

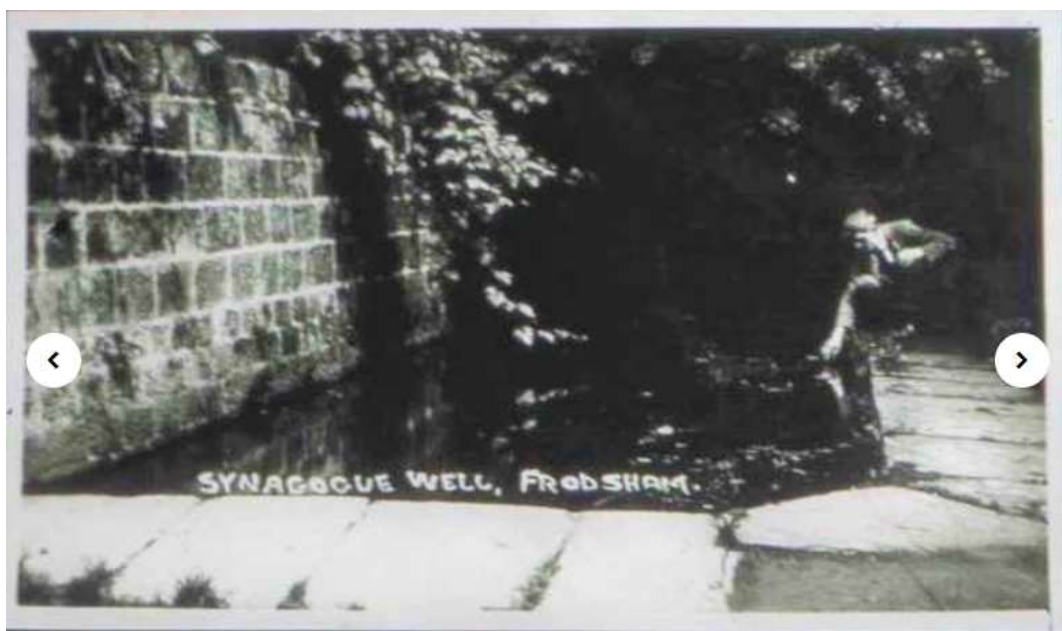
# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written in August 2023 as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who enrolled in the first two cohorts [1908 & 1909] of Trainee Teachers at the Cheshire Country Training College, Crewe [CCTCC]*

## **Elsie Burrow's Story**

**Please note that this story contains an account of a suicide.**



Robert Birtle gripped the fence, white-knuckled, as he stared at the still water of Synagogue's Well, a deep pond near the house. He wondered how he would tell Beattie that the family's worst fears had come true. He couldn't take his eyes off the body of Elsie, his sister-in-law, desperately hoping he had not been too late to save her, all the while certain that he had. His all-night search was catching up with him; he spoke to the police officer, and then went home to tell his wife and mother-in-law the awful news, and perhaps to have a rest, before facing the rest of the family, and the bureaucracy and ritual of the days to come.

The family soon gathered together. Elsie had been the second child of five. William was the oldest brother, and he lived with his wife Dolly on Coroners Road, Wigan. On the same street lived his younger sister Amy, with her husband William Garner. The four of them travelled together to the family home at Tower View, Church Street, Frodsham, to be with Robert, Beattie, and their infirm mother Elizabeth. This had been Elsie's home for her whole life, apart from her time spent at Teacher Training College, and a short period of time when she worked in Nantwich, about 20 miles away.

In their grief and confusion, the family talked over Elsie's life: how proud they had been of her when she was one of the first to qualify as a teacher from the new course at the college in Crewe; to her career progression towards becoming a headteacher. They shared the worries they had all felt in recent months about her fragile mental state, and speculated as to the cause of it – could it have started with the sudden death of her father in 1914, followed by her youngest brother, who died in 1923 at the age of 20. Had there been a sweetheart, a young man who went to war and never returned? Had the marriages of her brother and sisters made her even more focused and driven in her career? Even the position of the family home, situated as it was right opposite the churchyard, may have turned her mind to death more often than was healthy.

Elsie Burrows was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1890 in Frodsham. Her birth is listed on the Cheshire Workhouse records, but she was born at home in Church Street. Healthcare was provided to the poor by the workhouse and the document appears to be a vaccination list. She was baptised on 5<sup>th</sup> October, and inoculated on 9<sup>th</sup> October, her medical and spiritual needs both seen to by her careful parents. Her father was William Burrows, and her mother was Elizabeth Margaret Harrison. William was a grocer's assistant, who worked for Mr JG Kydd of Frodsham for over 30 years. Elizabeth was born in Lancaster, the daughter of Henry Harrison, a borough surveyor who employed 18 men in 1861.

