

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



A Story of Five Sisters

This story contains details of mental illness.

This is the story of the five Leighton sisters whose lives spanned a century; a period of great change. Born before the car, the aeroplane, the old age pension or the radio and before women had the right to vote, four of them survived two world wars, lived to see the 'swinging sixties' and one would witness man walking on the moon. It is also the story of five lockets. The sisters, Ada Florence, Frances Mary, Caroline Jessie, Lottie Matilda and Gertrude Fanny, were my grandmother's first cousins. Although the youngest, Gertrude Fanny, married, none of the Leighton sisters had any children. The sisters were the daughters of William and Caroline Leighton née Woolgar of Herne Hill in South London.



Caroline Leighton née Woolgar



William Leighton

Caroline was William's second wife and the sisters had an older half-brother, Frederick Beale Leighton, who emigrated to the United States. My second cousins and I are the closest living relatives who met any of the sisters in person. I feel particularly close to the middle sister, Caroline Jessie, known as Jessie, as I am the current custodian of her locket.

Both William Leighton and his father, John, were silversmiths. The Leightons were reputedly responsible for the cross on the tomb of the Duke of Wellington, in St. George's Chapel, Windsor and a bill for £226 19s 8d survives in family possession. Pictures of the tomb do not show a cross but perhaps it lies flat. William worked for Edward Barnard and sons, a company that dates back to the seventeenth century, when it was known as Nelmes.

The locket that I have was, reputedly, one of a set of five made by William for his daughters, each locket bearing their initials. The whereabouts of two of the other lockets is known. Apart from the initials, these lockets are identical,

perhaps suggesting that they were all made at the same time. If this is the case, then the date must be after the youngest sister, Gertrude, was born in 1880 and before William died in 1900. Based on its style, using his knowledge of jewellery fashions, an antiques expert dated Jessie's locket to between 1890 and 1910. Taking all the evidence into account, a date of creation in the 1890s seems probable.

The sisters grew up at 153 Railton Road, a three-story, eight-roomed, Victorian, terraced house in Herne Hill, in the London borough of Lambeth. In 1881, it seems that they were sharing the property with another family. Until he left for America in the 1880s, their half-brother lived with them, working as a silversmith like his father. The girls would all have gone to school locally.

Ada Florence 1870-1963

Ada, the eldest of the sisters, was born on 21 April 1870 at Herne Hill. It is not known where she was christened but her christening mug, almost certainly made by her father, has survived in the family. Ada had rheumatic fever, probably when she was a child. This is a complication that occasionally develops following a bacterial throat infection. Today, the effective treatment is antibiotics but these would not have been available to Ada. Rheumatic fever can have long term effects on the brain, heart and joints.



Ada's Christening Mug



Ada Florence

At the age of twenty, Ada was living at home and working in a baker's shop. In August 1893, she travelled to Connecticut to visit her brother, sailing on the *Chester* from Southampton. She was described as a servant; perhaps she worked on the voyage. No record of her return journey has been found, so we don't know how long she stayed or if she intended this to be a permanent move.

By 1901, Ada was one of two live-in shopwomen at the baker's shop run by Henry Hollands, at 64 Westow Hill, Upper Norwood, on the outskirts of Croydon. At the age of thirty eight, about 1908, Ada suffered a bout of depression. This may be why, by 1911, she was back in the family home at Railton Road with her mother and three of her sisters, taking in dressmaking. In 1918, Ada was living with her widowed mother and all four of her sisters at Railton Road. They appear in the electoral roll, having just been granted the vote.

All the sisters were left specific items of jewellery after their mother died from cancer at the end of September 1919. Ada was one of her mother's executrixes and was to receive 'my mother's ½ dozen silver spoons, one pair of tongs and two silver salt spoons'. I do have two silver salt spoons; perhaps these are the same ones.



Ada's Locket

Within three months of her mother's death, Ada suffered from what was described as 'a slight nervous breakdown'. Her condition worsened; she was forced to give up work in December 1919. A holiday in July 1920 had to be cut short, as Ada had delusions that she would not see her home again.

On 19 October 1920, the sisters consulted Harley Street doctor, Maurice Craig, about Ada's condition. The decision to take this course of action must have been a difficult one; the sisters would have found the cost of a Harley Street consultation a strain on their budget. Dr Craig declared Ada to be of unsound mind and 'a proper person to be taken charge of and detained under care and treatment'. His observations were that Ada was 'depressed with a great sense of unworthiness and a constant desire to die. She believes that she is a source of danger to others'. Following the visit to Doctor Craig, Frances applied for a free place for Ada in the National Bethlem Asylum, stating that Ada's only income was seven shillings and sixpence a week from National Assistance. It was fortunate that Ada qualified for assistance under The National Insurance Act of 1911. The details of the family income read, 'One sister and myself have been doing a little dressmaking at home and looking after the patient. Another sister is out in business and she has been helping a little to make ends meet'.

