

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in September 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon.

Mary Ann LEWIS's Story

Mary Ann LEWIS was born on 27th November 1828 in Carhampton, near Dunster in Somerset, the fourth child of John LEWIS and his wife Elizabeth (Betty), née BAKER¹. She was baptised on 29th December 1829 in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Dunster, and the baptismal records state that her birth was attended by Ann LEWIS and Ann CAVILL and that her father, at the time, was a cordwainer¹. John and Elizabeth's other children were Elizabeth Adams LEWIS (born 28th November 1821¹ and named for her maternal grandmother), Emma LEWIS (born 26th October 1823¹), James LEWIS (baptised 16th November 1825 under the surname LEWES), Elijah LEWIS (born 26th June 1831¹) and Louisa LEWIS (born 11th January 1835¹). Of the six children, three – James, Mary Ann and Elijah – were deaf.

By the time that Louisa was born in 1835, the family were living in Dunster and John had changed his occupation to that of draper¹. Unfortunately, by the end of that year, John was terminally ill; he made his will on 14th December 1835² and was buried in the Dunster Priory churchyard on 26th December 1835³, aged around 43. The Sherborne Mercury, on 28th December 1835, reported under the heading 'Fatal Case of Cancer' "Mr. John Lewis, linen-draper, of Dunster, was seized with the cancer in his neck about nine months ago, previous to which he had enjoyed excellent health. He consulted several medical men at Exeter, Bath and Bristol, but without having any relief. The swelling became so large at last, as to bring on suffocation, of which he died on Sunday last, leaving a disconsolate widow and six small children, three of whom are deaf and dumb: one of them is in the Exeter Deaf and Dumb Asylum." ⁴

On 8th June 1832, aged around 6, the eldest son, James, had been admitted to the West of England School for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb in Exeter, Devon⁵. The school had opened in April 1827, initially for children from just Devon and Cornwall, but almost immediately some provision was earmarked for children from Dorset and Somerset as well. The Taunton Courier, on 18th April 1827, reported "On Tuesday week, a General Meeting of the Governors was convened at the West of England Deaf and Dumb Institution, on the Alphington Road, near Exeter, to investigate the claims of additional candidates. Twenty, the number with which the establishment commences, having been elected, and the applicants being chiefly natives of Devon and Cornwall, it was determined to reserve, for three months, five vacancies for Dorset and Somerset exclusively, - a measure rendered practicable by recent arrangement with a distinguished and benevolent individual in that vicinity." ⁴ By December 1828

the institution had expanded to the point that it moved to purpose-built school for 70 pupils in the St. Leonard's district of Exeter.

Pupils were taught to read and write and those with some residual hearing were taught to speak (at various times, sign language was also taught, but this was dependent on the headmaster in charge). All pupils admitted had to have been baptised and emphasis was also laid on religious education. Writing in the 1870s, one headmaster (Dr W.R. Scott) said "It is not till some advance is made in the instruction of the deaf and dumb that we are able to impress them with the knowledge of the attributes of a God, and their duty to Him as their Creator and Preserve."⁶ The Exeter Flying Post, reporting on 14th December 1837 on the annual examination of pupils at the school, mentions James LEWIS as one of "the younger boys, who had been in the institution only about 18 months, and his responses to some of the questions put to the boys in the examination. "Why was Herod troubled when he heard of the birth of Jesus Christ? He was afraid that Jesus Christ would have large armies to fight against Rome, and seize him from the throne. – JAMES LEWIS." He also answered a question about Alfred the Great! At the same event, James received a prize for "children who have acquitted themselves best during the past year in their studies and for their general good conduct."⁴

Whilst some private pupils were taken and parents or 'friends' or their parish officers were expected to make some contribution towards costs, the school also relied on donations to its charitable funds. By 1836, the Western Times, reporting on 9th January on the annual meeting of the institution, stated that "the cost of each child was about seven shillings a week in addition to the sum of 3s paid for by its friends. As the funds which the institution could command,

limited the number of children to about 50, beyond which number the committee could not go consistently with the sum they had in hand, they had determined to raise the minimum of payment in order to obviate the necessity for rejecting children: for this purpose an intermediate class of private pupils had been formed who would have to pay ten shillings per week.”⁴

