

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in April 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who can be found as prisoners or staff in Dorchester Prison in the census returns, or who appear in the prison's admission and discharge registers.

Louisa Ann Collingwood's Story

Real name Louisa Ann Martin

Born March 1846 – died after December 1892

Louisa spent the night of 2 April 1871 at Dorset County Prison on remand for the crime of larceny for which she was sentenced to seven years imprisonment on 24 June of that year. She can be identified through her initials, L.A.C., in the census record. Her age, 24, and place of birth 'Shirley, Hampshire, are inaccurate¹.

¹ Census records. England, Dorchester, St Peters. [Dorset County Prison]. 2 April 1871. COLLINGWOOD, Louisa. RG10 PN 2010 FI 28. p35. <https://www.findmypast.co.uk> : accessed 05 April 2025.

Louise is a challenging character to trace, as she employed a variety of pseudonyms during her lifetime, travelled extensively in pursuit of her crimes and often presented herself as younger than her actual age. She did leave a legacy in the form of contemporary newspaper accounts of her crimes as well as prison and other records.

Louisa, Louisa Ann, or Louisa Annie used the surnames Martin, Grimes, Nelson, Collingwood, Ricketts, and Green and later the pseudonyms Edith Groves, Edith Louisa Augusta Barrington, and Louisa Augusta Browning among others²

Louisa's birth name was Louisa Ann Martin, which I was able to identify from an 1870 newspaper account that stated her family had lived at Sherfield English, near Romsey in Hampshire³.

Louisa was born in March 1846⁴ and baptised on 12 April at St Leonard's in the village of Sherfield English⁵. The 1851 census records the family as living in Sherfield and confirms that Louisa was born in 1846. Her father, Henry Martin, then a pauper and formerly an agricultural labourer, was also born there. Her mother, Sarah, came from East Dean in Wiltshire. Louisa, then 5 had brothers Charles, age 6, and George, 2⁶. Sarah and Henry appear had two more

² *Supplement to the Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* (1876). Rotherham Police Court. 3 June. p. 10.d. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

³ *The Hampshire Advertiser* (1870). County Bench. 15 January. p.6c. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025

⁴ *The Hampshire Independent*. (1859). Important Investigation Near Romsey. 13 August. p.8c&d. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

⁵ Baptisms (PR) England. Sherfield English, Hampshire. 12 April 1846. MARTIN, Louisa. Source film no: 1041256. Collection: England, Births and Christenings, 1538-1975. <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JQF8-QR9?lang=en> : accessed 05 April 2025.

⁶ Census records. England, Romsey, Michelmersh. 30 March 1851. MARTIN, Henry (head). PN 1671. FI 33. P1 Sch 3. <https://findmypast.co.uk> : accessed 5 April 2025.

children, Issac, baptised in June 1852⁷ and Ellen baptised in May 1859⁸. I have not established if any of Louisa's siblings survived to adulthood, but I found no evidence of contact between Louisa and her family after 1860.

The 13-year-old Louisa must have been devastated when her mother died in suspicious circumstances in August 1859 leading to the probable fragmentation of the family. Newspapers reported the coroner's inquest into the strange death of Sarah Martin of Sherfield, who had died suddenly; her body streaked with bright green marks that looked so unnatural that it was suggestive of poisoning to medical professionals. Despite witnesses stating they had seen her husband, Henry, collecting and baking 'Savin' (a poisonous conifer shrub used as a livestock insecticide) and the fact his wife had been upset about his friendship with another woman, who had presented her with a meal shortly before her death, no evidence of poison was found at postmortem, and she was known to have been very ill for some time.

Louisa herself appeared at the inquest giving ambiguous evidence as reported in salacious coverage by the Hampshire Independent.⁹, describing how her father used to go out to see his friend, Miss Brewer, at night, which upset her mother, and confirmed the kindly Miss Brewer had provided the meal that her mother ate shortly before her final agonies. Louisa was, however, firm that her father had not physically abused her mother or that she had any knowledge of wrongdoing. The Coroner's jury returned an open verdict.