Letters to the asylum survive, written by Ada's sister Frances. These relate to Ada's condition and her care and shed further light on her story. Frances' comments about her sister stated that she was suffering from a 'great fit of depression and melancholy. Patient has delusions that she hasn't been doing things right'. Frances also said that Ada had been 'very depressed for ten months, more so since July 1920. Patient had delusions when on holiday in July 1920 that she couldn't see her home again and insisted on coming home'. On

the basis of this evidence, the County Court Judge committed Ada on 22 October 1920. This must have been very difficult for all the sisters, particularly Frances who, as the second eldest, signed the papers and provided the family statement.

Interestingly, the application form for admission to Bethlem Hospital states that they would not admit those with the means to afford a private asylum, anyone who has been insane for more than twelve months, those 'in a state of idiocy,' or anyone suffering from epileptic fits. Preference was also given to 'persons of the educated classes'. The implication is that admission to Bethlem was preferable to the county asylum. The application had to be signed by a relative or friend, a role fulfilled by Frances and 'a person of known respectability'. In Ada's case the Methodist minister, Evelyn Clifford Unwin, signed the form.

There is a list of clothes required by female patients, with the stipulation that razors, scissors and knives were not allowed. Ada would have been equipped with three nightgowns, four vests and three pairs of drawers, or three combinations, two flannel petticoats, two upper petticoats, one pair of stays, four pairs of stockings and twelve handkerchiefs. For outerwear three dresses were required, this is annotated 'NB washing dresses objected to'. Does this mean that the dresses would not be washed? In addition, Ada needed, one jacket or mantle, two bonnets or hats, two pairs of outdoor shoes or boots and one pair for indoors, a brush and comb, a toothbrush, an dressing gown and a small box to hold these items.

On 24 October 1920, Ada was admitted to the Royal Bethlem Hospital, at this time situated in Southwark. Ada's case notes reveal that, on admission, she was undernourished, with 'a high degree of myopia' but generally in good physical health. The observations from two doctors stated that she was suffering from depression and 'delusions that she hasn't been doing things right'. The notes also mention that she had a great sense of unworthiness and a constant desire to die, yet she was not deemed to be suicidal. She also believed that she was a source of danger to others. Ada was subject to frequent attacks of crying and had refused to see her friends. The case book reveals that Ada's periods had stopped the previous year and it seems possible that the menopause may have been a factor contributing to her condition. Many of the regular reports on Ada's mental health state that there was no change, with occasional indications of slight improvement. There are comments that Ada occupied herself.

Ada appears at the asylum in the 1921 census when her occupation was given as nurse. Although it is possible that she had been nursing her mother, who died in 1919, in contradiction to the census, Ada's case notes state that she was a former confectioner's assistant, which seems more plausible. Her aunt, Fanny Amelia, was in the county asylum at this time and it may have been her experience there that led the sisters to seek Bethlem as an alternative for Ada.

In August 1923, the case notes read, 'The patient has improved slightly, she keeps busy and is comfortable in her surroundings. Her physical strength is fine'. The next four monthly entries read 'no change'. On 13 November 1923, Frances received a letter from the Physician Superintendent saying, 'no doubt you remember she (Ada) has been in the Hospital since 1920 and I now

consider the time has arrived when something should be done about her future. It will shortly be necessary to discharge her and I am wondering whether you would care to make arrangements for her to go on a period of leave with you first.' Would this have caused panic in the Leighton sisters' household, as they wondered how to care for Ada?

Frances' letters show that, at least from June 1923, she was able to take Ada on trips out from the asylum. It also clear that Ada was allowed 'periods of leave' to return to her home. Frances wrote to say that she would take Ada home on 'next visiting day', the 16 November 1923. In December 1923, when she was away from the hospital the medical superintendent certified that Ada was still not fit to return to her occupation; presumably this was needed in order to trigger National Assistance payments

In January 1924, Frances wrote to the superintendent to say that she felt Ada had improved sufficiently to be able to leave the institution and be transferred to the care of her own doctor. The case notes record that Ada was discharged 'relieved'. The extent to which she was actually 'relieved' is unclear. It may be that the institution felt that they could do no more and wished to pass the responsibility back to the family.