It was in this month, January 1836, that Mary Ann LEWIS was admitted to the school, joining her elder brother⁵. Having lost her father less than a month previously, it is likely that this was a necessity, as her mother Elizabeth tried to establish herself as shopkeeper in place of her husband whilst still caring for at least two children under the age of five (the elder two daughters, Elizabeth Adams and Emma perhaps being old enough by then to have gone out into service). There is less record of Mary Ann’s time in the school than there is of James. We know that they were both joined by their youngest brother, Elijah, admitted to the school in 1837⁵. Finding funds to support three children at the school was clearly difficult for Elizabeth. An entry in the school’s accounts for 1842 notes a payment of £2 6/- against the “Lewis a/c” which would be for board⁷. When more than one child was at the school parents/friends could ask for support for the boarding fees from a “Bazaar fund.” In a letter written around 28th October 1839 to the Gentlemen’s Committee “Mrs Hippisley Tuckfield [one of the founding benefactors of the school] begs to suggest for the consideration of the Gentlemen’s Committee whether it might not be desirable to make some allowance from the Bazaar Fund to Mrs Lewis of Dunster a widow woman who has now three deaf and dumb children in the Institution and finds the greatest difficulty in paying for them perhaps (?)1/- a week for each child might enable her to continue to keep them at the Institution.”⁸

As well as providing some scholarly education, the school also prepared its pupils for employment. Dr. W.R. Scott wrote, "These children are generally sent to school for a certain number of years, say six or seven, and it never ought to be less. After leaving, they should be in the best position to be placed as apprentices to learn a trade, by which to earn their future livelihood."⁶ Girls were generally prepared for domestic service, dress-making and the like. Boys were prepared for a trade. Dr. W.R. Scott reported that, at the first "Conference of deaf-mute teachers" held in London in July 1851, a Mr. Cook of Edinburgh "first considered what occupations seemed best suited to the deaf and dumb. These, in his opinion, were, first, shoemaking, which he regarded as most desirable on account of the steady employment it furnished, and the ease with which it was acquired."⁶

Certainly, on leaving the school (by June 1840), James LEWIS was recorded as becoming a shoemaker⁷, not only following a trade for which he had probably been prepared by the school, but also following in the original cordwaining footsteps of his father. In the 1841 census⁹ he is back home with his mother and youngest sister, Louisa (aged 6), in Church Street, Dunster; Louisa's occupation is given as shopkeeper but no occupation is given for James and no trace of him beyond this date has been found. Elizabeth is listed under the heading of "Grocers, Drapers and Dealers in Sundries" in Dunster in the 1844 Pigot's Directory of Berks, Bucks etc.¹⁰

Mary Ann and Elijah were still at school at the time of the 1841 census and both are therefore recorded as pupils at the "Deaf and Dumb School" in St Leonard's, Exeter¹¹. Mary Ann left the school in 1841/42 and Elijah left in 1846/87. School records state that they both returned to "reside with parents."⁷ This was clearly

just their mother and in the 1851 census they are still living with Elizabeth and Louisa in Church Street, Dunster. Elizabeth is stated to be a general shopkeeper and both Mary Ann and Louisa are stated to be dressmakers. Elijah, not unsurprisingly, is a cordwainer¹². The older sister, Emma, had married in 1847 and also lived on Church Street just a few doors away with her cabinetmaker husband, Thomas HOLE¹³. By the time of the 1861 census, Elizabeth appears to have given up the shop and is living with Emma and her family¹⁴; she was still with them in 1871¹⁵ and died in 1874¹⁶. Elijah had died in 1860 and was buried at 10th March 1860 in the Dunster Priory churchyard³. Louisa married in Dunster in 1874¹⁷ and she and her husband, Walter PRESTON subsequently moved to London.

