

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.

Johanna Driscoll's Story

On the 1901 census at St Joseph's Reformatory for Roman Catholic Inebriates, one of the inmates is Joanna Driscoll, aged 36, single, a hawker, her birthplace was Bishopgate in London.¹ Her first name was most often spelt as Johanna. St Joseph's had only recently opened when Johanna was sent there. On 4 October 1899 she appeared in court charged with throwing her boot through the window of the City of Carlisle Pub in Royal Mint Street and with being a habitual drunkard. When it was suggested that she should be sent to a reformatory she smiled and said "Send me to a reformatory? Why do you want to put me away? Send me to a ***** what? Reformatory? Ha Ha." She became so incapacitated with laughter that they had to delay the sentencing to the following session. The men of the court were concerned that the

reformatory would not take her as she was experiencing paralysis on one side of her body.² On 18th October she was sentenced to 6 months hard labour in Wormwood Scrubs followed by 12 months in the reformatory.³ This appearance in court was, according to another newspaper report, her 49th appearance in the Thames Court since 1890 and it claimed that she had spent 6 years and 11 months in prison in that time.⁴

Several other of her crimes appeared in the newspapers prior to this dating from 1885 through to her final sentencing in 1899. All of these were committed in and around the East End of London. This means that she was a poor, young woman living in Whitechapel during the time of Jack the Ripper. It is hard to imagine what this must have been like.

Johanna's first appearance in the newspapers was on 9 April 1885, Johanna along with Ellen Donovan was sentenced to 9 months imprisonment for stealing two sheets worth 3 shillings. It was noted that Johanna was unable to read or write.⁵

In December 1890 Johanna was only a day out of prison when she appeared in Thames Court charged with being drunk and disorderly. She was causing trouble in a public house and police were called to remove her. Once they got her out of the building she refused to leave the area and became so violent they had to call an ambulance. One of her boots was lost in the melee. On arrival in court she used foul language and demanded her boot be returned. She was sentenced to one month.⁶

On 4 February 1891 Johanna was sentenced to 2 months for being drunk and disorderly. The paper stated that in the last year she had only spent two weeks out of prison.⁷

In 1892 Johanna was sentenced to 2 months hard labour for throwing a brick through the window of the Brown Bear Public House in Lemn Street in Whitechapel.⁸ On 20 September 1898 Johanna was sentenced to eight months in Wormwood Scrubs for malicious damage – breaking seven plate glass windows.⁹ Then in 1899 she was sentenced to the time in the reformatory.

Despite her disdain for the reformatory, it appeared to have had a positive effect on Johanna. In October 1901 following her release she found herself with nowhere to go. She appealed to the magistrate. She said that she had been released from the inebriates home the previous week with 9s 1d which she had earned in the home. With nowhere to go and wanting to 'keep straight' she appealed to the magistrate for help. The magistrate said he had foreseen this possibility when the inebriates homes were established; that the inmates on release would need support, particularly those women, like Johanna, who had no friends and family to support them. They would then, most likely, return to their old life. He was sorry not to be able to help Johanna. He referred her to the court missionary.¹⁰ This shows a strength of character in Johanna, it would have been very easy to go back to her old ways. What happened to Johanna after this I have not been able to discover. She does not appear in the newspapers again after 1901 so hopefully that means she was able to stay on the straight and narrow.

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- ¹ Census records England. Ashford, Middlesex. 31 March 1901. DRISCOLL, Johanna. Class: RG13; Piece: 1171; Folio: 13; Page: 17. www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023
- ² Daily Telegraph & Courier (1899) State Reformatory Wanted *Daily Telegraph & Courier*. 5 October. Page 4, col e. British Newspaper Archive. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.
- ³ Prisoners Calendar. London Central Court (Old Bailey). 4th October 1899. DRISCOLL, Johanna. HO 140 Home Office: Calendar of Prisoners; Reference: HO 140/194. www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023
- ⁴ East London Observer (1899) A Good Record. *East London Observer*. 7 October 1899. British Newspaper Archive. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.
- ⁵ Newgate Prison Calendar. HO77/58/12. 9 April 1885. DRISCOLL, Johanna. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.
- ⁶ Tower Hamlets Independent and East End Local Advertiser (1890) Lovely Woman! *Tower Hamlets Independent and East End Local Advertiser*. 6 December. Page 6, col d. British Newspaper Archive. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.
- ⁷ Echo (London) (1891) Fifty Times in Custody *Echo*. 4 February. Page 3, col b. British Newspaper Archive. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.
- ⁸ East London Observer (1892) Bad for the 'Brown Bear' *East London Observer*. 2 July. Page 3, col e. British Newspaper Archive. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.
- ⁹ Prisoners Calendar. London Central Court (Old Bailey). 20th September 1898. DRISCOLL, Johanna. HO 140 Home Office: Calendar of Prisoners; Reference: HO 140/186. www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023
- ¹⁰ Henley Advertiser (1901) A Magistrate on Inebriates Homes. *Henley Advertiser*. 5 October. Page 6, vol d. British Newspaper Archive. www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 24 March 2023.