There is evidence that, periodically, the sisters sent donations to the asylum. For example, in November 1921 and again in June 1922, they contributed five pounds; Frances noting that the sum was donated by the Misses Leighton, 'in appreciation of the kind attention their sister is receiving in your institution'.

The sisters remained living together, moving from Railton Road to Belair, 36 Burleigh Road Sutton, Surrey between 1929 and 1931. By 1939, Ada was described as incapacitated and it is believed that she went blind. A picture of the four surviving sisters at a family wedding, in 1950, shows Ada in dark glasses, leaning heavily on two sticks. She died at home on 17 January 1963 at the age of ninety two. In her will, which had been written in 1940, Ada left her effects and her share of Burleigh Road to her sisters. She also left them her share in another property, St. Mawes, 7 Fir Road, Sutton. Fir Road was a typical 1930s, suburban semi. In 1939, Charles and Kate Roberts were living at this address, presumably they were tenants.

Frances Mary 1871-1970

Frances was born on 13 September 1871. She went to work as a servant for Frank Leach, a Chelsea draper. By 1901, after death of her father, she was back in the family home as a dressmaker and described as an employer, so perhaps she sub-contacted some of her work. This was to be Frances' role for the rest of her working life. Her niece, Ella, my great aunt, was also a dressmaker and may have worked for the Leighton sisters.



Frances Mary

Together with her sister Ada, Frances was her mother's executrix. She was left a silver sugar basin and cream jug.

In the 1921 census, Frances was described as the head of the household. The sisters had two lodgers, the Hill twins, who were telephonists. In addition, their cousin George Ellington was visiting.

Frances is the sister that I remember best; I can picture her walking across her dining room, handing me a glass of squash and admiring my drawing, although she had lost most of her sight by that time. When she took out probate on Jessie's will and made her own in August 1965, she was described as being of 12 Hillcroome Road, Sutton, which is a nursing home. Had Frances been forced to move once her sister was no longer alive?

Frances lived to be ninety nine, dying on Christmas Eve in 1970 at a nursing home at 28 Salisbury Road, Carshalton. The beneficiaries named in her will, who were to receive equal shares of her estate, were her niece, Ella Mary Bird, Miss Ethel Field, Mrs Elsie Skinner, Miss Fanny Webster and Mrs Edith Audrey Downton, who was the executrix. Of the non-family beneficiaries, only Edith can be traced. She was born in 1904 and in 1939, was living with her husband Jack in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire.

Caroline Jessie 1874-1965

Caroline Jessie was born on 10 November 1874 at Herne Hill, like her sisters. There is no evidence that she ever lived anywhere but the family home. Like her older sister, Frances, Jessie set herself up as a dressmaker.

Jessie's legacy from her mother was half a dozen silver spoons and a hair ring.



Caroline Jessie

Caroline Jessie made a will in December 1940, a few months after Ada made hers. Interestingly, it is Frances and Lottie whom she named as executors. Did she omit her eldest sister because of her incapacity? Like Ada, she left her interest in the family home at Burleigh Road and 7 Fir Road, Sutton to be shared between her three sisters who were alive at the time. In the event, only Frances survived her.

Holding Jessie's locket brings back memories of a sunny day in the early 1960s when I met Jessie, then nearly ninety. It may have been the only occasion when we met. She looks out of her photograph as a young Edwardian woman, with a future before her. I recall her as an elderly lady, sitting in a chair, one of a row of three, flanked by her then two surviving sisters. She was a plump, red-faced lady and profoundly deaf. Jessie died at home on 12 June 1965.



Jessie's Locket

Lottie Matilda 1877-1964

Lottie Matilda was born on 21 December 1877 in Herne Hill. Like her older sisters. Lottie became a dressmaker but unlike Ada, Frances and Jessie who worked from home, Lottie didn't work for herself. The 1921 census gives her employer as Russell and Allen of Old Bond Street. This was a prestigious



establishment who made gowns for the aristocracy. There are numerous newspaper references to the gentry wearing Russell and Allen outfits at court events.



Lottie Matilda

Lottie inherited a gold brooch set with stones from her mother. Lottie also made a will in 1940, a month before Jessie made hers. It seems strange that the sisters didn't all go together to make their wills. Jessie and Lottie used the same solicitor, whereas Ada's will is witnessed by a couple with a Cheshire address. Again, Lottie chose Frances and Jessie as her executrices and not Ada. Lottie died at home on 19 October 1964.

