

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.

Isabella Serplice's Story

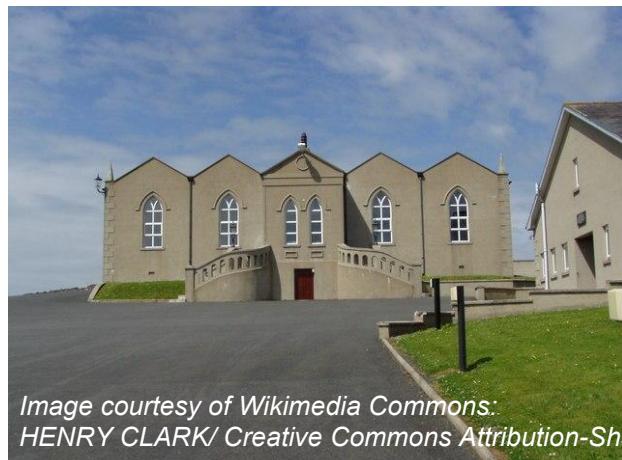
Isabella's birth in Magheralin

Isabella was born on the 31st of December 1867 in Magheralin, County Down, Northern Ireland. Her father Andrew Hamilton was

a weaver at the time, and her mother's name was Mary Jane Priestley.¹ Her parents were married in the Drumgoole Presbyterian Meeting House, pictured right.² She had an older sister Mary Jane who was born in October 1866, also in Magheralin.³

Isabella's father comes from Drumadonnell, near Moneyslane and her mother was born in Moneyslane.⁴ Moneyslane is a townland in County Down, near Ballyroney and is the birthplace of Hugh Porter (1780–1812),

who was an Ulster Scots dialect poet and weaver. He was known as the Bard of Moneyslane.⁵ Isabella's mother would have been familiar with Hugh Porter and his poetry as she shared Hugh's Ulster Scots heritage: they were both descendants of lowland & border Scots who migrated to Ulster in the early 1600's and were of the Presbyterian faith.⁶



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The Handloom weavers of Ulster

¹ "Isabella Hamilton Birth Record."

² Clark, *Drumgoole Presbyterian Church*.

³ "Mary Hamilton Birth."

⁴ "Mary Priestly Marriage."

⁵ Wikipedia, "Hugh Porter (poet)."

⁶ Wikipedia, "Plantation of Ulster."

Isabella's birthplace of Magheralin village, which lies between Moira and Lurgan, dates back to medieval times and is historically linked to the linen weaving industry, which is perhaps what drew her mother and father to this village sometime after their marriage. The local weavers in Magheralin were known as the Ducks of Magheralin due to their practice of using duck grease to lubricate their looms. They also used a paste made from flour, water and meal that prevented linen threads from breaking.⁷

Ulster linen weaving in this period (the early to mid 19th century) was still done in the home on a hand loom. Women had been traditionally excluded from weaving because it was judged too physically demanding with hand-spun thread. Because mill-spun thread could be woven more easily, it opened up opportunities for women and girls to weave on hand looms.⁸ This together with the expansion of the linen trade meant that women in Ulster villages such as Moneyslane & Magheralin had the opportunity to enter the weaving trade.⁹ This would explain how Isabella's mother became a weaver and earned a valuable additional income for her family.¹⁰ By the time of her sister Mary's birth, Isabella's father was no longer a weaver but was now a coachman or car driver. He remains a coachman for the rest of his working life. This change in occupation may have been the reason for their move to the larger town of Lurgan sometime before 1880.

The death of Isabella's father

The next we hear of Isabella and her family is on the first of April 1880 and they are now living in a place called Rogers Court in Lurgan.¹¹ Her father has just died and Isabella would have been 12 years old at the time and her sister Mary 13 years old. Rogers Court was a slum area of Lurgan, with long standing issues around sanitation and poor housing: Some years prior, a piece in the Protestant Watchman newspaper reported that the nearby Lurgan Workhouse sewers ran into the stream at Roger's Court, which created a 'dangerous nuisance'.¹² Rogers Court was demolished in the early 1900's as a result of the implementation of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890. Rogers Court had been identified as an 'unhealthy area'.¹³

Slum housing in Lurgan

The influx of weavers into the Lurgan area in the late 1870's-1880's onwards to work in the linen factories put great pressure on the local area and led to overcrowded and insanitary housing in the factory districts of Lurgan and other



⁷ Belfast Telegraph Co.Uk, "The Ducks of Magheralin."

⁸ Neill, "Women at Work in Ulster, 1845-1911," 56.

⁹ Neill, "Women at Work in Ulster, 1845-1911," 56-57.

¹⁰ "National Archives: Census of Ireland 1901."

