

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



Sarah Ann Sadler

1842-1884

WHITCHURCH.

SAD CASE OF SUICIDE.—On Friday an inquest was held at the Whitchurch Workhouse, before Mr. G. G. Warren, coroner, touching the death of Sarah Ann Spibey, whose body was found in the Shropshire Union Canal, close to the Wrexham Bridge, Whitchurch, on Tuesday night, the 22nd inst.—Mary Ann Heaketh, living in Green End, said the deceased her husband, and three children had lodged with her two or three months. Deceased suffered much from her head. She also had fits very frequently, having had as many as nine in three days. She was a sober woman, and lived happily with her husband. Witness had never heard her hint at destroying herself. She went out at a quarter to six o'clock on Tuesday night, and witness heard of her death at half-past seven. She had appeared more strange than usual during the day. About five o'clock on the previous night she said to witness "Oh dear, Miss Heaketh, I am going to die." Witness reasoned with her, and induced her to lie on the sofa, when she appeared as though she were going to die there and then. she said "If you will allow me I will go to the Workhouse." Witness said she must ask Mr. Spibey about that, and suggested that they should go for a walk. Witness then went to put her bonnet on, and on her return to the room the deceased was gone. She went in search for her, but failed to find her.—The foreman asked if she were paralysed.—Witness replied that the caps of her knees were gone, and she could only walk slowly. She had prepared her husband's tea before going out.—Stephen Spibey said he was a clockmaker. Deceased was his wife. She was 42 years of age. She had been subject to fits almost all her life, and had been very strange in her manner. They had lived happily together, and she had never said anything to lead him to suspect that she intended to destroy herself.—The Coroner having briefly summed up, the jury returned a verdict "Found drowned."

(Shrewsbury Journal, April 30th 1884)

FOUND DROWNED.—On Friday an inquest was held at the Whitchurch Workhouse, before G. G. Warren, Esq., coroner, on the body of Sarah Ann Spibey, who was found in the Shropshire Union Canal, close to the Wrexham Bridge, Whitchurch, on Tuesday night, the 22nd ult.—The Coroner remarked that from inquiries he had made it appeared that the deceased had been in a depressed state of mind, and he read a letter received by the police superintendent from the relieving officer at Hanley, stating that she was subject to temporary and sometimes severe fits of insanity. She left Hanley to join her husband at Whitchurch.—Dr A. B. George deposed to having examined the body on Wednesday morning. He found on the outer side of the left arm an old bruise some two inches in length and one in width. There were no other marks of violence, and very little cadaverical lividity. All the appearances were consistent with death by drowning.—Mary Ann Hesketh, living in Green-end, said the deceased, her husband, and three children had lodged with her two or three months. She had fits very frequently, having had as many as nine fits in three days. She was a sober woman, and lived happily with her husband. Before leaving on the Tuesday evening she had said, "If you will allow me I will go to the workhouse." Witness said she must ask Mr Spibey about that, and suggested that they should go for a walk. Witness then went to put her bonnet on, and on her return to the room the deceased was gone. She went in search of her, but failed to find her.—The Foreman asked if she was paralysed.—Witness replied that the caps of her knees were gone, and she could only walk slowly. She had prepared her husband's tea before going out.—Stephen Spibey said he was a clockmaker. Deceased was his wife. She was 42 years of age. She had been subject to fits almost all her life, and had been very strange in her manner. They had lived happily together, and she had never said anything to lead him to suspect that she intended to destroy herself.—William Woodward, ropemaker, Tilstock, deposed to finding the body about 7.30, observing it in the water as he went over the bridge. With the assistance of two men who were passing, he drew the body out of the water. He then sent information to Whitchurch, and remained with the body until the police arrived.—The Coroner having briefly summed up, the jury returned a verdict of "Found drowned."

(Shrewsbury Chronicle, May 2nd 1884)

Researching our ancestors means relying on various documents, some formal, which hopefully contain accurate information. There are other documents which contain opinion, from a range of people who may or may not have accurate information. It is through this maze of fact and opinion that we have to build, a picture, as true as possible, of a person from the past's, life.

Sarah Ann Sadler (1842-1884) is not actually a "forgotten woman" but comes into our sphere because she suffered illness which today would be termed "mental illness". However in the mid 19th century treatment particularly for working class men and even worse for women, was virtually non-existent. Endeavouring to build an accurate picture cannot involve assumption and statement of facts from speculation; however using the sources in conjunction, we can ask questions which future researchers can read the evidence and in light of their experiences can ask their questions.

To discover her story there are 2 newspaper reports for Sarah Ann; Wednesday, 30th April, 1884, in "The Eddowes' Shrewsbury Journal" and on the 2nd May in "The Shrewsbury Journal". Formal records include, census returns for 1851, (HO107/2005/43/29/108) 1861, (RG9 1937/16/25/150), 1871, (RG10 2863/8/9/52, and 1881 (RG11 27/29/118/).

