

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were born in the same year as Queen Victoria, 1819 in the parishes of Wem, Shropshire and Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk.

Ann Ebrey

There were 37 female baptisms in the Wem parish register for 1819, the year Queen Victoria was born. On 28th March, Ann Ebrey was one of them. I was interested in Ann, as Ebrey is a name possibly connected to my Woodvine family in Whixall/Wem. Another reason that she was interesting, was that her father, Edward, was recorded on her baptism, as a publican of the Buck's Head Inn.

Edward Ebrey and Sarah Kilvert had been married by banns on 1st September 1812 in Shrewsbury. Both had signed the register in the presence of Catherine Morris and William Morris (?). It was probably done in a hurry as on October 20th 1812, also in Shrewsbury, a daughter,

Mary was born, baptised on November 11th. The couple continued living in Shrewsbury, where 2 more children were born, Robert, on 9th February 1815, baptised a couple of weeks later, on the 26th and a daughter, Martha, was born on 2nd February, 1817, being baptised on 28th.

While living in Shrewsbury, Edward was recorded, on his children's baptisms as a servant. Sometime between Martha's birth and 1819, the couple moved to Wem, where Edward took over The Buck's Head Inn. Ann was born at that address, and baptised in Wem on 28th March, 1819. Sadly, only a few weeks later, tragedy struck the family, when in the Spring of 1819, Martha was scalded to death, in a tub of boiling liquor. She was buried, in Wem, on 5th May. Two more children were born to the couple and baptised in Wem, Edward on 13th May 1821 and Sarah on 23rd May, 1824.

A rather incongruous fact emerged with the obituary for Edward snr. in The Wolverhampton Chronicle and Staffordshire Advertiser of 31st March 1841. Recording Edward's death it read, "*On the 13th instant at Wem, aged 55, Mr Edward Ebrey, late assistant overseer of that parish.*" Corroborating evidence was recorded in the Eddowes Shrewsbury Journal, of 18th October, 1854 with wife, Sarah's death, "*11th October at The Clive, aged 74, Sarah, relict of Mr Edward Ebrey, formerly governor of the Wem Union Workhouse.*" It appeared strange that a Poor Law Guardian and a governor of the Wem Workhouse would be a publican, running a public house, many not having the best of reputations and contributing to some of the inmates, being incarcerated in the said institution.

The Buck's Head is now a listed building in Wem, situated on Mill Street, on the road out of the town before reaching the Mill. It did not sell alcohol but it was a Temperance bar. Temperance bars were popular where there were a high number of Methodists in the area. They sold drinks such as Sarsaparilla, Blood Tonic and Dandelion and Burdock. It survived in this form until the 1930s. There is still a Roebuck logo on the building. Things did change, as by the time of daughter, Sarah's baptism in 1824, Edward was the publican of a normal public house, The Black Lion.

There had been a workhouse in Wem since 1740, a converted 3 story maltings at the west end of the High Street. In 1777 it housed 30 inmates. After the Ebrey's moved to Wem, Edward became involved with the local community; in 1819, being a signatory on a letter to establish a monthly market in the town; also working with the Poor Law Guardians, looking after the workhouse, at one point becoming the governor. In 1832 it housed 18 men, aged between 40 and 80 and 8 females aged between 30 and 50. Edward appears in the quarter Sessions records as a juror in 1832 and between 1837 and 1839 as a constable in various capacities.

All this time, Edward's family were growing up. For the time, education in Wem, was quite advanced. There was an established grammar school, The Thomas Adams' School. Approximately 100 pupils attended a subscription charity school held in the Market Hall and taught on the "Bell" method. There were schools run by

religious bodies, a nonconformist school in Mill street. A fee-paying infant's school, teaching 100 pupils in 1833, with the charity school, expanded to cater for 186 weekday scholars, 120 of which attended the Sunday school. 1838 saw an application for a Treasury grant for

“the construction of a school-house with proper offices, for the instruction of as many poor children of the parish and neighbourhood of Wem as the trustees think fit, in English and the religious principles of the Church of England, to be called Wem National School”¹.

This was the building which Ann's sister, Mary, was to teach in. It was *“a commodious brick building with 2 spacious rooms”²* The cost was £1000. In 1837 the nonconformists in Noble Street and Chapel Street followed suit, when they purchased a plot of land on Leek Street and erected The British Schools. Boys' school rooms were on the lower floor, girls' on the upper. It is recorded that by 1869 few children of the parish were not attending school, boys remaining until 11 or 12, but girls being withdrawn earlier to go into domestic service.

Elder brother, Robert, lived locally and according to the newspapers held a farm in the village of New Town, where he appears, according to newspaper advertisements, to have been a timber merchant, selling trees. Ann, according to the 1841 census, had taken up a career as a bonnet maker. For this she would have taken

¹ Everard, Bowen & Horton, The Victoria History of Shropshire

² *ibid*

on an apprenticeship probably with a local milliner. There would have been no shortage of work to occupy her time, as there were 16 clothing and shoes shops registered in 1830 in the vibrant town. A hairdressers would be a draw for the ladies also.