¹¹ "Andrew Hamilton Death Record."

¹² Protestant Watchman and Lurgan Gazette, "Workhouse Sewers Causing Dangerous Nuisance," 3.

¹³ Lurgan Times, "Improvement Scheme-Town of Lurgan," 4.

towns in Ulster. By this time most factory workers were living in small two storied terraced dwellings like the ones pictured here in Blacks Court, Lurgan.¹⁴ This type of housing was known as an 'urban kitchen house' and had a kitchen and scullery downstairs and one or two bedrooms upstairs. Some had a small bedroom downstairs, sub-divided from the kitchen. There would have been no internal sanitation.¹⁵

Isabella's father's death certificate shows that he died of Phthisis or tuberculosis. He had been ill for six months prior to his death. He was still described as a Car Driver at the time of his death, but the long duration of his debilitating illness would have severely limited his ability to work and provide for his family. Isabella's mother wasn't present at his death, indicating she was most likely not home but working in one of the nearby linen factories in Lurgan. She would have worked on a hand loom as the factories were not yet using power looms on any scale. By this time, girls in the Lurgan and Portadown districts were working in the linen weaving factories as young as nine years of age.¹⁶ Both Isabella and her sister Mary were old enough to be working long hours in a linen factory. The fact that the family are living in Rogers Court speaks to their reduced circumstances.

Power Loom weaving in Lurgan

The 1890's saw huge change in the Irish linen industry with the introduction of the power loom. In the late 1880's, Lurgan linen factories employed about 18,000 hand-loom weavers. By 1897, the total number of hand-loom weavers in Ulster had reduced to 2,500.¹⁷

As work dried up for hand-loom woven linen, Isabella, her mother, and her sister Mary had to adapt, seeking new employment in one of the power loom factories that were springing up all over Lurgan. In her mother's case, this was a transition to weaving on a power loom and for Isabella it meant working on winding machines, an occupation called 'Winder'. Her sister Mary works as a 'Drawer-In'. As a drawer-in, she pulled the ends from the beam of warp yarn through the rows of heddles and secured them as preparation of the warp yarn, ready for weaving.¹⁸

Isabella gets married

Isabella married in the year 1898. Isabella is 30 years old and 7 months pregnant with her first child William. She marries Thomas Serplice, who was born in about 1870. Her address at the time of her marriage is Victoria Street, Lurgan and her employment is stated as 'Winder' and her husband Thomas is a Weaver.¹⁹



¹⁴ Gracey, *Blacks Court*.

¹⁵ Neill, "Women at Work in Ulster, 1845-1911," 121.

¹⁶ Neill, "Women at Work in Ulster, 1845-1911," 72.

¹⁷ Neill, "Women at Work in Ulster, 1845-1911," 64.

¹⁸ Burns, *Living Linen Interview LL2_R01/23*.

¹⁹ "Isabella Hamilton Marriage Record."

The houses on Victoria Street were constructed sometime in the 1880's, around the time that the Johnston Allen & Co linen weaving factory was built on the same street.²⁰ The company had several properties built on Victoria Street for the employees in their factory. It's likely that Isabella and her mother and sister moved to Victoria Street after securing employment in this factory. The move to Victoria Street marked a definite improvement on their previous dwelling in Rogers Court. The new home was a parlour-type house, boasting a downstairs parlour, hallway, and kitchen/scullery, along with three upstairs bedrooms. New husband Thomas moves in with Isabella & her mother & sister.

Isabella's work as a Linen Winder

James Johnston and Joseph Allen formed a partnership in 1867 for the manufacture of linen and cambric by handloom.²¹ The business was successful and larger premises were needed. In 1888 the company built a power loom factory on Victoria Street, with capacity for 500 power looms (see picture below).²²



*Image from Wikimedia Commons:
Brian Shaw / Former Linen Mill / CC BY-SA 2.0*

Isabella learnt the work of a winder by first starting with 'caging': collecting full bobbins of thread and stacking them into cages while watching the older women winders at work. She would have progressed onto the winding machines as she became more experienced. The winding room at Johnston Allen's would have had a dozen or more winding machines. Working conditions were extremely noisy and dusty. Each winder and cager worked as a team and were paid by output and a male 'Winding Master' handed out the bundles of

²⁰ Google Maps, *Victoria Street, Lurgan*.

²¹ Johnston, *Living Linen Interview LL2_R00/49 2 of 2*.

²² Shaw, *Johnston, Allen & Company Linen Factory*.

yarn.²³ As a Winder, her job was to wind either the weft yarn onto the pirn bobbins or the warp thread onto the larger bobbins, or perhaps to wind the larger bobbins onto the warp beam.

