

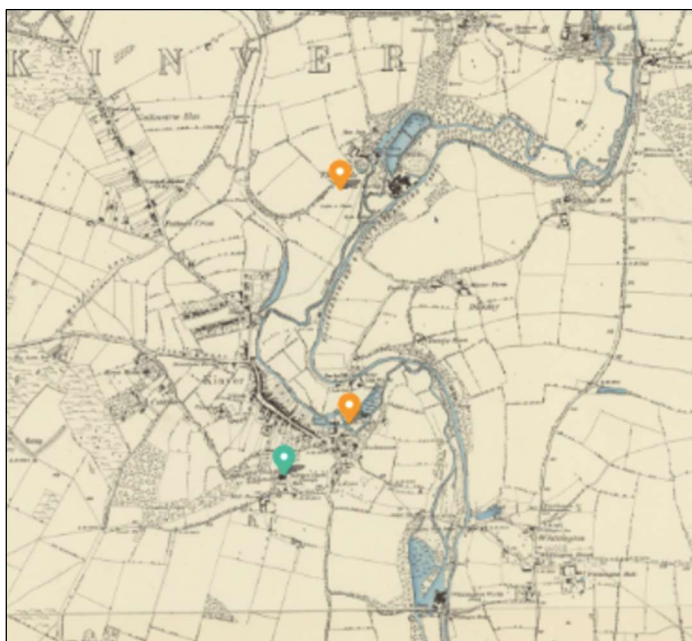
This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



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 King's Story

Mary King's life starts with a bit of a puzzle. The oldest child of John King and Hannah Pursall, Mary was baptised at the local parish church of St Peter, Kinver in Staffordshire on 2nd May 1869. (See jade marker on map.)



OS Staffordshire Sheet LXX.SE 1882-1887 CC-BY (NLS)

The date of her birth is recorded in the parish register as 14 October 1868.¹ On the same day that Mary was baptised, her younger sister Sarah Ann(e), was received into the church. The register shows that Sarah has been baptised (presumably privately at home) on 15th January, a few weeks after her birth on 18th December 1868.²

Jan. 15 born Dec. 18. 1868 No. 1121	Sarah - Anne	John & Hannah received May 2. 1868 - J. A. -	King	Village	Forgeman J. Hodgson	
May 2 born Oct. 14. 1868 No. 1156	Mary	John & Hannah	King	Village	Forgeman J. Hodgson	

As the register stands, Mary and Sarah were apparently born to the same mother within three months of each other. There is a civil record of Sarah's birth that confirms her birth date in the baptismal register, but I have not been able to trace a civil record of Mary's birth. As Mary was not baptised until almost seven months after her stated date of birth it seems likely that her date of birth was mis-recorded, either in error or deliberately.

Mary's parents had married at St Peter, Kinver on 20th October 1867³. Both were 19 years old and as minors needed parental consent to do so. Perhaps Mary was already on the way by then, and the date of birth recorded at her baptism is more diplomatic than accurate. Mary's mother Hannah seems to have had no difficulty conceiving. By the time she died in 1900, she had given birth to eleven children: three by 1871, a further five by 1881 and three more by 1891. A large family to support on a labourer's wage.

¹ Staffordshire Parish Registers D1197/1/7p145 Find My Past accessed 9/11/2024

² Staffordshire Parish Registers D1197/1/7p73 Find My Past accessed 9/11/2024

³ Staffordshire Parish Registers D1197/1/12 p129 Find My Past accessed 9/11/2024

Hannah was a local Kinver woman and John had been born in nearby Kingswinford. At the time of the 1861 census, 13 year old John was a labourer at the Ironworks where his older brother William was an engineer. Iron working (orange markers on map) and agriculture were the main local industries.

Ten years later, the 1871 census shows that both brothers had married, and three King households were living in the same house on Stourton Road, Kinver. William and John each had three young children. Three year old Mary King, the oldest of Hannah and John's children, was the same age as her youngest cousin. Both men were still employed at the ironworks; William as an engine driver and John a forgerman. The third household comprised Mrs King senior (mother of William and John) and an unmarried daughter.

Ten years further on, the 1881, the census shows that the families of the two King brothers were still living close to each other, but no longer in the same house. By then, Mary's father John was a general labourer and had seven children to support, four girls and three boys. (Sarah Ann's records peter out after 1871.) Of the younger children, Elizabeth, Alice, Charles and Clara are scholars, while three year old John junior and baby Ernest are too young for school. Mary is thirteen and no longer at school. Neither she nor her mother are recorded as having an occupation outside the home. With such a large family to care for, Mary as the eldest daughter may well have had a major role to play looking after the children and managing the household.

