

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 Jane Astley's Story

Mary Jane Astley was born on February 20, 1873 at Back Walls North in the district of Stafford, Staffordshire.¹ Her parents Thomas Astley and Patience Elizabeth Deakin were married in 1872.² She was their first born child. Mary Jane's baptism took place on March 30, 1873 in the Parish of St. Mary, Stafford. Her father's occupation was noted in the baptismal record as shoemaker.³

In the 1881 Census, the Astley's were still living in the Parish of St. Mary in Stafford and were now a family with five children. Mary Jane was eight years

¹ England and Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915, Vol. 6b Pg.12, GRO Digital Image

² Staffordshire, England, Birth, Marriage and Death Indexes 1837-2017

³ Staffordshire Baptisms, Archive Reference D1399/10, Page 216

old and attending school. Her six year old sister Alice also attended school. Mary Jane's other siblings were William age four, George age two and Elizabeth age one. Her father Thomas was still a shoemaker. Her mother, going by her middle name Elizabeth, was a machinist. It is highly probable that Mary Jane's mother was able to be in the workforce despite her large young family, because Mary's Jane's sixty-three year old widowed grandmother Mary Deakin also lived with the family.⁴

The mid to late 1880's was a time of upheaval for the Astley family. Mary Jane's sister Alice died in December of 1885 at the age of ten.⁵ Three years later in June of 1888 when Mary Jane was fifteen her mother also died.⁶ By that time, the family had grown by four children with Herbert born in 1887 being the youngest.⁷ This left Mary Jane's father a widower with eight children in his care, six of whom were eleven years old and younger. Not surprisingly in October of 1889, her father Thomas married twenty-two year old Sarah Ecclestone who was sixteen years his junior.⁸

In the 1891 Census, the Astley family was living in Tillington in the district of Stafford. Thomas Astley was still employed as a shoemaker. There were no children from his marriage to Sarah Ecclestone. All of his children with Patience Elizabeth Deakin were still living in the household with the exception of Mary Jane.⁹

⁴ 1881 Census of England and Wales, RG11 2689, Folio 139, Pg. 16

⁵ England and Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915, Vol. 6b Pg. 11

⁶ Ibid., Vol. 6b Pg. 5

⁷ Staffordshire, England, Birth, Marriage and Death Indexes 1837-2017

⁸ Staffordshire, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1900

⁹ 1891 Census of England and Wales, RG12 2137, Folio 46, Pg.11. Mary Jane's grandmother Mary Deakin was not with the Astley family in the 1891 Census. No death record could be found for her nor could she be found elsewhere in the 1891 Census.

In 1891, eighteen year old Mary Jane was an inmate at the Staffordshire County Refuge for Fallen Women, Sandon Road, Stafford, which was also known as The Staffordshire County Industrial Home for Discharged Female Ex-Prisoners and Friendless Women.¹⁰ Unfortunately, there were no records to reveal why Mary Jane found herself in this institution or how long she was an inmate there.

On March 20, 1895, Mary Jane was admitted to the Stafford Workhouse from the parish of Tillington where her family was living in the 1891 Census. Her year of birth was recorded as 1873 and her occupation was a domestic servant. It may have been an occupation she received training for while an inmate at the Staffordshire County Refuge for Fallen Women. No reason for her admission was given.¹¹ There was a discharge record for Mary Jane from the Workhouse on May 7, 1895.¹² Mary Jane was again admitted to the Workhouse on May 28, 1895.¹³ The reason for this admission was likely due to her pregnancy. On September 9, 1895, an admission for her daughter Mary Elizabeth Astley was recorded indicating she was born in the workhouse.¹⁴ Both Mary Jane and her daughter were discharged on December 26, 1895.¹⁵ Two days later, on December 28, 1895, Mary Jane's daughter was baptized at Christ Church in Stafford with the name Katherine Elizabeth Astley. She was

¹⁰ 1891 Census of England and Wales, RG12 2139, Folio 140, Pg. 37

¹¹ Index of Admissions to and Discharges from Poor Law Union Workhouses, 1836-1900, Volume Ref. C/W/3/1/1, <https://www.staffsnameindexes.org.uk/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

recorded as having been born on September 9, 1895. Their abode was Tillington. The father's name was not recorded.¹⁶