Her parents do not appear to have registered her birth in late 1842 or early 1843, as in the few years

following the introduction of registration, it was not compulsory. They did have her baptised and that is found in Staffordshire Baptisms, D3723/1/2 p12. Her marriage can be found in Staffordshire Births, Marriage and Death Index and is recorded as Civil and there is a death certificate (see top of page).

The newspapers do not give details of Sarah's early life which is learned from the censuses. Despite her father's upholstery/cabinetmaking business doing reasonably well, employing 2 men and son, Edward John being in the business, it appears that it was necessary for other members of the family to work also. Sarah being employed in a local pottery manufactory as a "potter's paintress".

Other newspaper reports record the marriages of sisters, Charlotte and Martha in 1854 and 1863. Brother, Edward John is mentioned as owning property and being involved in local politics.

Two years after the death of her mother, Charlotte, in 1864, Sarah married watchmaker, Stephen Spibey in early 1866 (confirming the newspaper report that this was Sarah's husband). However one index, despite giving the correct date records Stephen with an incorrect name. It is described as a civil ceremony. Two children, Edward and Charlotte, were born by 1871 and they lived in Hanley.

Before their marriage, Stephen, who like Sarah's father, was from Shropshire, had been lodging with another Shropshire born watchmaker, Joseph Bradley, who had married Stephen's sister, Elizabeth in 1856 in Wrenbury. They all lived in Shelton. Joseph died on 6th July 1876, at Stafford Street. His effects were under £50.

Two records now chart the next stage of Sarah's life. From the 1881 census Sarah and 4 children, John, Charlotte, Harriet and Joseph, were in the Stoke on Trent Workhouse. We learn from the Shrewsbury Chronicle that the police superintendent dealing with Sarah's death had corresponded with the officers of the Stoke Workhouse. Five years earlier, brother in law, Joseph Bradley, with whom Stephen had been lodging and perhaps, working, on 6th July 1876, died, possibly followed a year later, by his wife, Stephen's sister, Elizabeth. Joseph and Elizabeth's children, Mary Emily and Victoria moved to Manchester to live with their Uncle, William Spibey.

The death of Joseph and Elizabeth could have dealt a blow to the young Spibey family. By 1881 they were separated; Stephen returned to live in Whitchurch, living as a boarder but still working as a clockmaker. Sarah, with John, Charlotte, Harriet and Joseph, was in Stoke Workhouse, which would have been the correct one for her place of birth and that of her children, which was commented on by the evidence of the police sergeant.

Should we only consult the census records for Sarah at this point in her life we may be lead to an erroneous conclusion. The 2 separate entries for the family in 1881 having Sarah and the children in Stoke and Stephen out of the area could suggest that Stephen had left her. However a different picture emerges when the 2 newspaper reports are added to the data.

According to the police superintendent Sarah had left the workhouse to return to her husband in Whitchurch. Mary Ann Hesketh, the lodging house keeper, indicated that they were a loving family who had lodged with her at Green End for 2 to 3 months, (1884). One question arose when comparing the census and Mary Ann's evidence. Sarah had 4 children with her in the workhouse. They would have had to be with their mother as Stephen would not have been able to look after or afford to keep them with him. Miss Hesketh stated that there were only 3 children in the family. Searching various records it is difficult to discover which one is not with the family at Green End. Is it John, the eldest, who would have been 17 and old enough to get a job and go to other lodgings?

Our next body of information is based mainly on comment by witnesses regarding Sarah's health. There are no medical records at this time therefore we have to put actions and comments into the social context of the time. Firstly doctors were very

expensive and from a combination of documents although the Sadler family kept their heads above water, they were not well off, therefore if Sarah was ill she would probably have gone to the workhouse infirmary to get help.

Stephen deposed at the inquest that Sarah had been subject to fits all her life; was he indicating from birth or just from their marriage? Prior to 1881 had she become more ill than previously? When she entered the Stoke Workhouse she would have been interviewed by the "relieving officer". His job was to evaluate all the cases which arrived at the workhouse for medical or poor relief and to arrange poor relief or entry to the workhouse. The relieving officer at Hanley had written to the police superintendent in Whitchurch to say that Sarah was "subject to temporary and sometimes severe fits of insanity". Had he come across Sarah earlier in her life which had escaped the census records?

