

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in January 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of girls from Leeds, Girls' Industrial School, Yorkshire.

The Wilkinson Sisters

This is the story of three sisters, Annie, Sarah and Margaret, born to Joseph and Sarah Wilkinson in Leeds between 1857 and 1863.

Joseph and Sarah married on 29th August 1841, and had three children before our sisters were born; William in 1845, Mary in 1847 and Nathaniel in 1851. Annie, was born on 20th July 1855, then came Sarah in 1860, and then Margaret, in 1863. The girls were baptised later, at St Peters Church. Other children followed; Kate in 1879, Dan in 1889 and Mary Ann in 1890. But this seems improbable, as their mother Sarah was 56 in 1891, so her being the mother of Kate, Dan and Mary Ann seems very unlikely. Perhaps they were the children of one of her daughters, and she claimed to be the mother so that they wouldn't be seen as illegitimate.

Before our three girls were born, in the 1851 census, Joseph and Sarah were living at 3 Graham Court, and Joseph was a shoemaker. At some point between 1851 and 1857 the family may have fallen on hard times, because Joseph went from being a shoemaker to working as a hawker. The family had also moved to Bowling Green Yard. This area was one of the most unhealthy slums in Leeds. So the Wilkinson girls didn't have the easiest start in life. Joseph's work as a hawker was precarious. Hawkers walked around, selling their wares to whoever would buy. He would have had some regular clients, and tried to pick up as much extra business as possible. In the 1891 census Joseph is an invalid, and Sarah has become a hawker of fruit and vegetables.

The website www.leodis.net has a photograph of Bowling Green Yard, taken in 1916, just before the buildings were demolished. It shows wooden carts that could be similar to carts used by Joseph in his work as a hawker www.leodis.net/viewimage/75877. The buildings had a frontage onto Back High Street, which is also shown on a photograph in that archive www.leodis.net/viewimage/75876. There is a third photo, from 1901, when some of the family may still have been living there www.leodis.net/viewimage/82191.

So, what became of the three sisters? We see them in the list of attendees at Leeds Ragged School in 1871. Ragged schools were charitable bodies dedicated to free education for poor and destitute children in the 19th century. Such children, were often excluded even from Sunday School education because of their unkempt appearance and often challenging behaviour.

Annie is listed as being 14, Sarah as 11 and Margaret as 8. The girl's dates of birth almost never agree across records. It wasn't uncommon for poor families to be unsure of exact dates, and there may well be little or no paper trail to provide reliable information.

Annie

Annie was born on July the 30th 1855 and baptised at St Peter's Church on May the sixth 1866. We see her in the 1871 census, with her sisters Margaret and Sarah, at the Ragged School. I have not been able to find her after that, even finding her before is tricky. She doesn't appear in the 1861 census and, had I not found her baptism, I would have no evidence of her existence before 1871. There is one possibility though. In the 1861 Census there is a Jane listed as daughter of Joseph and Sarah, who is about the same age as the absent Annie. Could Annie have been known as Annie Jane? Whether that is the case or not, I have found no further trace of Annie or Jane.

Sarah

Sarah was born on July 6th 1858 and baptised on April the 6th 1866, at the same time as Annie. She appears in the 1861 Census, aged 4. In the 1881 census she is recorded as being at home with her parents and younger siblings, her age given as 22. In 1891 she is still with the family, and is now described as being 30 years old. I haven't found a marriage for her, and I wonder if she may have been the mother of the younger children who were listed as being those of her parents; Kate, Dan and Mary Ann. As mentioned above, Sarah's mother

would have been remarkably old to have given birth to them, being in her mid to late 60s.

Margaret

Margaret was born on 11th October 1863 and baptised on April the 8th 1866. She married John Wilson on Christmas Day 1887 at St Peter's Church, Leeds. John was described as a labourer at the time of marriage, and Margaret was a hawker, like her parents.

They had seven children, two of who died in infancy. The children I have found were Alfred b. 1892, John b 1895, Joseph 1897, Sarah b 1900.

In the 1891 Census we see Margaret and her sister Sarah with their parents. Sarah is a bag maker and Margaret is lodging there, with five year old John and one year old Sarah, working as a hawker of Greengrocery. Their brother Dan was living next door with his family, also working as a Hawker of Greengrocery.

I haven't found the family in the 1901 Census.

In 1911 Margaret and John were living in Thornton Street Leeds with three of their children, Alfred, Joseph and John. John worked as a General Labourer, Alfred was a Spinner, John worked as what looks like a Petty Well Lad (I have no idea what that may have been!) And Joseph is at school. There is no mention of Sarah, and I can't find her elsewhere, so she may have died.

Nathaniel Wilkinson

One of the girl's siblings would have been a source of worry for the family.

Nathaniel Wilkinson's life was clearly not an easy one. I have included his story because of the effect his life would have had on our three sisters. He married Margaret Dunn in 1877, and then, as a widower in 1888, he married Mary Ann Lye. In order for him to have married her he would have had to be released early from a prison sentence.

He was a serial offender, convicted and imprisoned for larceny and other crimes. It started when he was young, he absconded from the reformatory school aged 13. He was described as being 5 feet 4 inches tall, dark complexion, hazel eyes, brown hair, eruptions on the face, slender. Ten shillings was offered as a reward for his capture. He was a serial offender, and in 1877 he was convicted of feloniously wounding a policeman, for which he was given a life sentence of Penal Servitude, appearing in the 1881 census as a convict in 'Her Majesty's Convict Prison, Portland, Dorset.'

So was he released early, or were there two Nathaniel Wilsons of a similar age from Leeds? I can only find one, apart from a Nathaniel J Wilkinson who died there in 1920. With more research, it may be possible to disentangle his life.

In 1900 the 'terrible death of Nathaniel Wilkinson, was recorded in several newspapers. Is this him? The man who died was engaged by the pub, and is described as being very melancholy. His death was awful. He fell asleep and fell head first into a vat of boiling beer. He was pulled out and later died at the City Infirmary.

I have written about Nathaniel because his life story gives a background to the poverty and violence in the poor areas of Leeds, where the Wilkinson girls grew up. They had hard lives, and much went unrecorded. As in all industrial towns and cities, the poor of Leeds suffered from hunger, and diseases such as consumption (TB), dysentery, cholera, typhoid and smallpox were never far away. Leeds also suffered unrest in the nineteenth century, and crime was rife; the story of Nathaniel Wilkinson is not an isolated one.

A final bit of background:

In 1866 Sir John Simon – in effect the Chief Medical Officer of the time – prepared a report which Leeds Council tried to suppress. Not only did Sir John Simon publish the report, but he highlighted the efforts made to obstruct publication. He stated that the town presented: “a surprising sight, bringing to remembrance the conditions of many English towns of twenty years ago! The public health provision is in proportion to the importance of the town perhaps the worst of which has come to the knowledge of the department”

Sir John Simon, Privy Council, 1866 1866 Dr M. K Robinson appointed as Medical Officer of Health for Leeds Following his damning indictment of the situation in Leeds, Dr Robinson was appointed as the first Medical Officer of Health for Leeds in 1866. (Liverpool, in contrast, had appointed the world’s first Medical Officer of Health in 1847.) The 1870 infant mortality rate was 218 per 1000 live births – more than one in five dying before they reached their first birthday. That made up around 30 per cent of the deaths in Leeds at the time. Through the 1875 Public Health Act Medical Officers of Health had to be

appointed and write an Annual Report. However, Leeds Medical Officers of Health had started producing Annual Reports before that.

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