

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in November 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who were found residing or working in various homes for Fallen Women in the census returns.

Mary and Ethel Coombe's Story

Mary Coombe was born Mary Ann Sanders Burgess near Exeter, Devon, on 15 May 1864¹ and baptised on 28 January 1866 at Woodbury Salterton Parish Church.



Holy Trinity, Woodbury Salterton © Roger Cornfoot CC BY-SA 2.0

Mary's parents were George William Burgess, a hotel waiter, born circa 1835 in St Sidwell, Exeter, and Sarah Warren Goldsworthy, born circa 1831 in Clyst St George, Exeter. They

were married in the Exeter district of Devon in 1854² and had six other children in addition to Mary; George born circa 1856, Sarah L born circa 1858, Joseph born circa 1860, Ellen J born circa 1861, John W born circa 1863 and Edith born circa 1872, all born in St Sidwell, Exeter, except for daughter Sarah, who may have been born in Falmouth, Cornwall⁴. In 1871, the family were living at 41 Sandford Street, St Sidwell along with Sarah's mother, Sarah Goldsworthy who was born around 1804 in St Sidwell. By 1881, George, wife Sarah and family had moved to 9, Clifton Road St Sidwell. At this time sisters Mary Ann and Sarah were both dressmakers.

In 1884, Mary Ann married Albert Coombe from Pensilva, in Cornwall⁵ and a report appeared in a local newspaper:

*' Aug 9 at St Matthew's Church, Exeter,
Albert Coombe, late of Pensilva, Cornwall, to Mary Ann Sanders Burgess,
third daughter of G. Burgess of Exeter.'*

The Western Times, Exeter, Tuesday, August 12 1884 page 5 column 2

Albert, born circa 1864, was the son of William Coombe, a Copper miner. He had moved up to St Sidwell sometime before 1881, at which time he is to be found living at 37 Sidwell Street along with his brother, Richard Coombe, his wife Elizabeth, and their son Arthur aged 1 year, in the home of Daniel Smith and family, Builder and Decorator. Albert, then aged 17 years, was working as an apprentice Harness Maker⁶.

Mary Ann and Albert had their first child Violet Mary, in 1888:

Swelfth April 1888	Violet Mary	Girl	Albert Coombe	Mary Ann Sanders Coombe formerly Burgess	Jeweller Master	M A S Coombe Mother 37 Portland Street Exeter	Nineteenth May 1888	A. J. Pearse Registrar	
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She was born on 12 April 1888 at 37 Portland Street, Exeter. Curiously, Albert, her father, is stated to be a Jeweller, Master – a surprising, and possibly unbelievable, change from the apprentice harness maker of only seven years before.

The following year, another daughter was born. She was called Ethel Lilian May Coombe⁷, born on 29 April 1889. Her father is no longer listed as a Master Jeweller, but is a Commercial Traveller, meaning that he would travel extensively to sell a product and would probably have been away for long periods at a time.

Twentieth April 1889 130 9 Clifton Road Exeter A.S.D.	Ethel Lilian May	Girl	Albert Coombe	Mary Ann Sanders Coombe formerly Burgess	Commercial Traveller	M. A. Coombe Mother 9 Clifton Road Exeter	Twentieth April 1889	A. S. Pears Registrar
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A report of her birth appeared in a local newspaper:

'Births: Coombe, April 29 at 9, Clifton-road, Exeter, the wife of Mr Albert Coombe, of a daughter'

Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette Wednesday May 1 1889 p1 col 1

The address is the same as found on 1881 for Mary Ann's family, her home before her marriage to Albert.

Sadly, little Violet did not live long. She died in on 19th March 1891 aged only 3 years, from Pertussis Convulsions, or, as we know it today, Whooping Cough:

Twentieth March 1891 130 9 Clifton Road Exeter A.S.D.	Violet Mary Coombe	3 years	Daughter of Albert Coombe a Commercial Traveller	Pertussis Convulsions Certified by Martha Brown M.D.	M. A. Coombe Mother Present at the death 9 Clifton Road Exeter	Twentieth March 1891	A. S. Pears Registrar
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Unfortunately, Albert's job as a 'Commercial Traveller', information given to the registrar by Mary Ann, may have meant that not only did he travel far away from Mary Ann, her sick daughter Violet, and her surviving daughter Ethel, but he may never have returned to them as he has not been found recorded alongside Mary Ann again. In 1891, Mary Ann and Ethel are enumerated, along with her parents and sister, at 9, Clifton Road, St Sidwell, where she is still recorded as married⁸.

