

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in September 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon.

Alice Mary Gentle's Story

Alice Mary Gentle was born on 11 September 1891 in Trumpington, a village on the outskirts of Cambridge. Her family were living on the main London Road where her father had a carter's business. He had previously been involved in the straw hat trade but this was declining by the late nineteenth century, which presumably necessitated a change of career. Alice was the fourth child and only girl, born to Arthur and Susan Gentle. Her eldest brother had died as an infant three years previously. When Alice was born her surviving brothers were three years and eighteen months old and it may not have been apparent at the time that both boys were deaf, as was Alice. For all three children to be born deaf suggests a genetic cause but neither of their parents, nor any aunts or uncles appear to have been deaf. A younger brother, born in 1893, also died in infancy.

By 1901, all three surviving siblings were pupils boarding at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor in Margate, Kent. Alice's first two years of schooling had been in a day school. Presumably this was near her home and it is unlikely that there was any provision for Alice's deafness. She then went to the school in Old Kent Road in September 1898. Alice's 1898 report stated that she had 'caused considerable trouble through dirty habits'. We learn from her admission record that she had been deaf from birth and that she had had both Whooping Cough and Measles. Perhaps little Alice wasn't properly toilet trained. The Old Kent Road establishment was a feeder school for Margate and pupils usually spent a year or two in London before being transferred to the premises in Margate and Alice was moved to Kent in April 1900.

Alice's May 1900 the report stated that her was fairly intelligent but that she had only been at Margate for a month, as she had been ill for 'a long time'. By the time that she left, in 1907, she was described as 'A well disposed and persevering girl. She received 100% for articulation and lip-reading and her speech was described as 'intelligible'. She had been part of the cookery, housecraft and dressmaking and had done well in each.



The Gentle's Home

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The school offered a wide range of activities that went beyond communication skills and vocational training. The annual prize giving programmes reveal school plays, sports and other activities that gave the pupils an enriched experience. Both of Alice's brother feature regularly in the lists of prize winners.



The main road from Trumpington to Cambridge, very close to where the Gentle family were living c.1905

On leaving school, the three siblings returned to the six-roomed family home in London Road, Trumpington. Their father was still running his carrier's business. The two brothers were working in Cambridge, Herbert as a tailor and Stanley repairing cycles. Alice was a tailoress working from home. Ten years later the family were at the same address but Arthur is now described as a smallholder. Had he turned his carter's yard into a smallholding?

Arthur died in 1929, leaving £90 worth of effects to his widow. Susan died in 1932. Electoral Rolls show that Alice and her brothers throughout the 1930s. Alice seems to have been part of the community. A newspaper report, in 1937, stats that she had donated silver paper to nearby Addenbrooke's Hospital.

In the 1939 register, Herbert was doing odd jobs, gardening and farm work, Stanley was still mending cycles, whilst Alice was keeping house for her brothers. Herbert died in 1956, and Alice in 1961. Stanley remained alone until 1968. Alice and Herbert's gravestone is in the Trumpington Cemetery Extension.



Sources

Birth and death indexes of the General Registrar

1911 census for Trumpington Road, Cambridgeshire RG14 9099 SN121

1921 census for London Road, Trumpington, Cambridge RG15 08097 SN35

1939 RG101/63041/004/4

The Independent Press and Chronicle 19 March 1937 p.6 col f.

Margate Royal Asylum Prize Giving

Ch192/R8/1/2 Entry 205 Leavers Records: Registers of Children Leaving School (1877-1943)

Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 217 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate

Ch 192/R2/3/1 Page 13 Headmaster's register of children: Margate (1895-1913)

Ch192/R2/1/5 Entry 5447 Register of children: Old Kent Road [5256-5670] (with transfers to Margate)

Ch192/R2/2/2 Page 86 Headmaster's Register of Children: Old Kent Road (1891-1904)

Ch192/R2/3/1 Page 2 Headmaster's register of children: Margate (1895-1913)

Ch192/R2/1/5 Entry 5346 Register of children: Old Kent Road [5256-5670] (with transfers to Margate)

Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 105 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate

Ch192/R2/1/5 Entry 5390 Register of children: Old Kent Road [5256-5670] (with transfers to Margate)

Ch192/R2/3/1 Page 5 Headmaster's register of children: Margate (1895-1913)

Ch192/R2/1/6 Entry 160 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate