

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were found residing or working in various homes for Fallen Women in the census returns.

Fanny Sophia Austen's Story

In the 1871 census, Fanny Sophia Austen was residing in The House of Mercy Magdalen Home, Toldish Hall Road, Great Maplestead, Essex.¹ The home had been established in 1868 under the auspices of the Diocese of Rochester and at this time was staffed by members of the religious order The Sisters of the Name of Jesus.² Fanny, listed as an assistant sister, was one of three sisters, who, along with the lady superior, appear to be staffing the home, with the aid of a cook. It seems that The Sisters of the Name of Jesus was a Catholic order, yet Fanny's family contained several Anglican clergyman and there is no other suggestion in her life story that Fanny was a Catholic, or took religious vows. In fact, very little can be discovered about Fanny herself, yet her family were very well-known. Fanny had been born on 12 December 1821 in Ryde Isle of Wight, a town on the north-east coast of the island that was just beginning to develop from a little fishing village at this time. The family were only in Ryde for a very short time, or were temporary residents, as Fanny's closest siblings

¹ 1871 RG10 1698 folios 116-117.

² The Children's Homes website <https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/GreatMaplestead/> accessed 8 November 2024.

were born in Chawton, Hampshire in January 1820 and Steventon, Hampshire in July 1823 respectively. Fanny was the tenth of eleven children of Francis William and Mary Austen née Gibson. At the time of Fanny's birth, Francis was enjoying a glittering naval career. When Fanny was just eighteen months old, her mother, Mary, died. The newspaper report reads as follows: "Died on Saturday, at the Government House, Gosport, Mrs. Austen, aged 39 years, wife of Captain Austen R.N. leaving a family of eleven children to deplore her loss."³ The youngest child was only a few days old and it is likely that Mary died as a result of the birth. Sadly, her newborn son was to die the following year.

In 1828, Fanny's eldest sister, Mary, who had presumably assumed many of their late mother's household duties, married. Just one month later, her father remarried to Martha Lloyd, a lady in her sixties, some ten years old than Francis. For many years, Martha had been the companion of the novelist, Jane Austen. Jane was in fact Fanny's aunt, although Jane had died a few years before Fanny was born.

Francis continued to rise through the naval ranks, becoming a rear admiral in 1830. By 1841, the family were settled at Portsdown Lodge, Portsdown, Wymering, Hampshire. Fanny, two older adult siblings, her father and stepmother were being served by no fewer than nine servants.⁴ It is likely that this property enjoyed commanding views across to the Portsmouth naval base and the Solent.

Fanny's step-mother died in 1843 and the following year Fanny's father took up a



Admiral Sir Francis William Austen
Image in the public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

³ *Hampshire Chronicle* 21 July 1823, p.3 col. c.

⁴ 1841 for Portsdown Lodge, Portsdown, Wymering, Hampshire, England HO107 390/7 folio 23.

posting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which lasted until 1848. Initially, his role was to disrupt those who were still engaging in the slave trade. In 1846, war broke out between America and Mexico and Francis was expected to ensure that British commercial interests weren't being damaged by the hostilities. It may well be that Fanny, by then in her twenties, did not accompany her father to Canada but instead remained behind with an older sibling.

In 1851, Fanny was living at Lockerly Parsonage House in Hampshire, with her unmarried brother, George, who was serving the parish as a curate.⁵ George was to marry later that year and it may be that it was at that point that Fanny returned to live with her father. Unfortunately, we only get glimpses of Fanny's life once every decade but by 1861, she was at Portsdown Lodge once again with her father, elder brother Herbert and six live-in servants.⁶ Her father was, by this time, a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath and he was to become Admiral of the Fleet in 1863. Francis died, at the age of ninety one, in 1865 and was buried at Wymering Church. Herbert had married in 1863, so it is likely that her father's death left Fanny alone with the servants at Portsdown Lodge.

The next sighting of Fanny was when she was at the House of Mercy.⁷ Had she converted to Catholicism? What exactly was her status in the refuge? We have no idea if Fanny remained in this role for a few weeks or nearly twenty years but subsequent censuses do not find her in a permanent home. Instead, she is in a series of seaside lodging houses. Did she spend her life moving from one to the other, or did she make a habit of taking holidays in April, when the census enumerator came to call? In 1881, she was living in Torquay, on the Devon Riviera. Interestingly, she is, on this occasion, listed as a lodger, whereas others in the lodging house are described as visitors, suggesting that this was perhaps a more permanent home for Fanny.⁸ 5 Abbey Crescent, Torbay Road, where Fanny was staying, was a seafront property, accommodating three unmarried older ladies as well as the lady lodging housekeeper, her husband and son and a domestic servant.

⁵ 1851 census for Parsonage House, Lockerley Mill, Romsey Hampshire HO107 1671 folio 359.

⁶ 1861 census for Portsdown Lodge, Portsdown, Wymering, Hampshire RG9 650 folios 47-48.

⁷ 1871 RG10 1698 folios 116-117.

⁸ 1881 census for 5 Abbey Crescent, Torbay Road, Torquay, Devon RG112168 folio 26.

By 1891 Fanny had moved along the south coast to another lodging house at 2 Pelham Crescent in Hastings, Sussex, an elegant seafront building, which was catering for ten visitors. With Fanny was thirty-five year old Kate Josephine Poulter, who was acting as Fanny's companion.⁹ Fanny and Kate were still at the same address ten years later.¹⁰ It seems likely that this was a permanent home.

At some point, Fanny went to live with her brother, Edward, who was rector of Barfrestone, in Kent. Fanny died at the rectory on 9 March 1904 of cardiac failure and senile decay.¹¹ She left over £10,000 in her will.¹² She was buried at St. Nicholas, Barfrestone, near Dover.¹³ After Fanny's death, Kate Poulter went back to live with her mother, who was running a boarding house in Broadstairs. Kate married when she was in her sixties and died in 1935.



St. Nicholas', Barfrestone
Image via Wikimedia Commons

⁹ 1891 census for 2 Pelham Crescent, St Mary in the Castle, Hastings, Sussex RG12 761 folios 11-12.

¹⁰ 1901 census for 2 Pelham Crescent, St Mary in the Castle, Hastings, Sussex RG13 865 folios 109-110.

¹¹ Death certificate of Fanny Sophia Austen.

¹² Indexes of the Principal Probate Registry.

¹³ Find a Grave www.findagrave.com.