

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in March 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who appear in the 1901 census for St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory, Ashford, Middlesex and Farmfield Reformatory for Inebriate Women, Horley, Surrey.

Ellen O'Donoghue

Ellen was born in 1856 into a poor London family. Being female, working class and living in the largest city in Europe I thought it would be very difficult to find much information about her. How wrong I was!

Probably because she was SO poor and had such obvious social and medical problems (variously described as a "cripple" and "disabled")and was possibly suffering from poor mental health, she features in many different workhouse records over many years. Also because she had a trade I have been able to confirm a lot of the information– she also didn't move from a very small area of London. I have managed to trace her probable year and place of birth from census returns. We know she had problems with alcohol (she was after all, in the records of St. Joseph's Inebriate Reformatory). This has meant she has

featured a lot in newspaper reports and criminal records and I have even found reports of what she said from the dock and photos and a physical description!

Early Years

Ellen was born Ellen O'Donoghue in the Strand in London in c1856. The first definite record I can find is her marriage to John Thomas Heather in 1876. A son, John, was born in 1877. In 1881 she was living in Marshall Street in London and was a tailoress. In 1891 they were living in the St James area of Westminster in 2 rooms.

Later Years and Decline

Sadly, Ellen's story now is one of a gradual decline and decades spent in workhouses or asylums; from my first encounter with her in the Westminster Workhouse in 23rd January 1894 to her death in a Lunatic asylum in 1913. She appears in many newspaper reports and in criminal records as an inebriate. I have found much about her from these records. She was a Roman Catholic, a tailoress (I wonder if this was a source of pride for Ellen? It is mentioned in every record. I can almost hear her giving this information with some pride). In 1902 she is noted as "temporarily disabled". However, her husband was himself admitted to the Westminster Asylum on 3rd July 1902. He was a tailor, his religion was Church of England and his next of kin was not given as Ellen, but his son, John, who very interestingly was noted as being in the army! John was discharged from the Asylum on 26th July 1902 and it appears that her husband died in 1906. In 1911 Ellen was in the Wandsworth Asylum and described as a "lunatic". She died 12th September 1913 in the Colney asylum. It was noted that she was a pauper.

We can see from this decline and the fact that her husband was also admitted at least once to a workhouse that Ellen had serious problems and perhaps very little support. At the end of her life, she was no longer described as a tailoress, but as a pauper.

Police Records and Newspaper Reports

There is an incredible amount of information about Ellen in these records, including a physical description and photos! A report in various newspapers in 1906 states “She is a little, mild mannered woman who has been well known for years as an inebriate and was again before the Marlborough Street magistrates.” She was accused of being drunk and disorderly. To which she replied “I think this is very hard. I take very little drink”! She was sentenced to another three years in an inebriate home, it being noted that she had already spent two terms in one and indeed was discharged from one on the 23rd February and arrested for being drunk on the 24th! The exasperated magistrate noted that all attempts on “reclamation” had been a waste of public money! At a later date she was also sentenced to one month hard labour. On another occasion she “looked aghast” at the severity of the sentence and “screamed and “fell down”. However it was also noted at one hearing that she was a “good workwoman when sober” but on being given £1 to help her, on leaving the court she immediately went into a public house

It is clear that Ellen had a very hard life; particularly in the last 20 years of her life, which was mostly spent in workhouses, asylums and “Homes for Inebriates”. Earlier in her life she appears to have been more settled – marrying, having a son and working as a tailoress. Indeed it is noted that even in those later years she was known to be a good workwoman. The first record of her social problems was not until she was in her 40s when she first entered

an asylum. Her husband also had his own problems. Her last three years were spent in the Colney Lunatic asylum and it was there that she died on 23rd September 1913. She is described as a pauper- no longer the woman with a life of her own, a family and a trade.

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