Wem was home to a wide range of shops in 1830, serving a population of about 1,500. As Ann and her sisters walked down the busy main street in Wem, they may have encountered travellers as they alighted from “The Union” stagecoach, as it made its timetabled stop, at The White Lion, situated at the southern end of the town or “The Hero” stagecoach, stopping at The Castle Inn, located further down the street.

All the needs of the family were catered for with 10 food, shops, (including flowers and plants) and 3 hardware shops. There were 2 pharmacies to cater for the family’s health. Leisure time could be spent in any of 10 public houses, a café or a more sedate pastime of reading, with books from the book shop. There were various services with blacksmiths and saddleries and in the 1841 census there are several joiners.

On 17th November 1836, 13 parishes were reorganized into the Wem Union in accordance with the New Poor Law. Wem Union did not have the most harmonious committee, the assistant commissioner, William Day, “... found the guardians and their chairman exceptionally obstructive and uncooperative”³. The meeting appointed

³ “Refuges of Last Resort. Shropshire Workhouses and the People who Built and Ran Them” Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society (p121)

one chaplain, to cover the workhouses of Wem and Prees. Edward Ebrey was appointed as the governor of the new establishment with his wife, Sarah, aiding as matron. Problems were not far away, as before 6 months had elapsed, Edward had resigned. It was rumoured that the committee thought him incompetent and unable to keep acceptable records, however, given the clash of personalities already mentioned, was his resignation more to do with disagreements between officials, after all, he had held several responsible positions over the years, none of which had previously caused problems?

Whether ill health was brought about by the problems with the Poor Law authorities, but on 13th March 1841, at his home in Noble Street, Edward passed away. Since his resignation from his job with the Poor Law authorities, he must have taken over a farm. Unfortunately, his death certificate is mute on the cause of his death, age 55 years, daughter Mary, was the informant. A few months later, Sarah was in charge of a grocer's shop, in High Street. Living with her were Mary, Ann, Edward and Sarah.

Mary had embarked on a career as a school mistress. This path probably continued straight from attending school as a pupil. Education during the 19th century was a battle ground, disputed by religious bodies, local authorities, industrialists, reformers, all with different agendas as to the validity of educating "the masses" and in the centre, the future lives of the children, who should have been receiving instruction for life and career. Mary probably progressed from pupil, to pupil teacher. The 1841 census lists her as school mistress. By 1851 the family who had

been supporting their mother in the previous census, had gone their separate ways, only Mary remained in Cripple Street with Sarah, and a lodger, Joseph Jones aged 50, who was a blind organist. However, a little more information is added, we now know she was a National School, schoolmistress. Working at one the 4 schools in the town to receive grants in 1851.

Being a National School Teacher she would be working for a school, run by the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor, overseen by the Church of England, one of the 3 main voluntary groups providing education. Non-conformists ran the British and Foreign Society and the Catholics were catered for by the Catholic Schools Committee. Women who embarked upon a career in teaching, one of the few open to them, knew that, if they wished to make it a career for life, the one thing they could not do, was marry. Mary must have known this as she took the path of becoming a registered National School teacher. This process involved a 5 year training programme. The improvement of teacher training had been the project of Mr Kay-Shuttleworth, who had been in charge of The Committee of Council for Education, between 1839 and 1849.

The pupil became a pupil teacher, then, depending on scholastic achievement, moral rectitude and physical suitability they took on a 5 year apprenticeship. This involved teaching for part of the day but also receiving instruction from the head teacher, for at least one and a half hours, per day, which was often in the morning, before school hours and after school had finished, for 5

days per week. There were annual examinations by government inspectors. To gain the certificate, all was finalized with another examination. Mary had undertaken this training as in 1861 she is recorded as a Registered National School Mistress, aged 47, living in Loppington, a small village close by.

Ann, may have seen how Mary was progressing and making a change of career, she too in 1851, was recorded as a school mistress, now living in Clive, a village close by. Following the training route, however, was not for Ann, neither was remaining single, as on 29th March 1853, school mistress, Ann Ebrey aged 34, married Engine Fitter, Thomas Rowlands by licence at The Clive Chapel. There was another problem entry in the records; the only details entered in the register for the couple were; no. 3 Ann Ebrey, Full age, Spinster, School mistress. Both husband, Thomas Rowlands and Ann signed as did the 2 witnesses, Peter Bennett and Maria Rowlands. No husband's or father's details were entered. The local paper did however, confirm that Ann Ebrey, third daughter of the late Edward Ebrey, had married engineer Thomas Rowlands, at The Clive Chapel on the 29th inst. The marriage bringing to an end Ann's career as a school mistress.