In 1899, Mary Jane became embroiled in a court matter as the complainant against Bateman Perkins Wright who was a senior magistrate of the borough of Staffordshire and a former Mayor of Stafford. She had been employed by him as a domestic servant. On February 23, 1899, she was granted an Order of Bastardy or an affiliation order by justices at Stafford against the sixty-three year old Wright for the support of her illegitimate child.¹⁷ Wright did not pay. Mary Jane took her order to the courts for enforcement. As a result, Wright was arrested in Stafford and brought before the Bournemouth Police Court. The Hampshire Independent reported on April 15, 1889:

...an elderly man, of gentlemanly appearance, named Bateman Perkins Wright, was brought up on a warrant for non-payment of arrears due upon an affiliation order made upon him by the Stafford Borough Magistrates, adjudging him to be the father of the illegitimate child of a young woman named Mary Jane Astley, formerly of Stafford, and now of Poole-road, Bournemouth; and ordering him to contribute 3s. a week towards its support. The arrears were stated to be six weeks, at 3s., 18s., and the costs, £1 2s. 6d., making a total of £2 0s.6d. Mary Jane Astley, a single woman, produced the order which the Stafford Bench made in respect of her child, and said there were six weeks' arrears and the costs due. The defendant had not paid her anything since the order was made.¹⁸

The Chairman of the court asked the witness Mary Jane if she had made any "application" to the defendant Wright for the arrears. She said she had sent him a letter but received no reply, and the letter had not been returned through the post. Then there was the following exchange:

¹⁶ Staffordshire Baptisms, Archive Ref. D3387/4, Pg. 141; The birth registration has Mary Jane's daughter's name spelled Catherine Elizabeth Astley. England and Wales Births 1837-2006, Vol. 6b, Pg. 9

¹⁷ The Christchurch Times, Christchurch, Hampshire, April 22, 1889

¹⁸ The Hampshire Independent, Southampton, Hampshire, April 15, 1889

The Chairman: Is the defendant able to pay?

Witness [Mary Jane]: Oh, yes, sir.

The defendant to the Chairman: I am not in a position to pay. I have no means whatever [sic], and I cannot pay...¹⁹

Evidence was given by a Detective Sergeant that Wright had retired from business and had no occupation, but his friends had offered to pay the arrears but Wright had refused all offers. When the court made an order in the amount of £5 8s. 7d. to be levied against Wright's goods, he told the court he had no goods as they had been assigned to a trustee. The court observed that Wright was being "obstinate in the matter" and was ordered to spend one month in Winchester Gaol.²⁰

This was not the end of the matter. In July of 1899, Mary Jane was back before the courts in Stafford seeking again to enforce the order.

At the Stafford Borough Police Court, on Saturday -before Mr. J. Shallcross, Mr. N. Joyce, Mr. W. Wright, and Mr. W. H. Peach—Mr. B. P. Wright, a magistrate of the borough, was brought up on a warrant, which had been executed in London, charged with having disobeyed an order of the Bench that he should pay 3s. a week towards the support of the illegitimate child of Mary Jane Astley, formerly a domestic servant in his employ. The warrant had been issued in respect of arrears and costs amounting to £4 13s. 8d. Some time ago [sic] defendant was arrested and taken to Bournemouth, where he was committed to prison for a month for not obeying the order. Defendant alleges his innocence, and declined to pay or allow anyone else to do so on his behalf.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The Staffordshire Sentinel, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, July 8, 1899

The solicitor Mr. Underhill, who appeared for Mary Jane, told the court that she had written to Wright requesting the payment but it had been met with no response. Wright was still refusing to pay and would not allow anyone else to pay the arrears on his behalf. The court committed Wright to Stafford Gaol for one month.²²

This appears to have been the end of the matter in the courts. There were no further reports in the newspapers after July of 1899.²³ It was very unlikely that Mary Jane ever received any money from Wright. But, it spoke to her character that she was determined to seek support for her child despite the father's social status and the stigma surrounding illegitimacy at the time.

Whether she was seeking support for her daughter Katherine Elizabeth or another child could not be determined. The newspaper reports did not identify the sex or age of the child. No other birth or baptismal records showing Mary Jane had another child between 1895 and 1899 were found.

As the newspapers reported, Mary Jane was living in Bournemouth in 1899. The 1901 Census showed her residing in Bournemouth working as a domestic servant in the household of bricklayer Charles Lane.²⁴ There was no child residing with her. However, her five year-old daughter Katherine Elizabeth was found in the 1901 Census residing in the Parish of Christchurch in Stafford

²² Ibid.

