900 with just 30 beds. Mary Jane was admitted on 1 November 1900 for 3 years, when the place was still very new. The surroundings were probably the most pleasant Mary Jane had experienced in her life so far – with a flower garden, lawns, a lake and vegetable patches. The main rooms were brightly and prettily furnished, even the work rooms were airy and bright – electricity ran throughout the premises. The women could be employed in the dairy farm, cowhouse or bakehouse, working the vegetable patches, butter making, bee keeping or fruit farming. Obviously no alcohol was allowed.

Mary Jane's conduct at Farmfield was said to be excellent, she was industrious, obedient and loyal, although she was easily led. So on 15 September 1902, 22 months after her admittance to Farmfield Mary Jane is deemed well enough to be released on license, knowing that a fall off the wagon would lead to her return. Sadly this happened just over a month later on 25 October. She was then allowed out again on 15 November, readmitted on 22 December and then released again on 1 January 1903. There are no records of where she was during her times away from Farmfield although her records state she ran away from her first position and was removed from the second due to police interference.

Mary Jane is finally released on 7 November 1903 and her life rapidly deteriorates. She even absconds on her way to her new position. Her admittance record for Farmfield stated that she had 22 convictions for drunkenness and prostitution, along with prison sentences for all of them. However I have been unable to find any mention of her appearing in court in the newspapers until after her release in 1903.

In 1905 an Index of Habitual Drunkards was published for the year 1904, and Mary Jane appears on page 601 - proving that she must have had the 22 convictions mentioned above. Her photograph and record can be seen using the link below.

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/234826:61812?ssrc=pt&tid=190038804&pid=302460941953>

Mary Jane (aka Polly) was convicted of prostitution on 22 July 1904 at Woolwich and sentenced to one month of hard labour. Her address was given

as Rope Yard Rails in Woolwich and a quick search of that road in the newspaper archives gives the impression of an impoverished area with many convictions for drunkenness, prostitution and assault being recorded.

Earlier in 1904 she was convicted of being drunk and disorderly in Artillery

road.—Fined 5s. or 5 days.  
**Mary Jane Allen, 26, of 43, Ropeyard Rails, Woolwich, was charged on Tuesday with being drunk and disorderly at Artillery place, Woolwich.—One month.**

Place,

Woolwich and sent down for one month.

*Woolwich Gazette 22 January 1904*

Her conviction in July doesn't do much to deter her and she's back in court again in September, this time being bound over for 6 months.

**THIRSTY MORTALS.**  
George Billingham, coostermonger, and Annie Billingham, his wife, who reside at 10, Salutation Alley, Woolwich, were charged with being drunk and disorderly, and fighting. The male prisoner was fined 5s., and the female was discharged. — **Mary Jane Allen, 26, of 31a, Rope Yard Rails, Woolwich, drunk and disorderly in Powis Street. Bound over for six months.—Frances Lloyd, 27, of**

*Kentish Independent 23 September 1904*

And so continues her life over the next year or so with at least another half dozen convictions that can be found in the papers. Some of them are displayed on the following pages.

each.  
**Polly Allen**, no home, and **Geo. Wilson**, 23, of 10 Ropeyard rails, Woolwich, labourer, were charged with disorderly conduct at Mill Lane Woolwich.—Allen was sentenced to a month and Wilson fined 20s or 14 days.

days.  
**Polly Allen**, of 30a, Ropeyard Rails, Woolwich, was charged with being drunk and disorderly.—One month.

Greenwich and Deptford Observer 10 March 1905

**Violet Crouch**, 23, of 81, High Street, Woolwich, and **John Webb**, a driver in the Royal Horse Artillery, were charged at Woolwich on Wednesday, with indecency in Globe Lane. Crouch was ordered to pay 20s., or fourteen days, and Webb 10s. or fourteen days.—**Polly Allen**, 26, no home, was charged with a similar offence in Rope Yard Rails. An old offender, she went to prison for a month.

Kentish

Independent 21 April 1905

**Polly Allen**, 26, no home, was charged with being drunk and disorderly at New road, Woolwich.—One month.

Woolwich Gazette 26 May 1905

**Woolwich road, Charlton.—One month.  
Polly Allen, 27, of 31a, Ropeyard Rails,  
Woolwich, charged with being drunk and dis-  
orderly at Powis street, Woolwich.—Reman-  
ded.**

Woolwich Gazette 07 July 1905

A very short time after this last conviction she appears in court again, this time charged with prostitution. Her sentence is the longest she's been given since her time at Farmfield, and again she is sent to an 'inebriate reformatory'. She is also back in the Habitual Drunkards register.

This conviction sees her sent off to Eastern Counties East Harling Reformatory in Norfolk for 3 years.

Sadly, assuming she was there for her full sentence, within weeks of her release she has returned to her old hunting ground and is in court again.

**Monday.—Before Mr. Hutton.  
Polly Allen, 24, of 42, Ropeyard Rails,  
Woolwich, was charged with being drunk  
and disorderly and using obscene language  
in Green's End, Woolwich.—Fined 10s. or  
seven days.**

Kentish Independent 07 August 1908

*(Polly Allen, 24, of 42 Ropeyard Rails, Woolwich, was charged with being drunk and disorderly and using obscene language in Green's End, Woolwich – Fined 10s or seven days.)*

This is the last mention of Mary Jane/Polly in the newspapers and in any other records such as census, marriage or death. Sadly she seems to just disappear.

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Records do exist for a Mary Jane Allen born to John and Susannah Allen in Sawtry, in 1877. She had 4 siblings, and 4 half siblings. Her mother died in 1878 and her father is still alive when our Mary Jane is admitted to Farmfield. He dies in 1908. Mary Jane's admission record states that she has only one brother, her mother is alive and her father dead in 1900. The 2 Mary Janes are clearly not the same person, even though one is born in Sawtry. She appears on the 1881, 1891 and 1901 censuses still with her family in Sawtry.

### **Sources**

Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey RG13 629 folios 151-152

[Findmypast.co.uk/search/british-newspapers](http://Findmypast.co.uk/search/british-newspapers)