⁷ Baptisms, (PR) England. Sherfield English, Southampton. 27 June 1852. MARTIN, Issac. Hampshire, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813-1921. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

⁸ Baptisms (PR) England. Sherfield English, Southampton. 20 May 1859. MARTIN, Ellen. Hampshire, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813-1921. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

⁹ *The Hampshire Independent*. (1859). Important Investigation Near Romsey. 13 August. p.8c&d. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

What her father made of this is not known, but Henry Martin was sentenced to two months hard labour in January 1860 for stealing three bushels of wheat from his master William Moody at Sherfield English¹⁰. Louisa gave evidence that on 21 December, Henry had brought 'bags' into the kitchen and concealed them, removing them the following day.¹¹

Louisa's testimony probably helped to convict her father but whether she intended this is not known. At the age of 14 she left the family home and is likely to be the Louisa Martin found in Southampton in the 1861 census¹² where she lived as a servant at the Onslow Inn on Onslow Road. Her employers were Frederick Grossmith, a victualler and licensee, and his wife Caroline.

What happened between then and the beginning of her criminal career which was in progress by 1867 is unknown.

There are several references to Louisa having a prosthetic or 'cork' leg. In this context 'cork' leg means a more sophisticated type of prosthetic with flexible joints of the type fitted in Cork Street, London. It is not known how or when this life changing accident, which involved an amputation above the knee to her left leg, happened or how and when the prosthetic was financed and fitted.

¹⁰ *Hampshire Telegraph* (1860). Hants County Sessions. Chief Constables Report. 7 January. P.6b. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

¹¹ *Supplement to the Hampshire Independent*. (1860). The Chief Constable's Report. 7 January. p.11b. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025

¹² Census records. England. Hampshire, Southampton St Mary. 7 April 1861. MARTIN, Louisa. ED 2. Sch 82. PN <https://www.findmypast.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

Louisa later told one of her victims that she had lost the leg after being thrown from her pony 'near a wood', perhaps that story has an element of truth to it.¹³ This must have occurred after she left Sherfield and after the 1861 census, as she is unlikely to have gained employment as a servant or in any job that required manual labour. Perhaps she found a wealthy benefactor or secured funding from a charitable enterprise during that period. In any event, disability, lack of family support and the non-existence of other acceptable options must have spurred her to a life of crime.

Louisa's criminal career had begun by 1867 when on 2 August she was sentenced to on two charges of larceny.¹⁴ Louisa Ann Martin, a 'young dressmaker,' was sentenced to a month's hard labour for stealing two pairs of boots from a bootmaker in Winchester and a book 'Poetic Reveries' from her landlord, Charles Johnson of 3 Osbourne Place, Winchester¹⁵.

While 'dressmaker' is a euphemism for prostitution, there is nothing else to suggest that this was how Louise made her living.

Louisa appears to have then embarked on a crime spree that lasted until (and beyond) her imprisonment in 1871.

Her consistent technique was to book rooms at a lodging house then visit local shops arranging orders to be delivered to the address before absconding

¹³ *The Oxford Times*. (1887). Bullingdon Petty Sessions. 12 November 1887. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 06 April 2025.

¹⁴ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (1876). Rotherham Quarter Sessions. 1 July. p.3d. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025. This provides a summary of Louisa's criminal career to date.

¹⁵ *The Hampshire Advertiser County Newspaper* (1867). Winchester City Bench. 2 August. p. 11.d. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025

without payment. A variation on this theme was to present herself as a distressed middle class young woman and beg temporary lodgings based on some disaster that had just happened to her.

These elaborate scenarios often involved playing the role of a wealthy daughter with a 'mamma' or 'papa' arriving soon. Despite coming from rural poverty, she was confident, charming, well dressed and well-mannered enough to convince her victims, often weaving a complex background story.

Some of these events are recorded in contemporary newspapers but there are also references to similar offences for which accounts are not available, and it is likely that some went unreported by victims or investigated by the police at all. They appear to have occurred all over southern England before her time in Dorchester prison. After serving her sentence she expanded into Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and probably beyond. She travelled from place to place by train, often conducting a series of offences in one locality.

'Louisa Nelson' travelled in October 1867 to Brentford in Middlesex to commit her next reported crime, however by then she was already a known offender. The local newspaper referred to her as 'The hat and feather lady again' and alluded to a series of crimes. On this occasion she targeted a draper's shop. She selected items and asked that they be sent over to her 'mamma' in nearby Kew for approval, and money would be sent by return. The shopkeeper arrived with the items, and although there was no sign of 'mamma,' Louisa was present and asked him to return to the shop to bring another item; saying she

would pay for the whole lot together. When the shopkeeper returned, she had disappeared with the goods¹⁶.