Working as a school mistress, was one of the few ways for a woman to satisfy a wish, to do more than look after husband and family and it was also a path followed by Ann's niece, Martha, brother Edward's daughter. Martha progressed even further than Mary had done, soon becoming, not just a class teacher but in 1921, aged 60

and still working, the head mistress, of the Coleham Council School in Shrewsbury. Sadly Martha's story ended in tragedy, in 1939, she had spent a few weeks in a nursing home but had left to live with Laura and Sybil Jones. Martha had gone upstairs, Laura then heard a thud and rushed to find Martha at the foot of the stairs, bleeding from the head. Martha's doctor, of 20 years, concluded that she had fractured her skull. She died, the coroner, recording a verdict of "accidental death". Martha left, £2388.5s.5d in her will.

Ann's sister Sarah had followed a different path and become first a domestic servant and then a cook for Thomas Boulton, a 60 year old independent gentleman. She can't be found in the next 2 censuses but does reappear in 1881 living with her parents and brother, Robert, in Shrewsbury, all under the roof of Ann's daughter, Catherine, who, following in her mother's original footsteps, had become a milliner and dress maker. Oddly Catherine is recorded as married, probably a mistake by the enumerator, as spinster, Catherine did marry on 13th July 1884, in Shrewsbury, storekeeper, William George Smart, a widower, the witnesses being the same Peter Bennett, who was a witness at Ann's wedding at Clive, this time the second witness was Catherine's sister, Sarah Jane.

Brother, Edward had become a joiner and in the early part of 1846, married Ann Watkin. The couple, shortly after their marriage, moved across the border into Newcastle under Lyme, Staffordshire, where their first son, Edward was born. The couple continued to live there

until in 1901 the family, except Edward had returned to Shrewsbury. Ann is still recorded as married. Is the 86 year old joiner who died in the Belper Union Workhouse of senile decay, in 1908, Ann's brother? The death certificate does not give a clue, the informant being the Workhouse master.

What of Ann and Thomas' children? Eldest son, Robert Ebery started his career as an apprentice to a carpenter in Ford, the village where he was born, changing to become a traction engine driver. Using the farm machinery, such as the threshing machine, provided his employment for most of his life until in 1921, age 66, he was employed in a less strenuous capacity of horseman, along with his son William, working for Mr Lightfoot, coal merchant.

Robert's son, Robert, was employed at Hawkstone Hall, which is now, in parts, open to visitors, as a gardener. Robert's family life began when he married, 26-year-old, Ann Wilson, in Prees, in the winter of 1887. They had 8 children, all according to the 1911 census had survived, (although the youngest, Katherine was only 1 month and Ann was 49, so perhaps Katherine was the daughter of daughter, Annie, who was a domestic servant in Stoke upon Tern). Mother, Ann, William and Katherine were still living in Thatched Cottage in 1939.

Ann and Thomas' lives also contained much sadness. On 23rd Feb 1878 son Thomas, age just 21, died of "phthisis". Catherine's marriage to William produced 10 children, only 5 of whom survived. Daughter, Sarah Jane, died in 1891 aged only 30. She also had had "phthisis" for 8 years and died from the disease with exhaustion, brother,

Robert's sister-in-law, Ellen Wilson, being the informant. Alice Mary had gone into service as a housemaid, at Habberley Hall, Pontesbury near Shrewsbury, a manor with parts dating back to Elizabethan times. After her marriage, on 25th June 1883 to Henry Hemmings, less than a year later, Alice Mary, died, age just 20, again of "phthisis". This was a disease that the family must have dreaded.

Ann Ebery, (Rowlands) was baptised in the year that Queen Victoria was born. Ann died, age 89 in 1909, outliving the Queen by 8 years. Both women, one in the top level of society, one an ordinary woman from a working-class family. They had lived through a century which, on one level, saw great achievements, including the height of the Industrial Revolution, with inventions which changed, not only Britain but the world; British influence spreading across the globe. Queen Victoria would have been at the heart and gloried in this success. There was, however, another side which would affect Ann far more than Queen Victoria, poverty, overcrowding and ignorance, incurring great suffering and distress for the vast majority of the working classes; women in particular were affected by the living and social conditions in which they lived. Factions of people vying for influence, financiers, manufacturers, politicians, social reformers, religious groups and medical practitioners, all with different agendas and opinions, fought to promote their ideas often impacting ordinary people's lives. Ann herself would have seen, through her parents' connection to the workhouse, how hard poverty could be. She experienced the problems of ill health with her own children. She would also have seen how the better off lived through her

nephew's employment at Hawkstone Hall. She and her family also helped to make some improvement to the lives of others growing up in this time, Ann for a short period, her sister and nieces becoming teachers and endeavouring to improve children's lot for the future.

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