Both Stephen and Mary Ann Hesketh deposed at the inquest that Sarah "had been very strange in her manner of late", and Mary Ann stated that Sarah suffered "much with her head". In fact she had had nine fits in three days recently. On the day of her death she "had appeared more strange than usual that day"

What the cause of Sarah's fits was we will never know because medical records do not exist, however it is obvious from the reported comments of the

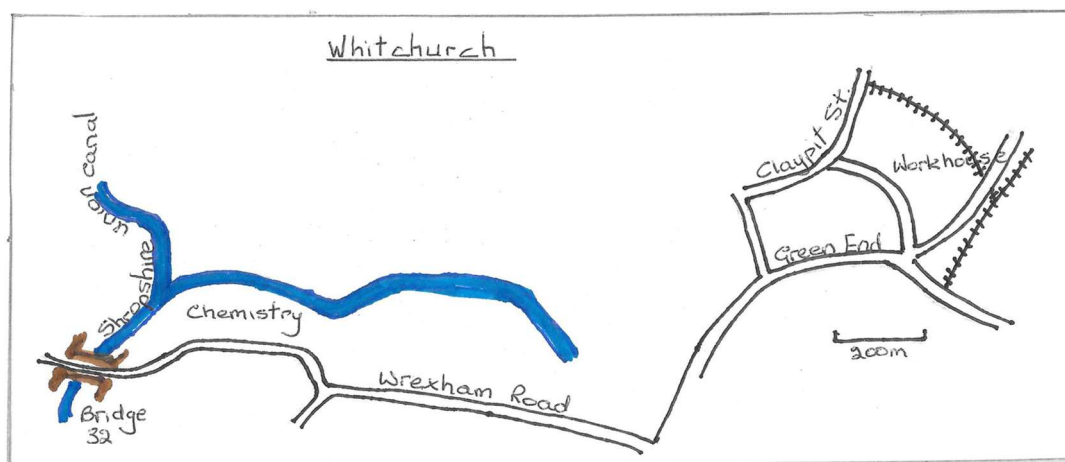
relieving officer at Hanley - relayed via the letter read by the police superintendent at Whitchurch, the evidence of the housekeeper and Sarah's husband, that she had some form of mental illness and or perhaps, epilepsy, which had gone untreated.

Mary Ann Hesketh stated that Sarah said herself that she did not feel well, perhaps a little dramatic but she stated "Oh dear Miss Hesketh I am going to die". Pertinently, she also stated that "If you will allow me I will go to the workhouse". This statement was met by Miss Hesketh with rejection or postponement until husband Stephen's permission had been obtained. It seems very strange that Sarah should ask the housekeeper's permission to go to the workhouse, compounded by Mary Ann's deferring to Stephen's permission. Was Sarah being confined, perhaps against her will or being watched over? This could have been innocently to keep her safe should she become disorientated. The refusal to let her go alone could have been critical for Sarah who perhaps felt that the workhouse was the only place she could obtain medical help. Had the housekeeper allowed her, or even taken her to the workhouse, Sarah might not have "escaped", whilst Miss Hesketh retrieved her bonnet, and been making her way along the canal.

The headline, "A Sad Case of Suicide" was probably written by an imaginative reporter, after a sensationalist headline, who interpreted Sarah's statement that she "was going to die" but she did not

say “I am going to take my own life”. Stephen gave evidence that “she had never said anything to lead him to suspect that she intended to destroy herself”. Sarah had one more health condition which is very difficult to interpret. The inquest jury foreman asked if Sarah was paralysed and Miss Hesketh answered that “the caps of her knees were gone and she could only walk slowly”. What does this mean? We cannot without further evidence say that this had a bearing directly on her death or did it make her so unsteady on an uneven tow path that she became disorientated and fell in?

Sarah had been in the workhouse, she said herself that she was not feeling well. Did she feel that the workhouse was the only place where she would get help. Had she become so desperate for help that she took Mary Ann’s absence to find her bonnet as a chance to go for help, the only place she knew, the workhouse and in her confusion took the wrong road?



Sarah Ann was lodging in Green End however for some reason instead of turning towards the workhouse she turned along the Wrexham Road to the Shropshire Union Canal and Bridge 32 where she met her sad end.

It appears that the coroner decided that Sarah did not commit suicide. Instead she was “Found drowned”. Had a verdict of suicide been recorded Sarah would not have been allowed to be buried in consecrated ground and the family would have been stigmatized.



Barge approaching Wrexham Bridge (32) on Shropshire Union Canal. Close to spot where Sarah Ann's body found.

(Photograph taken by Stephen Attey on 28th Aug 2002. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License)

Stephen and son Joseph continued to lodge in Green End in 1891. A boarder at “The Railway Inn”, on Station Road, Stephen was working as a

journeyman watch and clock maker in 1901 whilst Joseph was boarding at Oddfellows Cottages, with the Crewe family but employed as a brickyard labourer. He had moved with them by 1911 but with a change of occupation to porter, probably to baker, Frederick Crewe. Father and son were reunited in 1921 but in straightened circumstances at the Shropshire Union Workhouse. Stephen had worked for Joyce and Cay, a small firm with only one other employee besides Stephen. Joseph had worked for W. Shopwood as a general labourer.

This is the sad story of Sarah Ann Sadler, she was not forgotten but she did not receive the medical attention which would have given her comfort. It does not appear that the rest of her family offered help. Perhaps a medically unstable sister did not sit well with local businessman and property owner brother, Edward. Brother William, had moved to Tunstall and was away with his family for a time in America. Therefore Stephen and Sarah returned to Stephen's home area of Whitchurch.

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