

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.

Maria Vuller's Story

Maria Vuller was born on 18th May 1861ⁱ, in South Camp, Aldershot, the youngest child of Richard Vuller, a career soldier, and Margaret (née Drum). Though her birth certificate records her as "Mary Vuller," she was known throughout her life as Maria. The youngest of six siblings. Her life, spanning 73 years, was marked by despair and shaped by her family's military roots and the societal challenges of the Victorian era.

Richard Vuller: A Soldier's Life

Maria's father, Richard Vuller, was a Private in the 56th (West Essex) Foot Regiment, later the Essex Regiment. His career in the British Army defined much of the Vuller family's early life.

- Ireland: In 1841, Richard was stationed in Newry and Armagh, Ireland, where the 56th Foot Regiment played a key role in maintaining order during the Repeal Movement—a campaign of civil unrest by Irish nationalists to repeal the Act of Union, which had merged Ireland with Great Britain.ⁱⁱ By 1843, he was based in Cork,ⁱⁱⁱ where he and Margaret welcomed their first child, John Vuller, born on 9th November 1843 and baptized at St. Patrick's Church in Cork City, just three weeks later on the 28th November 1843.^{iv} He later attended the Royal Hibernian Military School in Dublin at the age of 11 and 8 months.^v
- England: Between 1845 and 1846, the regiment returned to England. During this time, Richard and Margaret welcomed their second child, Sarah Vuller, born on 25th March 1845, at Ashton Barracks, Ashton-under-Lyne. Sarah was baptized on 18th May 1845, at Old St. George's Church in Stalybridge.^{vi}
- Overseas Service: In February 1847, the regiment was sent to Gibraltar, a key military outpost at the time.^{vii} Elizabeth Vuller was born on the 18th April 1848 and was baptized on the 28th April 1848,^{viii} though little is known of her life. On the 30 April 1851, another son named Richard Vuller Jr. was born and he was baptised on the 12th May 1851.^{ix} Richard had served 4 years and 2 months in Gibraltar when on the 24th May 1851 the regiment transferred to Bermuda.^x

The Vullers spent the next four years in the Caribbean. This tropical assignment brought its own challenges, including an outbreak of yellow fever in 1853, which had spread from the convict hulk (prison ship), HMS Thames, which was

moored in Bermuda harbour and claimed the lives of over 200 soldiers.^{xi}

Richard's regiment was eventually ordered home in December 1853^{xii}, but due to delays, they did not depart Bermuda until late 1854.^{xiii}

- **Crimea War:** The regiment was ordered to recruit in Dublin before sailing to Turkey to join the fight. Richard was wounded in the conflict, after serving only 3 months, sustaining a severe injury to his left hand on 7th September 1855 in the trenches. A shell fragment required the amputation of his middle and ring fingers.^{xiv}
- **Medical Discharge:** After Richard's discharge on the 26th February 1856, the Vullers settled in Aldershot, a growing military town.

The Vullers in Aldershot, England

In 1857, Richard and Margaret welcomed another son, George (James George) Vuller.^{xv} Followed by Maria, completing the family.

Tragedy struck on the 26th January 1868, when Margaret died of acute bronchitis at just 44 years of age,^{xvi} leaving Richard a widower with young children. Maria being 7 years old.

Richard remarried on the 12th June 1870 to Hannah Cunditt at the Wesleyan Church in Aldershot.^{xvii}

The 1871 England census records Richard under Staff and Departments as a Hair Carder. The family are residing at South Camp, Aldershot, with Maria listed as a 9-year-old scholar.^{xviii}

During 1875 Richard advertises his civilian occupation as Mattress and Cushion maker in the Aldershot Military Gazette:-

R. VULLER

Begs to inform the Public of Aldershot that having just left Her Majesty's Service, after 20 as Mattrass Maker at the South Camp, will CLEAN and RE-MAKE MATTRASSES equal to New, at Reasonable Terms

Address:- NO 4, BIRCHETT ROAD, NEAR BANK STREET, ALDERSHOT^{xix}

MR. R. VULLER,

Begs to announce to the Public and Military of Aldershot, that with his 20 years experience of Mattress-Making, he is now prepared to MAKE or RE-MAKE every description of CUSHIONS or MATTRESSES.

Repairs Punctually attended to.

*Address :- NO 4, BIRCHETT ROAD, BANK STREET,
ALDERSHOT^{xx}*

The Aldershot Military Gazette also reported an incident that year involving a Richard Vuller. However, it remains unclear which Richard this refers to.

ALDERSHOT PETTY SESSIONS – THURSDAY [Before Captain Newcome, chairman.]