Elsie first appears on the census in 1891, living with her parents and her brother William in a semi-detached house called Tower View on Church Street, Frodsham. William and Elizabeth had taken in three boarders: Fannie Harrison, Elizabeth's sister, helped her in her confectionary business; and Henry Huddleston was a grocer's assistant, like Elsie's father. Elizabeth Cockram, a schoolmistress was the fifth member of the household. Maybe this young woman inspired her landlord and landlady to encourage their daughter into a career in education.

By 1901 there were no lodgers in the house, but two more daughters had been born; Beatrice, known as Beattie, and Amy. The neighbours were all shopkeepers; of a sweet and toyshop, two separate drapers, and a butcher. William still worked as a grocer's assistant, but Elizabeth,

unsurprisingly with four children, was no longer working as a confectioner. She had a further child in 1903, George Henry, who appears with his parents in 1911.

Elsie worked at the Cambridge Road Council School in Ellesmere Port in 1910, then the Nantwich C.E. Infants' School from 1910 to 1913. During this time she lived with the Hinde family in Nantwich, and can be seen there on the 1911 census.

In March 1914 William Burrows died of appendicitis. He was only 51, and left behind his wife, and five children ranging in age from 26 to 11. This sudden death must have been traumatic, and it happened as the world was on the brink of war. The tributes to William at his funeral stress what a good man he was; a Sunday-school teacher and a church-warden, a devoted employee for more than 30 years. "He was a man of such unassuming ways and gentlemanly courtesy that he endeared many friends"

It was in the same year that Elsie returned to live at Tower View, and took up a teaching position in the school on the street she lived - Church Street School in Frodsham.

In 1920 Elsie's sister Beattie married Robert Major Birtles, a joiner, who came from a large Frodsham family.

The 1921 census shows two households living at Tower View – on one return we see Elizabeth, aged 60, with her unmarried children and on the other, Robert and Beattie with their 10 week old son John Harrison Birtles. Elizabeth must have looked with pride at the occupations of her children – William was a commercial clerk, Elsie a certified assistant teacher, Amy a bank clerk and George an apprentice electrical engineer.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1922 William got married:

*The wedding took place at Runcorn Parish Church on Tuesday of Miss Florence Amy Wilson (Dolly) Pringle, elder daughter of Mr and Mrs R.H. Pringle of "Melrose", Runcorn and Mr Wm. Burrows, of Tower View, Frodsham. The bride was...attended by Miss Lily Pringle (sister) and Miss Elsie Burrows (sister of the bridegroom.) They were prettily attired in grey charmeuse, trimmed with jade, and hats to match.*

But tragedy struck the family again when the youngest son, George Henry Burrows died at Frodsham on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1923. No details can be found in the newspapers.

In 1925 Elsie was appointed Head Mistress of Five Crosses C.E. Infants' School in Frodsham.

Again, this doesn't seem to have been covered by the newspapers which are available on-line.

In 1929, Elsie's sister Amy married William Critchley Garner – they had met when they both worked in the local bank. Amy was 31 when she married, and Elsie, at 38 must have thought, if she thought about it at all, that marriage was not on the cards for her.

Her entry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary book of the CCTCC merely states "Not married, address noted as Tower View, Overton, Frodsham, Cheshire"

For the last 10 years of her life, Elsie continued working at Five Crosses, and according to the reports at her inquest, her health began to suffer from about 1934. The story from the Cheshire Chronicle, of Saturday December 7<sup>th</sup> 1935 is transcribed in full and gives all the details:

## **DROWNED IN WELL**

### **FRODSHAM HEAD-MISTRESS'S TRAGIC END**

#### **DISCOVERY MADE BY BROTHER-IN-LAW**

#### **AFTER ALL-NIGHT SEARCH**

*A sensation was caused in Frodsham on Thursday, when it became known that Miss Elsie Burrows, Headmistress of the Five Crosses Infants' School had been found drowned in Synagogue's Well, Castle Park.*

*Miss Burrows, who was aged 45, was missed from her home Tower View, Church-road, Overton, Frodsham, on Wednesday, and the discovery was made at about 10.30 on Thursday morning. Synagogue's Well is well-known in the district, and a few years ago there was a keen controversy over it between the two local Councils. The well is about six feet deep and about twelve feet long by five feet wide. For some years it has been fenced round to a height of six feet, and great difficulty would be experienced in getting to the water. In addition the park gate leading from Park-lane was locked, and this too, would have to be scaled.*