On 25 January 1868, at Charmouth, 'Louisa Annie Grimes' was charged with stealing two pairs of goloshes (rubber overshoes) after telling the shopkeeper an elaborate tale about how she wanted to borrow them for her 'mamma' to try on at their nearby lodgings. She had also spun a backstory to her chosen landlady assuring her that 'mamma' was arriving soon.¹⁷ Louisa was convicted and sentenced to four months' hard labour at Dorchester on 4 March 1868.¹⁸

On 19 October 1868, Louisa was tried for similar offences at Winchester, which had occurred on or about 4 August. This time, she had approached a landlady in East View, Winchester, to book rooms for her mother, a Mrs 'Sloan Stanley', appropriating the name of wealthy local family. The same day, she set up an account for 'her mother' at a local grocery store and persuaded the shopkeeper to send round goods on credit, which he duly did. Although she had given her real name when arrested, she insisted that she had given the name 'Sloane Stanley.' The jury believed her account over the police's version, and she was acquitted.

Later that day, 'Louisa Annie Nelson' knocked on the door of Mrs Ann Crockford a schoolteacher at Twyford, near Reading. Louisa claimed to have come from Winchester, but her carriage had lost a wheel, and she had been

¹⁶ *The West Middlesex Herald* (1867). The Hat and Feather Lady Again. 12 October. P.1f. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

¹⁷ *The Telegram*. (1868) Third Court – Friday. The Female Swindler. p.4f. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

¹⁸ The National Archives. *England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892*. HO 27; Piece: 149; Page: 167. <https://ancestry.co.uk>: accessed 6 April 2025.

thrown out and injured. Mrs Crockford gave her a bed and hospitality for the night. She was rewarded for her virtuous deeds the following day when Louisa left with her gold brooch, gloves, and other items. Louisa was tracked down by police to Southampton, along with the stolen goods. The resulting court appearance led to a description in the newspaper as a 'genteelly dressed young woman with a cork leg.' She was sentenced to 12 months in prison¹⁹.

The following year on 14 January 1870, was imprisoned again for a similar offence this time for six months. On 18 August 1870, she was declared a 'rogue and vagabond'.²⁰

Louisa may not have had a home to return to on her release from prison. On 2 August 1870, Henry Martin pleaded guilty to stealing a quantity of oats and straw from an Edwin Burt at Sherfield English and received a sentence of four months hard labour.²¹

While Henry was contrite and promised not to offend again, the prison sentences had no discernible effect on Louisa. The Weymouth Times of 28 March 1871 reported that 'A Lady Swindler'²² was taken into custody on a charge of attempted fraud. It described her as frequenting the fashionable watering places and using the surname 'Ricketts.' This crime involved her attempt to gain £5 worth of apparel. What is striking is the description of her

¹⁹ *The Wiltshire County Mirror* (1869). Hampshire Quarter Sessions. 13 January 1869 p.7e. Collection. <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025

²⁰ *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (1876). The Lady Swindler at Rotherham. 2 June. p.3b. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

²¹ *Reading Mercury*. (1870) Hants Quarter Sessions. 22 October. p.6b. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

²² *The Western Morning News*. (1871) A 'Lady' Swindler. 28 March. p. 3b. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

behaviour. She arrived in town, stating she wished to hire two servants, toured the town in a carriage calling at various tradesmen before presenting herself at a lodging house claiming she was a governess who could teach French, music, and the rudiments of German.

The Western Gazette continued the story on 31 March 1871, stating how a 'Lady Swindler' now 'Louisa Ann Collingwood' had ordered goods to be delivered to her lodgings. The matter was reported to the police, who suspected she was an 'old acquaintance,' 'Louise Anne Grimes'. Further enquiries revealed that she had arrived without a railway ticket, which she claimed was lost. She had also pretended to hire a servant and then extracted 2 shillings from the unfortunate woman purportedly for the transport of the servant's own luggage²³.

On 29 March 1871 there is a record of Louisa's admission to Dorchester prison but frustratingly no description of her as there was for the male prisoners²⁴. Louisa was held in custody at Swansea prison²⁵ and then 'delivered' to Dorchester prison for her trial on 5 April 1871.²⁶

On April 14, 1871, the newspapers reported that 'the *alleged* lady swindler' had been acquitted of attempting to obtain groceries from a Mr Grimmett of Weymouth fraudulently²⁷.