The family kept on growing. Three more daughters were born between 1881 and 1891; though at the time of the census only five of the children are at the family home. Thirteen year old John junior is a farm labourer and John senior is an iron shingler. (Shingling was one of the heavy and dangerous processes in iron manufacture involving hammering hot iron to shape it as it came out of the furnace.)

Mary left the family home at some time before the 1891 Census. We don't know when or why. We do know that on the night of the census in April she is an 'inmate' of The Edgbaston Refuge for Fallen and Destitute Women at 14 Noel Road, Edgbaston where she works as a laundress. Mary was one of 12 'inmates', 10 of whom worked in the laundry. As

well as the positive aspect (in Victorian eyes) of giving young women a 'respectable' trade, the laundry helped finance the philanthropic project.

The Refuge was run by George and Jane Davies on behalf of the City Mission and was one of several projects the Mission ran in Birmingham. Soon after the Refuge opened in the 1860s the Davies' were keen to stress its homely atmosphere and their parental approach. In January 1863, the Birmingham Daily Post told its readers that the refuge is a "home", it is a "kindly shelter" where "no one is detained who wishes to leave the House". The reporter concluded that "...the refuge is made to partake as much as possible of the nature of a home, the master and matron - Mr and Mrs Davies - watching over their charges with parental affection and solicitude."⁴

By the time Mary King was there, Mr and Mrs Davies had been running the Refuge for over thirty years and were in their sixties and seventies respectively. The couple had made it their home; they brought up two grandchildren at Noel Road and 23 year old granddaughter Jessie, still lived with them: indeed, as Assistant Matron,⁵ she was part of the management.

We don't know Mary's circumstances or why she was admitted. She may have left home to go into service or other work. She may have been attracted to the city. The iron trade, which had been the main factor in Kinver's growth and prosperity, was dwindling and the closure of the Hyde Ironworks (one of the area's main employers) in 1882 was reported to have caused "much distress".⁶

However she came to be there, Mary King clearly did not experience her own stay with affection. With an elderly couple overseeing the Refuge and much of the day to day running probably in the hands of an Assistant Matron of her own age, it can't have been easy. But she does seem to have made a friend, and a plan.

⁴ Birmingham Daily Post 6 January 1863 <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/image-share/f4c78818-3269-42ae-9147-87df6d260e78>

⁵ 1891 Census RG12 2359 folio 5

⁶ Victoria County History of Staffordshire Vol 20, 118-60



On Sunday 24 May 1891, at nine in the evening, 23 year old Mary and 24 year old fellow laundress, Fanny Brown of Nottingham, climbed out over a high wall. Mary and Fanny had got as far as Oldbury, just under six miles away, when they were discovered “loitering” by a local policeman and detained in custody. Mary and Fanny explained they were making their way to Stourton, (presumably to Mary’s family home).⁷

Whether or not they were theoretically free to leave the Refuge (or “Mr Davis’s laundry” as it is perhaps more accurately described in the newspaper account), they had committed a crime by “stealing” the clothes they were wearing (and which they may well have made) because the clothes they stood up in belonged to the home. I haven’t discovered if they were charged. I hope not!

This newspaper account is the last reference I have been able to find for Mary. Her younger sister Elizabeth, widowed very young, lived on the High Street in Kinver until her death in 1925 and brother Charles moved to London to work as a clerk. Mary does not seem to have made a home with either of them. The records for some of her other siblings are as incomplete as Mary’s. I hope she flourished after her time in the Refuge. Based on the evidence of her escape bid, she certainly seems to have been resourceful enough!

Sue McCarthy

⁷ Birmingham Daily Mail 25 May 1891

Sources:

1861 Census RG9 2124 folio 34

1861 Census RG9 1985 folio 12

1871 Census RG10 3083 folios 36-37

1871 Census RG10 2928 folio 18

1881 Census RG11 2790 folio 13

1881 Census RG11 2955 folio 90

1891 Census RG12 2359 folio 5

Birmingham Daily Post 6 January 1863

Birmingham Daily Mail 25 January 1891

Derby Mercury 15 July 1868

Victoria County History, Staffordshire XX (1984)

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/warks/vol7/pp434-482>