

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.

Edna Bolton's (Boulton) Story

We initially find the subject of this paper listed on the 1881 census (taken on 3 April) for the Parish of St Mary, Stafford, living at the County Refuge, Sandon Road. Edna's name is third from the bottom of the list of 29 inmates at the Refuge and reads:

Edna Bolton, (relation to head of family) inmate, (age) 15, (occupation) Laundry Work, (born) Stafford, Fenton.¹

The Refuge for Discharged Female Prisoners, as it was known when it opened on 17 September 1878, offered shelter and training to girls and women who were eligible for admission:

¹ The National Archives, London, England, 1881 Census for St Mary, Stafford, England, reference RG11/2689, p.45.

- (1) on discharge from Staffordshire County Prison on completion of their gaol sentence;
- (2) women discharged from other prisons on payment of such sums of money per week as the committee from time to time shall fix, to be guaranteed by some responsible person or persons; or
- (3) women not being discharged prisoners, but having fallen into misconduct or crime whom the Committee may deem it desirable to admit under such arrangements.²

By 1882 the Refuge was known as Staffordshire Industrial Home for Discharged Female Prisoners and Friendless Women. The annual report for the same year, discussed at a meeting of subscribers and friends, heard how, of the 19 admissions during 1881, seven females had gone there after leaving Stafford gaol, three after gaol at Bristol, one from Stone workhouse, one having been exchanged from the Wakefield Refuge, another exchanged from the Carlisle Refuge, two received on their own application at the doors of the institution, and four sent by ladies.³

Extensive searches of Court proceedings in newspapers, as well as online lists of Staffordshire Prisoners at Quarter Sessions, 1779-1921, and Stafford Gaol Photo Albums, both from the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service, did not find any mention of Edna.⁴ Although the category for admission to the Refuge in Edna's case is not known, given her age, and as she does not appear to feature in Court and possibly prison records, we can only hope that she was

² The County Female Refuge, *The Staffordshire Sentinel*, Saturday, May 1, 1880, p.7.

³ Staffordshire Industrial Home for Discharged Female Prisoners, *The Wolverhampton Evening Express*, Saturday, February 4, 1882, p.3.

⁴ Staffordshire Names Indexes, Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service:
<https://www.staffsnameindexes.org.uk/default.aspx>

admitted either voluntarily, or sponsored by someone within the community, rather than for an instance of crime.

The Refuge was designed to accommodate about forty women and the building was divided into three compartments, comprising sewing, laundry and cooking, where the women received training during the two years they were expected to stay at the Refuge, to support them in the outside world and to encourage them to lead better lives.⁵ Given Edna was at the Refuge in April 1881, she must have been admitted between 1879-1881.

Who was Edna? The 1881 census shows that Edna was born approximately 1866 at Fenton, Staffordshire. A search of statutory birth indexes for an Edna Bolton between 1860-1870 in Staffordshire did not locate any matches.

Repeating the search without any surname revealed a number of options, but the only relevant name found was an Edna J. Boulton born in 1866 at Stoke-upon-Trent (also known as Stoke T), which included Fenton.

Edna Jane Boulton was born on 6 March 1866 at Pleasant Row, Fenton, the eldest child of Elijah Boulton and Hannah Boulton nee Hancock (married 1865 at Stoke-on-Trent). The family were located on the 1871 census then living at 12 Sutherland Street, Fenton, Stoke-upon-Trent, when Elijah is working as a pot presser in the pottery industry.⁶

Elijah and Hannah had the following children:

⁵ Opening of the Stafford County Refuge for Discharged Female Prisoners, *The Staffordshire Daily Sentinel*, September 18, 1878, p.3.

⁶ The National Archives, London, England, 1871 Census for Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent, England, reference RG10/2873, p.65.