Winding the weft thread

This picture was taken in a linen producing factory in Canada in 1908.²⁴ Isabella would have worked on a very similar machine. The thread for the weft is wound onto small bobbins called 'Pirns', which were commonly kept in baskets. The linen thread was supplied in 'hanks' which are large, looped bundles of yarn, twisted and tied. The woman to the right of

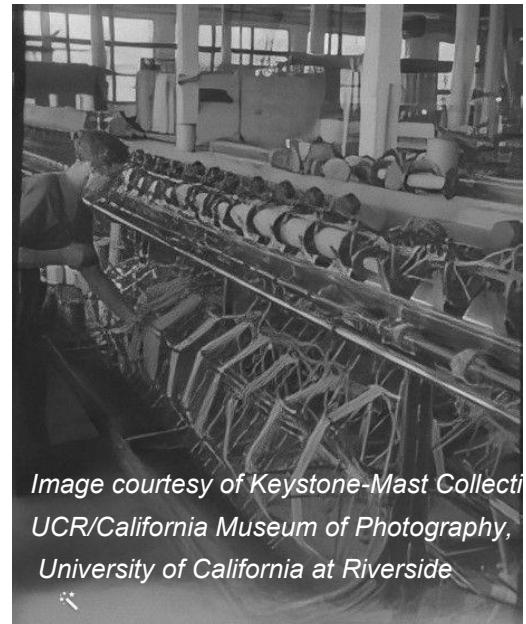
the picture is preparing the hanks of linen for the large winding wheels on the winding machine. The woman leant over the winding machine is connecting a thread from one of the large wheels placed at the bottom of the winding machine to a spool above it which in turn feeds the thread onto the the pirn bobbins directly above. The large wheels spun slowly, while the small pirn bobbins spun very quickly. When a Pirn was full, Isabella would have replaced it with an empty one. She



detached each full Pirn from the machine and placed it into a basket. These were then taken to the weaving shed and put into the shuttles of the loom.²⁵

Winding the warp thread

Isabella may have worked as a winder on a machine that wound the hanks of linen onto larger bobbins for the warp thread.²⁶ In the picture on the right, a woman in a Canadian factory is connecting a thread from the



*Image courtesy of Keystone-Mast Collection
UCR/California Museum of Photography,
University of California at Riverside*

²³ Beck, *Living Linen Interview LL2_R01/30*.

²⁴ *Winding Bobbins in Linen Mill - Linen Industry, Canada*.

²⁵ Beck, *Living Linen Interview LL2_R01/30; Weaving Linen (1940-1949)*.

²⁶ *Weaving Linen (1940-1949)*.

large wheel which in turn feeds onto the larger bobbins above.²⁷

Winding onto the Warp Beam

Isabella may also have operated a type of winding machine that prepared the thread for the Warp Beam. The larger bobbins were put into a large upright frame, which you can see to the right of the picture below, which could contain up to 400 bobbins.²⁸ The thread was drawn from the caged bobbins through a reed which evenly spaces them and guides them onto a large rotating drum known as the warpers beam, which you can see in the middle of the picture. This beam is then used for the warp thread on the power looms. You can see the warp beams stacked to the left of the picture, ready to go to the Weaving shed. This illustration from 1889 shows the scale of the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century power loom factories: the noise and dust created must have been tremendous.²⁹



Isabella becomes a Linen Seamstress

By April 1911, she had changed occupation and was working as a Linen Seamstress in her home as a 'home-worker', also known as an 'out-worker'. She had six children by this date: William, Joseph, James, Annie, Mary Elizabeth, with her youngest being Robert who is not quite a year old. The needs of an infant child and of her other younger children have perhaps forced her to become an out-worker and work from home rather than in the factory. It was

²⁷ *Winding Warp on Spools in Linen Mill, Guelph, Can. Cat #28, Flax #22 P32 Replaces 20928.*

²⁸ Kohl, *Warping of the Warp Threads.*

²⁹ *Weaving Linen (1940-1949).*

common for married women to combine both out-work and factory work. Isabella was one amongst the many women at the time who were forced by poverty & childcare demands to continue to work albeit from home.³⁰

The Lurgan linen trade was famous for its handkerchiefs and most of the factories at the time were producing fine handkerchiefs made from a type of linen called Cambric. The Lurgan handkerchief trade relied heavily on out-workers as well as factory workers. Handkerchiefs were given out by all the sewing factories to be carried home and "drawn" (mostly by children) in the houses of nearly all the working-class families in a process known as 'thread drawing'. Isabella's older children are likely to have been employed doing this. The handkerchiefs were then returned to the factories, where they were folded and 'veined'. They then were returned back to the women, the seamstresses, for the 'top-sewing' process, in which thousands of mothers in Lurgan were employed.³¹ 'Top-Sewing' was the final stage of sewing used to secure the edge of the handkerchief, likely a type of hemming stitch that enclosed the raw or drawn edge. It is the visible, finished edge of the handkerchief. This was very likely the work that Isabella was carrying out at home.³²