By 1901, Mary Ann and Ethel appear together in the Exeter Home for Fallen Women at 44, Bartholomew Street West, St Paul's, Exeter⁹. Mary Coombe is still listed as married, aged 35 and working as a sub-matron while Ethel is listed as a 'visitor' aged 11 years, rather than as her daughter. The other occupants of the home are a matron who is a single lady aged 60, a servant, born in New York and eight single women aged between 14-22 years old from as far afield as Devon (Torquay, Kingkerswell and Dartmouth), Oxford, Jersey, Hollyend near Warwick, and London. The purpose of this home, and others like it, working under the umbrella of The Ladies' Association for the care of Friendless Girls, was to 'prevent the degradation of women and children' and to stop them falling into prostitution because of their social, economic, or family or other circumstances. The Exeter Home was probably a Workhouse Magdalen Branch¹⁰ helping young, single, first-time mothers, who, without family or other support may be forced to go into the workhouse or might have had to resort to prostitution to support their baby, or otherwise give it up. The Association tried to find the girls positions for employment and some places, including Exeter, provided accommodation for the babies while the girls worked.

By 1911¹¹, Mary Ann and her daughter had gone separate ways. Mary Ann, now listed as widowed, was working as a Foster Mother in a 'Scattered Home' in Camberwell, London, for the Camberwell Board of Guardians. Scattered Homes placed small groups of children in ordinary houses scattered around the suburbs. The children went to ordinary local Board schools and were placed so that there were never more than 30 scattered homes children attending the same school. Mary Ann was looking after six female pupils aged between 3-13 years and two male pupils aged between 5-7 years, all born in London and all attending London County Council schools except one, who was at an LCC 'Special School'. The house had eight rooms and she had two female domestic servants aged 17 and 14 to help her. In the same year, her daughter Ethel Lillian May Coombe, 21 years old and still single, was working in Marylebone, London, as an assistant in a Drapers. She lived in a residential home at 42 Weymouth Street, just off Harley Street in London, which had 43 rooms.

In 1921¹², Mary Ann was still working as a Foster Mother in Camberwell and still living at 263 Friern Road, where she now looked after nine females aged between 8-14 years. Most had either one or both parents deceased and all but one, the eldest, were living there full-time.

Meanwhile, Ethel was boarding at 5 Church Row in Hampstead¹³, and working as a bookkeeper for R Cattle, a woodworking machinist at 27, Wybert Street, NW.

The Electoral Registers show that by 1932¹⁴, Ethel (listed first) and her mother Mary Ann were living together again at Hargrave Mansions, 27, Hargrave Road, Islington. They stayed there together until at least 1935. However, by 1939, Mary Ann had moved back to Exeter and was working as an unpaid domestic for Arthur Godfrey, a newsagent, and his family at 38 Cowick Hill¹⁵. Ethel, had remained in London and, still single, had continued to work as a bookkeeper. She was living in a house at 29 Mecklenburgh Square, Bloomsbury, with several other females of varying ages, some retired and others who were in employment as typists, bookkeepers, secretaries and stenographers¹⁶.

Mary A Coombe died at the start of 1940 in Exeter¹⁷. She was 75 years old and had devoted her adult life to looking after young women and children. It is possible that, because of her own experiences, she wanted to help make the lives of these vulnerable young people the best she could.

Ethel Lilian May Coombe suffered a tragic end. She died in the same year as her mother in London, at 5, Byron Court, Mecklenburgh Square, on 16 September 1940 aged 50 years¹⁸.

CORONERS —									
No.	1. When and Where Died.	2. Name and Surname.	3. Sex.	4. Age.	5. Rank or Profession.	6. Cause of Death.	7. Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant.	8. When Registered.	9. Signature of Registrar.
407	Sixteenth September 1940 Byron Court Mecklenburgh Square	Ethel Lilian May Coombe	Female	50 years	Spinner & ledger clerk Daughter of Coombe a Commercial Traveler (deceased)	Due to War Operations	J. P. Fenlon Causing the body to be burned (3) Rosemont Avenue N. 12	September 1940	H. G. In Lead Institution Registrar



Bloomsbury: Mecklenburgh Square, WC1

The square is named after the wife of King George III, Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburgh-Strelitz (1744-1818), whom he married in 1761. This is the east side of the square built around 1812 to the designs of Joseph Kay. These residences suffered from major damage during the Blitz.

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She was bombed out of existence by enemy action known as the Blitz, an aerial bombing campaign conducted by the Luftwaffe against British cities when over a period of nine months, over 43,500 civilians were killed in the raids. Her cause of death is described nebulously as 'Due to War Operations' and, as the event happened on the night of 09-10 September, it was presumably some days before she was identified. Ethel's death certificate does not tell us of her occupation. She is merely called a spinster and the daughter of a deceased father, a commercial traveller, with no known first name.

Ethel Lilian May Coombe was buried in St Marylebone Cemetery, Finchley¹⁹ at 10.30am on 19th September.

A book 'Square Haunting' by Francesca Wade²⁰ includes an idea of the mayhem that followed the bombing:

'Five houses on the east side of the square formed Byron Court, a block of residential accommodation for nurses from the Royal Free Hospital on Gray's Inn Road. As his eyes became accustomed to the dark, Lehmann thought that it looked rather odd, then realised after a few seconds that he was seeing a tree beyond – the building had been smashed to bits, one side standing, sliced open like a doll's house.'

If Byron Court was indeed housing nurses from the Royal Free Hospital, was it possible that she, like her mother, had become involved in some way with the caring profession before she lost her life so tragically? It would not be a surprise.

Fiona Stone

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