²³ *The Western Gazette* (1871). Weymouth. 31 March 1871. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

²⁴ Dorset History Centre. Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Dorchester Prison. NG/PR 1. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

²⁵ The National Archives. HO 140 Home Office: Calendar of Prisoners; Reference: HO 140/13. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

²⁶ Dorset History Centre. Dorset Calendars of Gaol Delivery. Calendars of Prisoners, 1854-1882. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

²⁷ *The Western Gazette* (1871). Dorset Quarter Sessions. 10 May. P8a. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers>

On May 10, 1871, a 'Louisa Ann Collingwood', said to be 21 and of Dorking Surrey, was charged with taking a railway journey from Beckford to Birmingham without a ticket and 'forgetting' to pay her hotel bills in Cheltenham. She was remanded while enquiries took place²⁸.

Finally, on June 3, 1871, Louisa's luck ran out when the crimes took place that would result in a seven-year sentence. At Alverstoke, she stole a silk handkerchief from a shop on the pretence of making a purchase²⁹. The Prison Register states that Louisa was convicted on 27 June 1871 at Winchester on three separate counts. The other two were: stealing a glass of stout, two envelopes, note paper, and stamps from a hotel; then gloves, a silk handkerchief, and lace from another shop. The prison records name her as Louise Anne Martin alias Collingwood alias Nelson, a dressmaker, age 23 and record that she was taken into custody at Winchester Gaol on 9 June 1871 to await her trial on all three charges³⁰.

The fact she had five previous convictions led to a harsh sentence of 7 years of penal servitude and, following that, supervision by the police for 7 years³¹.

Little is known about Louisa's life in prison. A prison record describes her as being discharged from Woking Female Prison at Knaphill, on 2 April 1876. She

²⁸ *The Birmingham Daily Mail* (1871). This Day's Police News. 10 May. p.3c. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

²⁹ *Hampshire Advertiser*. (1871). Second Court. 28 June. p.4a. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

³⁰ The National Archives; HO 140 Home Office: Calendar of Prisoners; Reference: HO 140/14. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

³¹ The National Archives. England & Wales, crime, prisons & punishment, 1770-1935. HO140/14: Home Office: calendar of prisoners tried at the general quarter sessions for the year 1871. PN 14. <https://findmypast.co.uk> : accessed 05 April 2025.

was said to be 27 (although she was 30), 5 feet, 3.5 inches tall, with brown hair, green eyes, and a fair complexion. Her trade was described as knitting. Her reported destination on release was Laverstock near Salisbury. The record went on to confirm the loss of her left leg and that she had three previous convictions³².

It is unknown if Louisa did go to Laverstock, but just a few weeks later she was back to her criminal behaviour. On 1 June 1876, 'The Lady Swindler' appeared at Rotherham Police Court, now using the name 'Edith Groves' and claiming she was 26. An account of her offences was recited at the hearing. She had booked apartments at three hotels in Rotherham and ordered refreshments, all without paying. In addition, she obtained several stamps and finally stole several pairs of gloves from a shop. She was permitted to cross-examine witnesses and was reported as saying to the police:

" I got the stamps; it is no crime. I never commit any crimes. I have been in a stamp case before but never locked up. It is only a debt, and they cannot do anything with me for it."³³

Perhaps Louisa was right about the stamps. Her trial on the charge of theft of gloves only, took place on 30 June 1876 at Rotherham. Her numerous court appearances had rubbed off. She did not use counsel, cross-examined witnesses herself, and confidently addressed the 'gentlemen of the jury'. Much was at stake. The Chairman acknowledged that she put up a clever defence.

³² The National Archive. England & Wales, crime, prisons & punishment, 1770-1935. Stafford Gaol, Staffordshire: A Copy Of The Distributed National Alphabetical Register Of Habitual Criminals In England And Wales. PCOM 2/404. PN 404. P158. <https://findmypast.co.uk> : accessed 05 April 2025.

³³ *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (1876). The Lady Swindler at Rotherham. 2 June. p.3b. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

However, the jury found her guilty. She was sentenced to ten years of penal servitude and five years of police supervision³⁴.