*Several people have been drowned in the well during the past years, and it was as a result of these tragedies that the fencing was erected.*

#### **"SUFFERING FROM NERVES"**

*Mr W. Burrows, the brother of Miss Elsie Burrows, and formerly organist at the Kingsley Parish Church, when interviewed said that his sister had been in ill-health for some time. She was suffering from her nerves, "We tried to persuade her to have a rest," he said "but she would carry on. She was so devoted to the children and her work." His sister had been missed from home on Wednesday night, and a search was made throughout the district. The body was discovered by Mr. Birtles, a brother-in-law.*

*Miss Burrows was educated at the Runcorn Secondary School, from where she went to the Crewe Training College during the first year of its opening. Later she was appointed to a Nantwich school, and from there went to Crewe. A few years later she was appointed assistant to Miss Walker at the Frodsham Girls' School, and eventually obtained the position of headmistress at the Five Crosses Infants' School. She was keenly interested in church work, and was associated with the Frodsham Parish Church.*

*Sympathy will be extended to her invalid mother, brother and two sisters. The funeral takes place at the Frodsham Parish Church on Saturday at 2.30pm.*

#### **SYNAGOGUE'S WELL**

*The history of the well goes back, it is said, to the Roman Conquest, when as a spring it was used by a Roman encampment. There is a story as to how its name originated in a history of Cheshire. It is said that in the reign of Edward I. a Jewish traveller going through the neighbourhood rested and quenched his thirst at the spring, which he named Synagogue's Well.*

*Before water was laid in Frodsham it was frequently used by the village people, who walked some distance to the well for their daily supplies.*

#### **TO-DAY'S INQUEST**

##### **DOCTOR ORDERED REST BUT SHE CARRIED ON**

*The inquest was held at Frodsham Police Station this (Friday) morning by Mr J.C. Bate.*

*Robert Major Birtles, Tower View, Church-road, Overton, Frodsham, gave evidence of identification, saying that Miss Burrows was his sister-in-law. She had lived at Tower View all her life, and her mother was still living there. Up to twelve months ago her health was good, but since then she had had a nervous breakdown, and had not been well all the year. The doctor told her to give up her work and advised three months' rest, but she was so devoted to her work that she persisted in carrying on. At the end of October she seemed much better until about a week ago, when she went worse again. She attended her teaching, however and was at the school on Wednesday. She came home and served him with his dinner. His wife had gone out for a few minutes. He noticed that his sister-in-law was dressed ready to go out. She spoke to his little daughter, saying, "Tell mummy I have gone to see a lady; I shall be back in half-an-hour." For the past few weeks, continued witness, Miss Burrows had been rather depressed and was going worse. She had never said anything to indicate that she would take her life.*

*The Coroner: What was the trouble? What did she complain of? – She complained of general depression and nervousness.*

*What did she actually say? – She never said much to me, but the quiet way she went about showed that she was depressed, for before Christmas she was always cheerful. He asked her on one occasion what was the matter, and she said her nerves were shattered. She seemed to be well in body apart from her nervous condition. When she went out on Wednesday witness did not see anything unusual in it, for she always went for a walk about that time. She was usually away for about half an hour.*

##### **ALL-NIGHT SEARCH**

*The Coroner: She did not come back on this occasion? What did you do? – Well we sat up, and we were quite hopeful until midnight. My wife was uneasy, and I advised her to wait until all the trains had left the village. She did not come in then, so I made a search of her usual walks. I came back home and went out again, and I did this all the night until 7.30 next morning, when I rang up my brother-in-law at Widnes.*

*The Coroner: Did you tell the police? – Well, I saw a constable and asked him if he had seen a lady in brown. I went out again around the hills and then came back for breakfast. After that I sent a message to Constable Thomas. When my brother-in-law arrived we went round in a car and searched round the back of the hills and visited friends to whom she was likely to have made a visit. We then went to Synagogue's Well.*

##### **"LAST AVENUE"**

*The Coroner: Why did you go there? My brother-in-law suggested it as a last avenue. The gate leading into the Park was then opened, but the inner gate around the well was padlocked. Witness saw her bag, hat and gloves on the side of the well, and could see a body on the bottom of the well. He got over the fence and told his brother-in-law to go for the police. He got hold of the coat and the body rose quite easily to the top, and he brought it to the side. Two notes were in the handbag, and witness identified the writing of his sister-in-law. Miss Burrows had never threatened to take her life.*