Mary Ann LEWIS, however, remained in Somerset but moved east to Taunton. In both the 1861¹⁸ and 1871¹⁹ censuses, she is living at Castle Green, Bishops Hull, Taunton, as a lodger in the family of Thomas J BICKLEY and is described as a 'boot binder.' A binder operated a machine which attached the uppers to the soles of shoes or boots. It was a job often done by women; there were 94 shoe or boot binders in Taunton listed in the 1861 census and all bar two of these were female, including Mary Ann's fellow lodger Mary Ann DUNSTER. By the time of the 1881 census²⁰, however, Mary Ann had now become a domestic servant to the BICKLEY family, which included Mrs BICKLEY's mother Mary HEARNS and she went on to become a general servant to Mary HEARNS by 1891, when they were living together in Black Horse Lane, Taunton²¹. By 1911²² Mary HEARNS was living with another married daughter and she died in 1914²³. I cannot find any trace of Mary Ann LEWIS, dead or alive after the 1891 census although it should be noted that Mary HEARNS also appears to be missing from the 1901 census.

Sources

- ¹ Ancestry: England & Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1936
- ² South West Heritage Trust: Somerset Archive Catalogue: Will of John Lewis, shopkeeper 1835-1836
- ³ Find My Past: National Burial Index for England & Wales (Transcriptions by Somerset & Dorset Family History Society)
- ⁴ Find My Past: Newspapers
- ⁵ West of England School for the Deaf - Admissions Register 1827-1836 Transcription/Extracts D123 by Joint project Devon Family History Society with Devon Record Office (Record Office Ref 7645)
- ⁶ Book [electronic resource] by Dr. Scott, the headmaster, published 1870. The deaf and dumb: their education and social position by Scott, W. R. (William Robson), 1811-1877 from The Wellcome Library available under creative commons public domain <https://archive.org/details/b20412484/mode/2up>
- ⁷ Annual Reports DHC 7645C West of England School for the deaf and Dumb Annual Reports, 1826-1860 accessed July 2024 with kind permission from Devon Archives and Local Studies, and from the Deaf Academy, Exmouth
- ⁸ Minutes of the Gentlemen's Committee 1837-53 DHC 7645C West of England School for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb. Accessed July 2024 with kind permission from Devon Archives and Local Studies, and from the Deaf Academy, Exmouth. Extracts transcribed by Helen Shields
- ⁹ Find My Past: 1841 England, Wales & Scotland Census: HO107 Piece 936 Book 4 Folio 21 Page 10 Schedule 398
- ¹⁰ University of Leicester Special Collections Online: Historical Directories of England & Wales: Pigot & Co.'s Directory of Berks, Bucks ... , 1844. [Part 2: Hants to Wilts, & Wales] (<https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4/id/231600>; accessed 12/09/2024)
- ¹¹ Find My Past: 1841 England, Wales & Scotland Census: HO107 Piece 263 Book 23 Folio 14 Page 22 Schedule 1245 (Elijah transcribed as 'E??? Lewis'; Mary Ann transcribed as 'Mary Ann Luies')
- ¹² Ancestry: 1851 England Census: HO107 Piece 1920 Folio 137 Page 17 Schedule 60
- ¹³ Ancestry: 1851 England Census: HO107 Piece 1920 Folio 137 Page 16 Schedule 57
- ¹⁴ Ancestry: 1861 England Census: RG09 Piece 1602 Folio 21 Page 13 Schedule 67
- ¹⁵ Ancestry: 1871 England Census: RG10 Piece 2350 Folio 25 Page 24 Schedule 117
- ¹⁶ GRO Death Index: Mar Q 1874 Williton Vol 5c Page 257
- ¹⁷ FreeBMD: Sept Q 1874 Williton Vol 5c Page 441.
- ¹⁸ Ancestry: 1861 England Census: RG09 Piece 1619 Folio 4 Page 4 Schedule 17
- ¹⁹ Ancestry: 1871 England Census: RG10 Piece 2374 Folio 38 Page 9 Schedule 59
- ²⁰ Ancestry: 1881 England Census: RG11 Piece 2368 Folio 98 Page 4
- ²¹ Ancestry: 1891 England Census: RG12 Piece 1877 Folio 74 Page 8 GSU roll 6096987
- ²² Find My Past: 1911 England Census: RG14 Piece 14239 Schedule 20 (Mary HEARNS transcribed as 'Mary STEAMS')

²³ Find My Past: Newspapers: Western Daily Press 26 March 1914