Although working from home provided a necessary additional income for the family, out-workers' wages were paltry in comparison to factory wages. In 1912, the British government issued a report and recommendations on the conditions of employment in the Northern Irish Linen Industry making up trades, appointed by Winston Churchill when he was Home Secretary. Out-workers in Lurgan were a focus of the report because of the heavy reliance of the handkerchief trade on out-workers. The report sought to remedy the disparate, lower wages paid to outworkers, the extensive and unregulated use of child labour in the making-up trades and the insanitary conditions of many home workers.³³

The family were still living on Victoria Road at the start of 1912, but this year was to bring great hardship. Isabella's mother had died some years before which had further reduced the family finances.³⁴ Her husband Thomas and sister Mary are still employed working in the factory, as a Weaver and Drawer-in respectively.³⁵ However, the wages that Thomas & Mary earnt for their factory labour had not risen in Lurgan for many years. The average wage for weavers was 12/- a week and this had not increased since 1886.³⁶

The cumulative effect of more mouths to feed, loss of income after the death of her mother, the erosion of pay for factory workers after decades of no wage rises and her lower wages as an outworker have resulted in the family struggling financially. Their home in Victoria Street was repossessed by a court order in July 1912 and a School Attendance Order was issued for one or more of the children a month later in September 1912.³⁷ It's likely that, through necessity, one or more of Isabella's school-age children have been working instead

³⁰ Neill, "Women at Work in Ulster, 1845-1911," 172.

³¹ *Lurgan Mail*, "The Lurgan Out-Work Trade," 8.

³² Google, "Sewing Processes in Early 20th Century Lurgan Handkerchief Trade."

³³ Hatch, *Report of the Committee on the Conditions of Employment in the Linen and Other Making-up Trades of the North of Ireland, with Evidence*.

³⁴ "Mary Jane Priestly Hamilton Death."

³⁵ "National Archives: Census of Ireland 1911."

³⁶ Austen, "Lurgan Ancestry ~ Lurgan Weavers and Winders Strike 1913."

³⁷ *Lurgan Mail*, "House Repossession Order," 7; *Lurgan Mail*, "School Attendance Order," 5.

of attending school. The family moved some time in 1912 to New Row, Charles Street in Lurgan.³⁸ Charles Street houses were not the parlour-type of house but were of the poorer kitchen-type. In January 1913, the desperate condition of linen workers in Lurgan resulted in a mass walk-out of all the weavers and winders in the factories in the town. The Lurgan Weavers and Winders Strike went on for several weeks.³⁹

Isabella, husband Thomas and her younger children continue to live on Charles Street. Her oldest son William has gone on to work in a linen factory as a Warper and serves with the Royal Irish Fusiliers during WW1.⁴⁰ He married in 1919 to Jane McKee who was a hemstitcher in a linen factory.⁴¹ Less than two years after her son's marriage, Isabella fell ill with Acute Rheumatism and died aged 53 in 1921.⁴² She'd been ill for a month, eventually suffering heart failure. Her husband Thomas was present at her death.

Acute rheumatism is now more commonly known as acute rheumatic fever and is caused by an abnormal immune response to a Streptococcus bacterial infection. This condition can cause inflammation affecting multiple organ systems, including the joints, heart, brain, and skin, often leading to symptoms like painful joints, rash, and potentially heart damage. Aspirin-type drugs were available at the time for relieving the agonizing joint pain and reducing fever, which hopefully offered Isabella some comfort in those last few weeks. While highly effective for the pain and fever, aspirin did not cure the disease or prevent the development of rheumatic heart disease (RHD), which was the most feared long-term complication. Today we would treat with antibiotics at the first sign of strep throat, but this was not an option in 1921 and it wasn't until after the end of the second world war that antibiotics like penicillin would become widely available in the UK.⁴³

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³⁸ "Ulster Covenant, 1912"; "William Serplis Absent Voter List."

³⁹ Austen, "Lurgan Ancestry ~ Lurgan Weavers and Winders Strike 1913." BNM, .?@~

⁴⁰ "William Serplice Military Service: Absent Voters Lists 1918."

⁴¹ "William Serplice Marriage Record."

⁴² "Isabella Death Certificate."

⁴³ Wikipedia, "Rheumatic fever."

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