

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This story was written, in April 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women staff and female patients associated with the Fleming Memorial Children's Hospital, Jesmond, Northumberland.

Mary Deakins: The Story of a Laundry Maid in 1901

The records from the 1901 Census shed light on the life of Mary Deakins, who was born in 1882 in Newcastle upon Tyne and was working as a laundry maid at the age of 19 at Fleming Hospital in Jesmond. Despite efforts to trace more information about Mary through genealogical resources, little else is known about her family or background. It's suggested that she may have had a younger sister, Margaret Deakins, also listed in the Census, but connecting the two as part of the same family has proven difficult due to the lack of further records.

In the absence of concrete genealogical details, the narrative of Mary Deakins serves as a representation of the experiences of numerous young women of her time. These women often found themselves working in challenging conditions with limited prospects for progress. The reconstruction of Mary's daily life delves into the routines she adhered to, the obstacles she encountered, and the societal context of the early 20th century. Glimpses into Mary's background suggest she likely grew up in a working-class household with several siblings, where her father likely held physically demanding jobs for meagre wages while her mother supplemented the family

income with additional work. Mary, familiar with hard work from a young age, would have understood the significance of contributing to her family's well-being.

Education was likely a luxury beyond reach for Mary, as she might have attended school briefly before assuming responsibilities at home to aid her mother in caring for her siblings. At 19 years old, Mary sought employment to support her family, finding a role as a laundry maid at Fleming Hospital in Jesmond, a notable milestone that provided her with a humble income and a degree of independence in an environment of medical activity.

Mary's daily routine commenced early each day, where she would travel from her modest home in Newcastle to the hospital in Jesmond, enduring a commute involving both walking and potentially a tram journey. Upon arriving at the hospital, she would join a team of laundry maids in a bustling, steam-filled basement laundry room.

Within the laundry room, Mary's tasks encompassed washing, drying, ironing, and folding linens for distribution throughout the hospital. These duties demanded physical strength, precision, and meticulous attention to detail, all amidst challenging conditions of heat, humidity, and exposure to chemicals that posed health risks. Despite the toil and modest pay, Mary upheld her work with pride, understanding its importance to the hospital's operations and patient care.

Mary's narrative unfolds against the backdrop of industrialization in England, characterized by evolving gender roles and nascent labour movements advocating for improved conditions. Despite facing arduous work and low wages, Mary likely found solace in the camaraderie of her fellow laundry maids and harboured aspirations for a brighter future, whether through personal endeavours or societal changes.

In examining Mary Deakins' story, we garner insights into the resilience and fortitude of working-class women in Edwardian England, whose contributions often went unrecognized but were crucial to the functioning of institutions like hospitals. Mary's tale illuminates the challenges faced by women in similar roles, offering a glimpse into their lives amid a transforming society grappling with social and economic shifts.

The historical narrative of Mary Deakins underscores the significance of acknowledging the labour and sacrifices of individuals like her, whose stories reveal the intricacies of daily life and the societal dynamics of a bygone era.

Sources:

- [FindmyPast](#) - 1901 Census Records
- [Ancestry](#)
- [Wikipedia](#)
- <https://washergenes.wordpress.com/2006/06/15/english-laundresses-a-social-history-1850-1930/>
- <https://clogsandclippers.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-life-of-laundress.html>
- <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/victorian/daily-life/>
- <https://www.fewforgottenwomen.com/general-8-3>