Louise's prison record, which records her as 'Edith Groves' and lists some of her pseudonyms, indicates that she was transferred to Millbank Prison in London on July 18, 1876³⁵.

At the date of the 1881 Census, 'Edith Groves' was back at Woking Prison. The prison record merely states she was a female prisoner, age 31 (although she was about 4 years older) born at Shirfield (sic), Hampshire, unmarried, with no occupation³⁶.

It is not known when Louisa was released. But in June 1885, she successfully obtained donations towards a new prosthetic leg before absconding with the proceeds. That led to her being sent back to serve the last nine months of her imprisonment, with three months added.

Now known as 'Louisa Augusta Barrington' and claiming to be Danish, she was charged with several offences in Buckinghamshire in March 1887. A newspaper referred to her as "a veteran imposter." The charges related to obtaining food and lodgings by deception.³⁷

³⁴ *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (1876). Rotherham Quarter Sessions. 1 July 1876. p.3d.

<https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

³⁵ The National Archives. PCOM 2 1770-1951 Home Office and Prison Commission: Prisons Records, Series 1.

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

³⁶ Census Returns England. Woking, Guildford Surrey. GROVES, Edith. RG 11/773. PN 773. FI 99. p.7.

³⁷ *The Leighton Buzzard Observer*. (1887). Petty Sessions. 29 March, p. 8a Collection:

<https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

Louisa, still using the name 'Louisa Augusta Barrington' and still aged 31 (in reality, 41), again fraudulently obtained board and lodging in June 1887, this time in Coombe, Oxfordshire, and was subsequently sentenced to four months of hard labour.³⁸.

Louisa was in Skegness in 1892 when, using the name Louisa Augusta Browning, of Newcastle a 42-year-old governess, she was accused of obtaining food and lodging on false pretences. A newspaper remarked that she had the money on her to pay the £15 bail immediately perhaps, as the newspaper revealed, financed by going around on crutches soliciting subscriptions for her new cork leg before suddenly leaving town.³⁹.

The attempts to raise funds for her leg may have been genuine. The original cork leg appears to have been replaced by an unsophisticated wooden one at some point during her prison stay, which must have been debilitating. She was described as walking on crutches whereas previously she used a walking stick although she had a limp.

Louisa's entry in the Prison Calendar as Louisa Augusta Browning makes interesting reading as it lists her previous offences under her various aliases since 1867. It also provides details of offences under the name 'Edith Golding' at Chepstow in January 1889 and 9 November 1892 at Spalding as Louisa Ann

³⁸ *The Oxford Times* (1887). Oxfordshire Summer Assizes. p.7d. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 05 April 2025.

³⁹ *The Dover Express* (1892). [no title]. 11 November p.2d. Collection: <https://findmypast.co.uk/search-newspapers> : accessed 06 April 2025

Brown⁴⁰. However, she was plausible enough to be acquitted at the Lincoln Assizes on 24 December 1892.⁴¹

I can find no record of Louisa after that date under her actual name or any of her known pseudonyms. It is highly likely that she invented new identities for the rest of her life and her eventual death is recorded under one of them with her real identity remaining hidden from those around her.

It is striking that Louisa's life was contemporary with Thomas Hardy and she had lived in his 'Wessex' during the earlier part of her life. Like his characters her life was blighted by the injustice of the class system, early poverty and a rudimentary education. Yet she was charming, articulate, and convincing as con-woman and also able to argue her case convincingly in court. She may have made a plausible Hardy heroine, suffering the machinations of fate through traumatic bereavement and a life changing injury, reinventing herself and striking out alone in the world.

Louisa's crimes do not seem to deserve the harsh punishment she endured. She did steal but the goods and services obtained were relatively inexpensive and while she arguably caused emotional harm to her victims, she was never violent.

Hardy was a magistrate and served as a juror in the assizes in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Dorchester. There is nothing to suggest she came before his court, but I wonder what he would have made of her. While Louisa

⁴⁰ The National Archives. HO 140 Home Office: Calendar of Prisoners; Reference: HO 140/137. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

⁴¹ The National Archive. England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892. *Class*: HO 27; *Piece*: 222; *Page*: 303. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk> : accessed 06 April 2025.

might have been forgotten by the modern world, she was unforgettable to many of those who encountered her in life.

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