

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written, in November 2023, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who studied at The Grange School of Housewifery in Street, Somerset.*

## **Bessie Emily Rowley's Story**

Bessie Emily Rowley was born on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1885<sub>1</sub> and baptised on the 1<sup>st</sup> November<sub>2</sub> in the small village of Hutton in North Somerset. She was the fourth child of parents Henry and Sarah Anne. Four more children were to follow. Her father, Henry, was an agricultural labourer who moved around the villages surrounding Weston-super-mare finding work until the family settled in the tiny village of Locking in about 1888. Although Locking only had a population of 125 in 1891, it had a school, church and post office. Bessie and her siblings attended the school and the 1891 census even recorded her sister Blanche aged 3 attending as a scholar. By today's standards the curriculum was fairly limited to the three R's along with sewing, singing and Art.

In 1895 when Bessie was ten years old, this photograph was taken of the village children in front of the Manor House, with the vicar and Miss Gimingham, the elderly lady dressed in black, on the back row. Perhaps Bessie

is the tall child in the centre of the photo as she was reported as being tall as an adult.



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Amelia Gimingham, who lived at the Manor House, was quite a remarkable woman. A keen photographer of life of the village, who organised the village band and gave generously to the church. About 30 children attended the village school in 1897 and she encouraged them by donating bags to keep their school work in, along with seeds and bulbs for them to grow vegetables and flowers<sup>3</sup>.

In 1900 Bessie and her class mate Emily Pike, both then aged 15 years won places at a technical school for working class girls in Street, Somerset, which is about twenty miles south of Locking. The school, the Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery, was set up to improve the skills of young women to prepare them for their role as wives and domestic servants. The following year Bessie's sister Blanche also won a place there.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps Miss Gimingham or their school teacher were keen to encourage the girls in the village as it seems exceptional that such a small school sent at least three of its pupils there. When the 1901 census was taken on 31 March there were thirty pupils in residence including Bessie and Ethel.<sup>5</sup> As well as cookery, the girls were taught home nursing, first aid, laundry work and mending, how to budget and save, healthy eating and exercise, and how to organise the daily housework. They were required to keep notes in an exercise book to take with them when they left.<sup>6</sup> I imagine they were also taught how to behave towards their employers.

The course lasted a year and after this time it seems likely that Bessie and Ethel found themselves employment in Weston-super-mare which at that time was a popular sea side resort for the middle classes.

Sadly it seems that Bessie did not settle well to her life there as on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1904 she went missing from her employer's house.

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**M**ISSING.—BESSIE **EMILY** ROWLEY,  
left her situation in Weston on Friday, March  
4th ; aged 18 ; tall, dark hair and eyes ; dressed in  
black and sailor hat ; had £1 with her ; anyone  
giving information will be rewarded.—Address Mrs  
ROWLEY, Locking, Weston-super-Mare.

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Her mother put this announcement with a description of Bessie in the Weston Mercury.<sup>7</sup> A few days later Mrs Rowley received a telegram from a Mrs Goldsmith from the Salvation Army in Bristol to say Bessie was in their care. It

would seem that Miss Gimingham was involved in the search as she then wrote to thank the newspaper and its readers for helping to find Bessie.<sup>8</sup>

On September 18<sup>th</sup> 1910, Bessie, now aged 25, married Albert Pike, a 50 year old widower and father of Ethel, who had attended the School of Cookery and Housewifery with Bessie in 1901. Bessie's family were in support of the marriage as two of her siblings were witnesses at the wedding<sup>9</sup> and the couple were living next door to her parents in the census of the following year.<sup>10</sup> One wonders what her friend Ethel, who had by now married and was living in Weston-super-mare, thought of the marriage. In February 1911 Bessie gave birth to a son, Alexander.

Sadly, husband Albert died on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1915 from sepsis after an accident with a nail in his hand. Bessie now had to support son, Alexander, aged four, by herself. She left him with her parents in Locking and went to work in domestic service in Weston-super-mare. By now, several of her siblings had also moved there, but life must have been hard for Bessie as she is recorded in the 1921 census<sup>11</sup> as living in one room and employed by Miss Brockhurst who ran an agency locating domestic servants for the gentry of Weston.<sup>10</sup> The wages offered were only about £30 to £35 per annum and as Bessie's parents were now in their seventies and not at work<sup>13</sup> they would need some of Bessie's income to look after her son.

In 1924 Bessie returned to Locking and married another widower, William Wilmot, a market gardener. His first wife had died the year before leaving him with four children to care for. The older three were teenagers but the youngest, Gladys, was only four years old. It is not possible to know how Bessie

fared for the next fifteen years but I guess she remained in Locking as the 1939 register recorded the couple as living there, at 2 Church Cottages, William still working as a gardener and Bessie engaged in “household duties”.<sup>1</sup>

There is a photograph of Bessie and William attached to a family tree on Ancestry.com showing Bessie in her working apron next to a smiling William in his flat cap and shirt sleeves with his garden behind him. William died in 1953 aged 67 years. Bessie lived on to the age of 83, dying in 1968.

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## Sources

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3. <http://www.lockingheritage.org/village.html>  
Photograph from the Locking Heritage website used with their kind permission
4. Somerset Standard 2 Aug 1901 page 3
5. 1901 Census of England Class: RG13; Piece: 2319; Folio: 59; Page: 19
6. Somerset Heritage Centre; C/E/1/146, Somerset School of Cookery and Housewifery – Minutes, 1897-1916
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8. Weston Mercury 4 April 1904 accessed at FindMyPast
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12. Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette 29 March 1924
- 13 1921 census National Archives RG 15 11404 104 RD314 RS3 ED3