

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.

Eliza Binns

Eliza Binns was admitted on October 9th 1869 aged 10. Her record states that it is not known where she was born. Her height was not recorded but she had dark brown hair, light blue eyes, a slender form and a florid complexion. She had several scars on her body; a scald on her breast, burns on her left arm and a scar on her right arm said to have been done by her brother 'with poker red hot'. It is not known whether Eliza had attended any school but she could not read, write or cipher and she was not employed. The name of her surviving parent was Bridgit, her father having died in Bristol Infirmary from consumption. Her mother's occupation was a Hawker of small wares.

Loyd's Arms Yard and Mrs Massley's Lodging in Scott's Yard were the residences named, the former also connected with her brother John Binns, an umbrella mender and Ma[r]y her sister. Other relations and friends were

James Binns and his wife and Uncle Pat and Ellen Grimes who were in a lodging house near Old Church, Manchester. He [Uncle Pat] was a Hawker of pins and needles and other things. Eliza's offence was stealing money to the sum of 12 or 13 shillings and 6 pence from a till in Meadow Lane. She had done this often and said she had gone with Patrick and Martin Handley from Massley's [lodging house]. She was brought before Thomas Tennant and Antony Tetley at Leeds on October 9th 1869 and was given 5 years in the Reformatory. A note is recorded that her time was up on October 9th 1874 and her page is crossed through.

Her history reveals a young life of theft. She had often stolen money and other articles from tills, counters of shops and fruit from stalls. She did live in Manchester with someone called William Br- (the rest of the name is illegible) near Shude Hill, Market Street. There is no further information given about her detention or discharge.

Eliza would have been born around 1858-9. There was some useful information in her record concerning the names of her relatives. Her mother Bridgit, or Bridget potentially had a brother called Pat or Patrick Grimes which may suggest that her surname was also Grimes. Of the three births registered around 1856-1860 for an Eliza Binns, one in Hull, Yorkshire in 1857 showed the mother's maiden name to be Grimes. Further research found a marriage for David Binns, a weaver, to Bridget Grimes in Burnley, Lancashire in 1841. Their first three children were John, birth registered in Rochdale in 1842, James, birth registered in Bradford in 1845 and a daughter, Bridget, her birth registered in Bradford and North Bierley in 1850 and her death in Bolton Union aged 1 year in 1851.

The census of 1851 finds David Binns an umbrella maker aged 26, born in Manchester, with his wife Bridget, aged 27 born in Wigan, Lancashire and their sons John, aged 8 born in Rochdale, James aged 5 born in Huddersfield. Another James Binns, aged 20, a watchmaker born in Bolton was also recorded. They were all lodging with Joseph Little (also working as a butcher) and his wife Elizabeth at 12, Cannon Street, Burnley, Lancs. In 1852, a son called David was registered in Huddersfield Union, in 1854 a daughter called Susanna was also registered in Huddersfield Union. In 1856 another daughter called Margaret was registered, this time in Hull, with her death, also in Hull, registered the same year. In 1857 Eliza Binns was born, also in Hull, her little brother David, aged 6, died there the following year and in 1859 Eliza's oldest brother John, an umbrella maker his father David Binns also an umbrella maker, married Mary Ifield at St. Stephen's parish church in the Holy Trinity parish of Hull. This may account for the 'sister' Mary recorded in Eliza's admission record.

The 1861 census finds Eliza Binns, aged 3, born in Hull, together with her parents David, now a brushmaker with Bridget his wife, James, 15 and Susan, 6. They are lodging in the Prince of Wales public house in Thanet St. Lawrence, Kent. In the same year, it is likely that the eldest brother, John, now an umbrella maker, was living in a lodging house in Portsmouth with his wife Mary, born in Brighton, Sussex and their son David aged 16 months born in London. By 1871, Eliza, a scholar, had been moved with the other girls from the Reformatory to the Windsor Street Ragged School in Leeds. Her age is still recorded as 10 years and her birthplace as not known. At the same time, Bridget Binns, a licensed Hawker, was lodging in Middle Road, Dewsbury. She is

stated to be unmarried. If her husband had died between 1861 and 1869, the date of Eliza's admission, it is feasible that this is Eliza's mother, the lodging house keeper, Rachel Thompson assumed she was single. A death was registered for a David Banes aged 39 years in Bristol in 1862 which may have been Eliza's father and it is possible that Bridget died in 1877 aged around 51 years, as death for a Bridget Binns was registered in Bradford district which included Dewsbury at this time. She was not found on the 1881 census.

In 1876 Eliza's brother James married Catherine Ellis in Huddersfield parish church. His father, David Binns was recorded as an umbrella maker as was James. On March 17th 1879, Eliza married John McDonall (also found as McDonald), a Puddler (working in Iron manufacturing), at St James Parish Church in Leeds and an announcement appeared in the Leeds Times on March 22nd 1879. She possibly fictitiously names her father as James Binns, a warp dresser. There may be several reasons why, possibly the main one was that she may hardly remember who her father was. By 1881, she and James are living apart, he is a boarder at 2, Wheeler Row, Leeds, still employed as a Puddler but an 'unmarried' one. John's sister, Sarah Ellen MacDonald, had been in the industrial school with Eliza and her story is told elsewhere. Eliza has not been found on the 1881 census but by the later part of 1883, a son was registered in Leeds called John McDonald with a mother whose maiden name was Binns.

In 1891 Eliza McDonald is found with her 7 year old son John living at 17, Worsteds Street in the St Peter's district of Leeds. Further research shows that her next-door-neighbour at number 15 was her widowed sister Susan, now called Susan Sorbie after her marriage to Edwin Sorbie early in 1881. He was also a Puddler, and it may be that their husbands had worked together. Eliza

and her sister Susan Sorbie were both hawkers of millinery in the 1891 census. Eliza has not been found on the 1901 census but it is probably her son John McDonald who is lodging in Leeds aged 17 at 4 Vienna Street in the St. Peter's district of Leeds and working as a mill hand.

An interesting development occurs in 1911 when Eliza and her formerly estranged husband John McDonald appear together in a lodging house run by Jonas Wood in Chesterfield, Derbyshire as man and wife. They are both working as Hawkers. The information provided suggests they had had five children, that three had died and two were living. It is not known who the other child may have been besides the younger John McDonald.

Three occur events which may relate to the younger John McDonald, including a marriage in 1914 to Maria Moore in Leeds, their residence in Leeds in 1921 with John working as a railway labourer in Wakefield and having a spell in H. M. Prison, Leeds around 1939. In 1939 also, an Eliza McDonald, widowed, with a birth date of 19th March 1857 is found as a resident of the Home for the Aged Poor in Belle Vue Lane, Leeds and a death is recorded towards the end of 1939 in Leeds for an Eliza McDonald aged 82 years. This is no doubt the same woman but whether it is Eliza McDonald née Binns is debateable, as her birth was registered in the fourth quarter of 1857.

It would appear that Eliza led a nomadic life, and not an easy one. In most of the census records, her family are found in lodging houses. The life of a Hawker was a precarious, unsettled, existence covering miles in all weathers. It would be good to think that Eliza found some degree of comfort for her final years in the Home for the Aged Poor.

Fiona Stone January 2023