Gertrude Fanny 1880-1931

The youngest sister, Gertrude Fanny, known as Gertie, was born in 1880. Unlike her sisters, Gertie worked as a bookkeeper, as did her younger cousin Ivy. Gertie was the only sister not to remain single. At the age of twenty nine she married accountant, George Benjamin Witt, at Herne Hill. The family story was that the shock of marriage was so much for her that she died almost

immediately afterwards. This is clearly not true, as Gertrude lived until 1931 but it does raise questions as to where and why that story originated.

The family stories surrounding the sisters came from my mother, who knew them all except Gertie and my great-aunt, their niece, who was twenty when Gertie married and in her forties by the time Gertie died. It seems strange that she should have perpetuated this myth, particularly in view of its slightly risqué nature. Was Gertie in some way estranged from her sisters?



Gertrude's Locket

Gertie inherited a watch and chain and shawl brooch from her mother in 1919. The will is not very clear but it seems that all the furniture, household effects, pictures, piano and brass chandelier were also to go to Gertie. This seems odd as her sisters were living in the family home, whereas Gertie was established in her own home. It is possible to interpret the will to read that the unmarried daughters were to inherit the furnishings, which would make more sense. It seems that the family did not own their Railton Road home at this stage. It is also strange that the will was not probated for nine years. Could the ambiguity in the will have led to a family disagreement? Shortly after probate was granted, the sisters moved to Burleigh Road, perhaps purchased with help from the money left by their mother, whose estate was valued at £126.

During the first world war, Gertie's husband was a Lieutenant in Royal Army Service Corps and it seems he was injured during his service. In 1921, George and Gertrude were visiting the Manhire family in Wallington, Benjamin was

described as an army pensioner, disabled in the war. According to an electoral roll, their home address at this time was 6 Dulwich Road, Tulse Hill.

There were no children of the marriage and early in 1930 Gertrude had an operation for breast cancer. Sadly, the cancer spread to her liver and Gertie died at home at 59 St. Oswald Road, Norbury, with her husband at her side, on 9 May 1931. In 1939, George was living with Dixon family in Croydon. He later married Elizabeth A Simpson, in 1944 but died two years later. In 1946, his will was administered by Mr Manhire.

The Locketts

Although the sisters had relatives who were descendants of their much older half-brother, this family was in America and it seems that they lost touch before the second world war. This left two female and one male first cousins on their mother's side as their nearest relatives in England. At some point, it was decided that the sisters' five lockets should be given to the five daughters of those first cousins. These were my mother, Gwendoline and Gwendoline's first cousins, four sisters, Muriel Olive, Cynthia Mary, Marjorie Evelyn and Beryl Helen.

The family story was that Gertrude's locket was given to Gwendoline and Caroline Jessie's to Cynthia, so that the initials would be correct. This clearly did not happen, as the locket that passed to me from Gwendoline is Caroline Jessie's and Gertrude's is now with Beryl's daughter.

It is unclear when the change of ownership occurred. It must have been sometime between 1930, when the youngest of the five cousins was born and

1970, when the last of the five Leighton sisters, Frances, died. Gertrude's locket did not remain with her husband after her death, as it is still within the family. Perhaps it never went to her marital home. The great niece to whom Gertrude's locket was given was only one year old when Gertie died, so it may have passed first to one of the other Leighton sisters. There is still a photograph of her father in Gertrude's locket; perhaps all the lockets originally held images of their parents.

The children of Gwendoline and her cousins kept in sporadic touch and met for a funeral in 2017, at which the topic of the lockets came up. A search commenced for the five lockets. In all, three were found, Ada's, Jessie's and Gertie's. It was at this stage, that I realised that the locket that I had was Jessie's. Interestingly, Ada's has the initials A L, representing her first forename and her surname, whereas the other two have the initials of forenames only. Does this suggest that perhaps Ada's was made first? Initials aside, the three lockets are remarkably similar. Perhaps, as the eldest daughter, Ada was described as Miss Leighton, in a similar manner to the Bennett sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*. At another family funeral, in 2018, I and two of my second cousins, wore our lockets, so the three were temporarily reunited.

For their first owners, the lockets were an item of then-fashionable jewellery, which had the added significance that they were a personal family gift from their father, the maker. Were the lockets created with the intention of evoking memories more than a century later? Did William Leighton ever think of their legacy beyond his daughters? No doubt he expected them to be treasured and passed to as-yet-unborn granddaughters.

The Leighton sisters had no children, or grandchildren, or nieces and nephews to preserve their memory. I am their first cousin twice removed. Removed by relationship maybe but their lives touched mine and Jessie's locket reaches across the years and continues to bind us with an invisible chain. As the five lockets once united five sisters, they now engender in their current owners, cousins and second cousins, a sense of belonging.

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