*Questioned by Sergt. Atherton, witness said he did not notice signs of any struggle outside the well.*

*William Burrows, 45, Coroner's-lane, Widnes, said his sister had not been in good health for some time. He came over to Frodsham at least once a week, but she never said anything to him that would lead him to think she would take her life. He went over on Thursday morning in response to his brother-in-law's message, and it was his (witness's) suggestion that they visited Synagogue's Well. It was possible to climb over the fence by the aid of two bars across it, though it would not be an easy task.*

#### **CONTENTS OF NOTES**

*PC. F. Thomas said he received information that Miss Burrows was missing on Thursday at around 8.50am. At 11 o'clock the same morning he went to Synagogue's Well in Castle Park. He saw the body on its back on the flags by the well. A hat, bag and gloves were neatly arranged on the side of the well. He examined the handbag and found a note which read: "Please inform R.M. Birtles, Tower View, Church-road." On another note was: "Please forgive me; I have come to the end. I cannot go on. Look well after my dear mother. On another note was the following: "I cannot be a burden. I cannot go on. I have come to the end. My nerves are shattered. I cannot fight any longer. Forgive me for causing this trouble. Look well after my dear mother. It breaks my heart to leave her. No one is to blame. Everyone has been too kind, especially my sister Beatrice. I have failed. May God forgive me. 'Other refuge have I none.'"*

*Witness said that Dr Earlam was summoned and pronounced life extinct. The well was approached by a footpath leading from the Park-lane through a small gate. This was locked at 5 o'clock every night. It was a public entrance to the Park. The well was 12 feet long by five feet wide, and had six feet of water in it. It was walled on two sides, and had a six foot wooden fence at the other side. The gate to the well was padlocked. Four steps led to the bottom of the well. From marks at the Park gates and at the fence, Miss Burrows had apparently climbed over the gate and then over the fence into the well.*

#### **NEURASTHENIC SUFFERER TOOK HER OWN LIFE**

*The Coroner said that there was no doubt that Miss Burrows had been suffering for the past few months from a most difficult disease to cure – neurasthenia. It was a condition of the nerves, and there seemed to be no medical way of treating it. It was a disease that came on occasionally, and especially in persons of Miss Burrow's age. She had been attended by a doctor, who thought that she would be better if she had a change, but she persisted in carrying on with her work. If she could have been prevented from doing what she had done, she would undoubtedly have recovered. It was difficult to keep a permanent watch over her, and the doctor had not suggested it. She had gone out on Wednesday with the excuse of seeing a lady, and she had evidently got over the fence round the well, put her hat, gloves, and bag on the side, and got into the water. She got into the water by her own act. In other words she took her own life, and he had no doubt that her mental condition was such that she was not responsible for what she was doing. She committed suicide and was of unsound mind at the time.*

Poor Elsie, she had depression, perhaps brought on by stress and overwork, perhaps because she seems to have been a very driven person. Her funeral took place on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> December. Her invalid mother did not attend, but the rest of the family were there, with other relatives and friends. Many floral tributes were also sent, particularly from various educational

organisations, including the schools she had worked at and the local branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Elsie's mother Elizabeth died in August 1939.

William and Dolly lived in Coroner's Lane in 1939, they had a son Robert W. Burrows (1924-2005). William worked as a senior accounts clerk. Dolly died in 1971 and William in 1972, in Widnes.

Beatrice and Robert had three children, they lived on Howey Lane, Frodsham. He died in 1956 and she died in 1977.

Amy and William continued to live at Coroner's Lane Widnes. They had no children. Amy died in 1959, and William, who was a bank manager moved to Appleton Court, Birchfield Road, Widnes, where he died in 1975. They were both buried in Frodsham.

### ***Narrative by Jude McCourt***

#### Sources:

1908-1929, Souvenir of the 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary, CCTCC. Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe.

#### FindmyPast

Teachers' Registration Council Registers 1914-1948

Cheshire Workhouse Records (births)

Cheshire Diocese of Chester Parish Baptisms 1538-1911

Censuses of 1891-1921

#### Newspapers:

Chester Chronicle Mar 7<sup>th</sup> 1914

Cheshire Observer Mar 4<sup>th</sup> 1922

Chester Chronicle Dec 7<sup>th</sup> 1935

Cheshire Observer Dec 14<sup>th</sup> 1935