UNLAWFUL POSSESSION OF MILITARY NECESSARIES. Richard Vuller was charged with being in unlawful possession of a pair of military boots and a flannel shirt. The case was proved by the Metropolitan Police and a Sergeant of the Army Hospital Corps. - Ordered to pay £2 10s., a week allowed for payment.^{xxi}

Siblings' Lives and Service

Maria's siblings followed military paths:

- John Vuller, the eldest, enlisted in Dublin on the 26th January 1858 and joined the 56th Foot Regiment. He was just 14 years and 2 months. John was stationed either in India (a total of 12 years and 4 months) or at home.^{xxii}
- Sarah Vuller married Patrick Roach a career soldier and Drum Major formally of the 56th Foot, now serving with the 2nd Battalion 16th Regiment (residing in North Camp)^{xxiii} on the 3rd March 1873 at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Farnham, Surrey. They moved to Preston, Lancashire.^{xxiv}
- Richard Vuller, served in the 2nd Border Regiment.^{xxv}
- George Vuller, enlisted in Aldershot with the 48th Brigade on the 17th November 1874 aged 18 and 7 months. He served with the Royal West Surrey 2nd Foot Regiment in India (3 years and 3 months) and Malta (6 months). He was medically discharged on the 6th December 1881 at the age of 35, due to asthma. He continued his carpentry profession.^{xxvi,xxvii}

Despite their service, the family endured continual losses. Richard Jr. died of tuberculosis on the 31st January 1884 at the Newry Military Hospital.^{xxviii}

Richard Sr. passed away on the 13th March 1890 at the Chelsea Hospital from Morbus Corbis and General Dropsy (Natural causes, heart disease and general oedema/swelling) xxix. John died in 1894 in Lambeth, London.^{xxx} By 1900, Maria's brother George had also died in Aldershot.^{xxxi}

Maria's Struggles

Maria's life took a difficult turn by the 1881 England census,^{xxxii} when she was 19 years old, unmarried, and her occupation is documented as a general domestic servant. She is recorded as an inmate at St. Thomas' Home for the Friendless and Fallen in Basingstoke, a refuge for vulnerable young women.

The home accommodated up to 48 young women, aged from 15 to 30 years and trained women in needlework, laundry, dairy work, and cooking. Inmates were expected to remain two years.^{xxxiii} There are no surviving records for the St Thomas' home to shed light on the circumstances that led to Maria's stay. There is no evidence that Maria had a child or children, though societal pressures and possible stigma may have influenced her trajectory.

In the 1891 England census, Maria's whereabouts are unclear. However, her death certificate later records her last residence as the Refuge on Grosvenor Road, Aldershot — another institution for destitute women, also known as a Magdalene Home.^{xxxiv}

A Life of Hardship and Institutionalization

Maria's declining mental health led to a report in the Reading Mercury and Oxford Gazette on the 25th April 1896:-

ALDERSHOT PETTY SESSIONS, April 16

CHARGE of ATTEMPTED

SUICIDE – Maria Vuller was charged with attempting to drown herself in the Basingstoke Canal. Privates Pearson and Marshall, of the A.S.C., were going for a walk and heard screams. A little girl said a women was in the canal, and they ran to the bank, and Pearson jumped in at once swam to the women, who was in the middle of the canal, and brought her to the bank, and with Marshall's help got her out. She said she was driven to it by despair. The Court complimented the soldiers, especially Pearson, and remanded prisoner for a week.^{xxxv}

On the 25th June 1896 Maria is mentioned in the Farnham Board Of Guardians Minute Books^{xxxvi} for the Farnham Workhouse. There is an order of adjudication made upon the parish of Lambeth. Later she is admitted to the Hanwell Lunatic Asylum on 27th April 1898,^{xxxvii} where she remained for the rest of her life. Institutionalization was a tragic reality for many women of her era, often rooted in poverty and societal prejudice.

Maria's Final Years

Maria outlived all her siblings. Maria spent over three decades in the asylum.^{xxxviii,xxxix,xi} Her sister Sarah converted to Catholicism on 17th February 1911 at the age of 65^{xli} and died in 1914 in Preston^{xlii}. Maria herself passed away on 4th November 1934,^{xliii} at 1 Uxbridge Road, Norwood, from chronic bronchitis, the same condition that claimed her mother. A cruel echo of the illness that had shaped her early life. She was described as a spinster and former general servant. The informant on the death certificate was A.W. Daniel M.D. Dr. Alfred Wilson Daniel was the medical superintendent of the Hanwell Mental Hospital. He served the hospital from 1902 to his retirement in 1936.^{xliv}

Today, the institutions where Maria spent much of her life—the St. Thomas' Home, the Refuge and Hanwell—have been repurposed, their original purposes faded into history. Some of the original building of St Bernard's Hospital (Hanwell Asylum) are now part of the headquarters for the West London Mental Health NHS Trust (WLMHT).^{xlv} Yet, Maria's forgotten story has been retold, a testament of one family's youngest child amid a life marked by hardship and loss.

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