

# *This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'*



## **Ann Palmer's Story**

*Please be aware that this story contains information about an historic child murder, self-harm and mental distress.*

*A version of this story first appeared on the website*

*<https://thehistoryinterpreter.wordpress.com>.*

We first came across Ann in a class of records that are at The National Archives but also online at Ancestry. The Criminal Lunatic Asylum Registers, kept by the National Lunatic Asylum and county and metropolitan asylums, are in class HO20 and cover the period 1800-1846. These contain a wealth of detail about those who had been convicted of criminal offences but were deemed to be insane. Ann's story caught our eye. Ann Palmer, from Dagenham, Essex, was convicted of murder at Chelmsford Assizes in 1823. Her entry reads:

*'The jury having found that she was insane at the time of the commission of the offence declare that she was acquitted by them on account of such insanity. From Dagenham, Essex.*

*Previous to Commitment. About 25 years since she partially cut her throat while she lived servant at Newington. Is said to have been a good*

*and affectionate mother. Was married to a very afflicted man who kept a small public house at Marks Gate, Padnell Corner, Dagenham and became much afflicted in her mind at her husband's death, which happened a short time before her commitment in consequence of her being informed that his body had been stolen from the grave.*

*Conduct in goal since. Decidedly insane, sometimes violent, at others dull and moody but not dangerous to those about her.*

*Thos. Cawkivell Goaler, Jas. Hutchinson Chaplain.*

*The state of her bodily health varied much during the period of her confinement but more particularly since the time of her trial. She was at one time reduced to so feeble a state that considerable apprehensions were entertained of her probable dissolution but she has within the last 10 or 12 days become more tranquil and has appeared gradually to acquire a strength insomuch that I have no hesitation in pronouncing her capable of safe removal to any place which may be appointed for her. 14 August 1823 G A Gepp Surgeon.'*

The record also revealed that Ann was 43 years old and died on 23 February 1824.

We found not one but two newspaper reports. The first, in the *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* of the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1823 gave details of Ann's crime.

*'Chelmsford July 17. Ann Palmer was indicted for the murder of her infant son, at Romford. This case excited considerable interest, and*

*sensibly affected a very crowded auditory. The wretched prisoner, a poor widow with nine children, was placed at the bar in a state of mental stupor, and it was with difficulty she was made to understand the arraignment. She, however, pleaded not guilty, and the trial proceeded.*

*Ann Savell deposed that she had known the prisoner about three months. On the 23<sup>d</sup> of May the prisoner's eldest daughter called witness into the prisoner's house, when she saw the deceased, who was only eleven months old, stretched lifeless upon a bed, but the body was still warm. The prisoner was in the room, and witness said to her, "the dear baby is no more, but you must reconcile yourself to the event. The Lord's will be done, not ours." She replied, "the Lord had nothing to do with it; I killed my baby." She seemed then much agitated, and witness left the house horror-struck at the circumstance.*

*Mary Palmer, the prisoner's eldest daughter, deposed that her father had been dead about four months. Her mother was quite overpowered with grief at his loss. There was a rumour that his body had been disturbed in the grave, which very much increased her grief. Indeed she was quite distracted with sorrow, and at times did not know what she said or did. She was a woman of very acute feelings, and was doatingly [sic] attached to her husband and children. She had suckled the deceased baby herself, and was passionately fond of him. She had often sat whole days since her husband's death, weeping over the baby. She had often said she would kill herself, Before this time she had frequently said, laughing wildly, that the baby was dead and gone to heaven. On the 24<sup>th</sup> May she called to witness, and told her the baby was dead. She was then*

*crying bitterly and wringing her hands. There was a small black mark on the left temple.*

*A Constable of Romford deposed that he saw the prisoner some time after the child was found dead. She was then violently beating her head, weeping and wringing her hands. She said, distractedly, "Hell! Hell, hell! I have murdered my baby. I meant the blow or myself, but it fell upon the baby. The beetle with which I did it stands behind the door. I have murder in my heart, and have carried a razor about me this fortnight." She appeared quite wild and distracted.*

*Mr Curruthers, a surgeon, deposed that he examined the body of the child. Its death was occasioned by a blow to the back of the head. It might have been with such an instrument as a beetle or mallet.*

*This was the case for the prosecution; upon which Mr Baron Graham intonated, that he thought it unnecessary to call upon the prisoner for her defence. It was quite obvious that poverty and grief had overpowered the better affections of the heart, and had bereft the prisoner of her reason. If the Jury were of this opinion, they would find the prisoner not guilty upon that ground.*

*The Jury immediately found the prisoner Not Guilty, on the ground that she was insane at the time she committed the fatal act.*

*The prisoner was then ordered to be detained in custody.'*

The *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* of 25 July 1823 carried an almost identical report but adds that the deceased child's name was Thomas; the National Burial Index lists the burial of a Thomas Palmer in Romford on 27 May 1823.

There is a burial for a Joseph Palmer on 13 March 1823, aged forty, 'of Dagenham' at Stapleford Abbots. There are baptisms of several children of a Joseph and Ann Palmer at Stapleford Abbots, East Hordon, Romford and Dagenham. These do not include Thomas but the eldest girl is Marianne, who could be the Mary mentioned in the newspaper report.

Some of the younger children seem to have been baptised more than once, three of them in January 1824, in Dagenham, which seems odd, as Joseph would have been dead by then. The Dagenham baptisms do state that Joseph was a publican; perhaps this is a re-baptism when the girls entered the workhouse.

Searching for a marriage between a Joseph Palmer and an Ann \_\_\_\_\_ hasn't been very successful. Perhaps she was Ann Goodman, who married Joseph Palmer, a widower, in Southwark, St, John's Horsley Down, in 1806.

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