²³ The case was widely reported in England garnering headlines such as "An Interesting Arrear Case" from The Hampshire Independent, Southampton, Hampshire, April 15, 1889; "A Magistrate sent to Prison: A Remarkable Case at Bournemouth" from The Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser, Taunton, Somerset, April 19, 1899; "The Servant's Baby" from The People, London, April 16, 1899; "Magistrate in Trouble: Arrears to a Servant Girl", South Wales Echo, Cardiff, Glamorgan, Wales, April 14, 1899; "An Ex-Mayor Sent to Prison" from the Boston Spa News, April 21, 1899, Boston Spa, Yorkshire.

²⁴ 1901 Census of England and Wales, RG13 1039, Folio 41, Pg. 26

where she had been baptized. She was using the surname Astley, although her forename was recorded as Kathleen Elizabeth. She was identified as the step-daughter of John Kenderdine and his wife Harriet, both natives of Stafford. John was employed as a Railway Engine Stoker. Two younger children, the Kenderdines' son and daughter, were also in the household.²⁵ The Kenderdines appeared not to have had any familial connection to Mary Jane.²⁶ After 1901, Katherine Elizabeth disappeared from the records.

On March 14, 1907 in Stafford, Mary Jane gave birth to a daughter Beatrice Lilian Clerke. Beatrice's birth registration records soldier Rupert Reginald Clerke as the father. Mary Jane's surname is also recorded as Clerke, formerly Astley. However, no marriage record could be found. The address at which Mary Jane gave birth to Beatrice and also resided was 36 Crooked Bridge Road, Stafford.²⁷ This was the address of her father Thomas Astley's residence in the 1911 Census.²⁸

In the spring of 1908, Mary Jane married Henry Dix in Stafford.²⁹ If Mary Jane had been married to Rupert Reginald Clerke, there was no record of his death.³⁰ In the summer of 1909, Mary Jane gave birth to a son Henry Thomas Dix.³¹

²⁵ 1901 Census of England and Wales, RG13 2571, Folio 117, Pg. 10

²⁶ Records for the couple did not show any connection to the Astley or Deakin families.

²⁷ England and Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915, Vol. 6b Pg. 6, GRO Digital Image

²⁸ 1911 Census of England and Wales, RG14 16356

²⁹ England and Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915, Vol. 6b Pg. 34

³⁰ No records could be found to identify Rupert Reginald Clerke/Clarke.

³¹ Staffordshire, England, Birth, Marriage and Death Indexes 1837-2017

In the 1911 Census, the family was living in Whitgreave Stone in Staffordshire Henry was employed as a bricklayer. Four year old Beatrice was identified as Henry's daughter and used the surname Dix.³² Sadly, Mary Jane's two-year old son Henry died later in the same year.³³

In the 1921 Census, the family was living in Stone Rural, Staffordshire. Henry was now a farm labourer. Mary Jane was at home. Beatrice was identified as Henry's step-daughter with both the surnames Clarke and Dix. Her birth registration as Clerke was likely in error. There were no other children.³⁴

On December 26, 1934 at Nottingham, Nottinghamshire, Mary Jane's daughter Beatrice was married to Frederick Henry Browning. She married with the surname Clarke. Her father was recorded on the marriage record as soldier Rupert Reginald Clarke who was deceased.³⁵ Beatrice was living with her husband in Nottingham at the time of the 1939 Register.³⁶ Mary Jane was also a resident of Nottingham in 1939. She was living with seventy-four year old John H. Goodband who was a widowed retired firewood merchant. Mary Jane was recorded as married. Her birthday was given as February 1873 with the day later recorded in red ink as the fourteenth which is incorrect according to her birth registration. She was a housekeeper.³⁷ Interestingly, her husband Henry Dix was still living in Stone, Staffordshire in the 1939 Register. He too

³² 1911 Census of England and Wales, RG14 16346

³³ Staffordshire, England, Birth, Marriage and Death Indexes 1837-2017

³⁴ 1921 Census of England and Wales, RG15 12519

³⁵ Nottinghamshire, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937

³⁶ 1939 Register RG101 6175D

³⁷ *Ibid.*, RG101 6188F. Later ink notations were made in the 1939 Register when updates were made due to an individual's change of status for example a marriage or perhaps enrollment in the NHS in 1948.

was recorded as married. He lived alone and was retired.³⁸ Henry Dix died at Stone, Staffordshire in 1945.³⁹

Mary Jane herself died late in the year of 1966 at the age of ninety-three. She had made her way back to Stafford where she had been born.⁴⁰

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³⁸ Ibid., RG101 5479E

³⁹ England and Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916-2007, Vol. 6b Pg. 34

⁴⁰ Ibid., Vol. 9b Pg. 377