1. Edna Jane Boulton, born 1866, Stoke-on-Trent
2. Elijah Boulton, born 1868, Stoke-on-Trent – died 1869
3. William Boulton, born 1869, Stoke-on-Trent – died 1872
4. Leah Boulton (daughter), born 1871, Stoke-on-Trent
5. Hannah Boulton, born 1873, Stoke-on-Trent
6. Elijah Boulton, born 1876, Stoke-on-Trent
7. Rachel Boulton, born 1878, Stoke-on-Trent
8. Leah Boulton (daughter), born 1880, Stoke-on-Trent – died 1883
9. Alice Maud Boulton, born 1883, Stoke-on-Trent – died 1884
10. Mary Elizabeth, born 1885, Stoke-on-Trent

No information is available on when Edna left the Refuge and what, if any, employment she found. A search of the 1891 census failed to find an Edna Boulton. Could she have married or died? The indexes for statutory records showed a marriage for an Edna Jane Boulton and Robert Ball on 29 November 1891 at Liverpool. Edna was age 25, a spinster, and daughter of Elijah Boulton whose occupation is given as potter. Another search of the 1891 census (taken on 5 April) for Robert Ball found the couple living together as man and wife at Everton, Liverpool, with Edna's birthplace given as Stoke-on-Trent. The census and marriage register entry do not give any occupation for Edna and presumably Robert was financially supporting her.

A search of the 1901 census for Robert and Edna produced no results. As they had been living in Liverpool, a port which played a large part in ferrying hopeful emigrants across the Atlantic, as well as further afield, there was a possibility Robert and Edna had also left for a new life abroad. A search of death records, however, found Robert's death on 25 April 1900 at Liverpool Infirmary, age 34. The informant of his death is given as E. J. Ball, widow of deceased, of 25 Job Street, West Derby.

Another search of the censuses for 1901 failed to find Edna Ball in Liverpool. Did she emigrate on her own, or move back to Staffordshire after Robert's death, or was there another reason for her absence? No death was found between 1900 and 1901 that fitted Edna's age, but a search of the indexes revealed a marriage had occurred on 3 December 1900 at West Derby, Liverpool, between an Edna Jane Ball and Joseph Norman Jopson. In the marriage register entry, Edna signed her name as E. J. Ball, and it shows her condition as a widow and her father, Elijah Boulton, by now deceased, whose occupation had been a potter. The couple were found living at Everton, West Derby, on the 1901 census, where Joseph is listed as a window cleaner.

Neither Edna or Joseph could be located on the 1911 census. No death record was found for Joseph Norman Jopson for between 1901–1916, but on 12 June 1916, at Liverpool, Edna Jane Jopson, widow, married her third husband, John Peter McFee, a mariner.

Again, neither John or Edna McFee could be found on the 1921 census. As John was a mariner, possibly Edna had the option of travelling with him. It would be nice to think she was afforded, through travel to foreign destinations, at least some enjoyment in her lifetime, especially given her early years spent in the Refuge.

John Peter McFee died on 30 May 1935 at 50 Kirby Street, Liverpool, age 68 years. His occupation is given as seaman in the Merchant Service. The informant of death was E. J. McFee, widow of deceased, present at the death, 50 Kirby Street.

Sadly, Edna died later the same year on 1 December 1935 at 241 Westminster Road, Liverpool, age 69 years. Cause of death is given as senility and the informant of death was L. P. Hughes, occupier, 241 Westminster Road. Edna's name is given as Jane Edna McFee, but her death certificate confirms she was the widow of John McFee.

The address, 241 Westminster Road, was a City of Liverpool Welfare Committee's Old People's Home, known as Westminster House. L. P. Hughes was likely a member of staff who may not have known Edna to realise that he had incorrectly provided her forenames in the wrong order.

Unfortunately, no information, apart from marriage register entries, was found to fill the gaps in Edna's life between censuses. Edna's father, Elijah, died in 1887 at Stoke-on-Trent. Her mother, Hannah, remarried in 1890, to Charles Roberts, and died in 1930.

Edna had no children from any of her marriages, whether by choice, or due to some other reason. Several of Edna's siblings had died in their infancy while Edna was a minor and possibly the resulting distress may have played a part in her admittance to the Refuge, or was a reason for choosing not to have children of her own. We can only hope that Edna experienced some fulfilment during her sixty-nine years. A Forgotten Woman no more.

Alison Kennedy
23 November 2024

Sources:

British Newspaper Archive: www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

Find My Past: www.findmypast.co.uk

Free BMD: www.freebmd.org.uk

General Register Office: <https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro>