

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in October 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were working in the Ulster linen industry.

Alice McKane's Story

Alice was born on 2 October 1867 to Mary Murray (formerly McShane) and her husband, Arthur Murray, a thread worker. Alice's birth was registered by her father on 11 October 1867. The Murray family lived in Seapatrick, part of the district of Banbridge in County Down¹. The name of Seapatrick probably came from the Irish Suí Phadraig which means Saint Patrick's seat². Alice was baptised in the Roman Catholic church on 5 October 1867 when she was only three days old³. Alice had a younger brother named Patrick who was born in 1873 and a younger sister named Mary born in 1878⁴. There may have been more siblings.

The linen industry in Seapatrick and Banbridge, including the factory run by successive generations of the Hayes family, was based on the banks of the River Bann. It was in one of

¹ Image of birth registration accessed via www.irishgenealogy.ie

² Wikipedia.org

³ Irish Roman Catholic Parish Baptisms – Seapatrick, Dromore, Down, Ireland accessed via www.findmypast.co.uk

⁴ 1901 census for Seapatrick accessed via www.irishgenealogy.ie

those factories that Alice's father worked and Alice followed him, possibly from as young as ten years of age in 1877. Census records from later years show that Alice could not read or write so she had presumably received no education outside the home and would have started work at a young age in order to boost her family's income. The days in the mill would have been long and arduous in a hot, dusty, damp atmosphere.

The next available official record is Alice's marriage registration⁵. On 17 May 1898 in the Roman Catholic Chapel of Banbridge, Alice Murray married Alexander McKane. Alice's occupation was mill worker. Her husband was a servant and was the son of a blacksmith. Alice gave birth to her first child, a son whom she named Arthur after her father, on 8 July 1900⁶.

The 1901 census for Seapatrick Village has Alice and her family living at house no 68⁷; there are no street names given on the census record. Her parents and siblings were nearby at House no 81. Alice's house was in the 3rd class of houses. It had three rooms and one window at the front. Alice's age was recorded wrongly as 32 when it should have been 34. Her occupation was reeler. Reeling was the step in the process of producing linen after spinning and before weaving. The reeler operated a machine which wound the yarn onto a bobbin, mended any broken threads and removed the hanks and skeins of thread from the machine when completed. The 1901 census record shows that Alice's husband was two years (in fact four years) younger than her, that he was working as a general labourer and that he could read and write. Baby Arthur was 9 months old.

Alice's second son, John Robert, (and sometimes Robert John) was born on 23 May 1902 and her daughter, Mary (after her mother) Louisa, on 29 February 1904 – this was Leap Day and in some records Mary's date of birth is given as 1 March. The births of all three of Alice's children were registered by Mary Murray, Alice's mother, who was present at the births⁸. Pregnant women who worked in the mills were expected to continue working up to the

⁵ Image of marriage registration via www.irishgenealogy.ie

⁶ Image of birth registration via www.irishgenealogy.ie

⁷ 1901 census for Seapatrick accessed via www.census.nationalarchives.ie

⁸ Images of birth registrations via www.irishgenealogy.ie

beginning of their confinement and they had to return to work quickly after giving birth because their wages were necessary for their family's survival. At least Alice seems to have had some support from her mother who probably also looked after the children when Alice was at work.

Alice died on 23 October 1907. Her death registration⁹ indicates that there had been an inquest into her death and there was a report on the inquest in the *Banbridge Chronicle* dated 26 October 1907¹⁰. The report states that the Coroner for South Down held the inquest upon the remains of Alice McKane who was aged 40 years and an operative at Seapatrick Mill and who expired under what the report calls peculiar circumstances. Alice's husband gave evidence that his wife had been working at the mill the previous day and appeared to be in her usual health. He said they had their supper of porridge and milk together then went to bed at ten o'clock. Sometime after, he was woken by the children crying and he said that he saw his wife lying face downwards on the pillow. He said that he tried to rouse her but realised she was dead and went to fetch her father. Her father gave evidence that Alice had taken him some porridge about ten o'clock and that she seemed to be in her usual health. A doctor then gave evidence that he knew Alice and had sometimes prescribed for her. He had made a superficial examination of her body and found no traces of violence. He therefore gave it as his opinion that death was caused by suffocation during an attack of epileptic convulsions and the verdict was returned in accordance with this medical evidence.

Alice's husband remarried in 1909¹¹ and the three children were living with him and his new wife at the time of the 1911 census¹². Alice's younger son died of tubercular meningitis at the age of twelve on 19 September 1915¹³. He was already working at the mill, probably part-time, as well as attending school.

(Researched by Jennifer Grice on 17.10.25)

Sources

www.irishgenealogy.ie

www.census.nationalarchives.ie

⁹ Image of death registration on www.irishgenealogy.ie

¹⁰ Accessed via www.findmypast.co.uk

¹¹ Image of marriage registration on www.irishgenealogy.ie

¹² 1911 census for Seapatrick accessed via www.census.nationalarchives.ie

¹³ Image of death registration on www.irishgenealogy.ie

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