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

.

Mary Humphrey's 's Story

An important part of the lives, albeit maybe for only a short period, for those children who suffered the disability of deafness, was, if they were lucky, being able to attend a specialist school for the deaf. Even though she lived at some considerable distance away from the Royal School for the Deaf in Margate, on the Welsh Border, Mary Humphreys was able to attend for 6 years.

She was not deaf from birth when she was born on the 12th April 1890, it was mumps, 2 years later which caused her disability. She was baptised, after just under a month later, on 18th May at the parish church in Bronington, which, in

the school's records, is in Shropshire but in official records, is in Flintshire, Wales. Her parents were Charles Humphreys, a general labourer and Louisa Burrows. Both were from families locally established. However, they had been married a few miles away in Nantwich, Cheshire in 1885. Mary had an elder brother, George Herbert born on 3rd July 1887, Mary had followed but a younger sister, Elizabeth born in 1892 died three years later in 1895. The next sibling, William Henry born in 1895 did survive but sadly next born, Lily passed away not long after her birth in 1899. This year was very traumatic for the family as on 14th October, Mary's mother Louisa died at home from heart disease and hypostatic congestion of the left lung, Charles was by her side.

With a young family to provide for and therefore needing to go out to work, in the summer of 1900 Charles married widow, Hannah Copnall, whose husband, Henry, had died, aged just 36, in the winter of 1898. She brought 4 children to the family unit, Ada, Joseph, Annie and Charles.

Exactly how the Humphreys' found out about the school, so far away, we will probably never know but they were supported with sureties provided by two local gentlemen, George Wardle, a farmer from Old Fin's Hall, perhaps Charles had done some labouring for him, and Thomas Foulkes, an accountant. Mary was elected on 12th June 1897 and admitted to the Old Kent Road section of the school on 8th Sept 1897 where she was described as having moderate intelligence with a high-pitched voice. Although Mary was at the deaf school the family's change of address was noted in the records. On her entry in 1897 they were in Bronington. Her mother's death in 1899 also being noted but it appears not her father's remarriage in June 1900 in Ellesmere to widow Hannah Copnall. Louisa died on 14th October 1899 age just 36.

By 1901 the family were in Wavertree, Liverpool and by 1902 had moved to Hey Green Road Liverpool where Charles had taken up, the probably more secure job, in the chemical works.

Before her transfer to Margate in Jan 1899 Mary was reported to have made very fair progress with her intelligence. Her school record only gives a breakdown of her achievements between the years in Old Kent Road and the first couple of years at Margate with a final report when she left in 1906. It is difficult to assess exactly how well she did as it gives the numbers but not in most cases what the possible total was.

The numbers of children in the class varied between 1897 and 1902 with the highest of 13 in 1900. She did appear to have had several absences, perhaps not surprising with the death of her mother so far away in Flintshire. Her best subject would seem to be undoubtedly, needlework as in the Summer of 1901 she won the prize for that subject and in her final report it was recorded that she was a "Good needlewoman. Has had lessons in sewing machine and blouse cutting."

Her marks by the end of her time in Margate appear to be very respectable with Intelligibility being 100% and conversation and dictation at 93%, Her general knowledge was also good at 87% with history and geography a little lower. In history they seem to have concentrated on the Tudors with geography focussing on The British Empire. She did drop a little on arithmetic at 66%. Again, her sewing was excellent at 93%.

From her time at the school it appeared that Mary would have been equipped to enter employment in some sort of sewing career but the next time we encounter her is with her family, engaged in domestic duties, in Runcorn in 1911. None of her own siblings were still at home but the 3 children of her step mother were.

By 1921 her father, step mother and 2 of her children had moved to Elford, Eccleshall in Staffordshire, where Charles had a new job as a "sewerage man". Sadly, it appears that when the family were still living in Runcorn Mary had become pregnant. On 22nd September 1919 Mary gave birth to a daughter, Mary in the Liverpool Lying-in Hospital. Mary's address was given as The Dutton Institution Infirmary, a name which was not concealed in the 1921 census when it was given the name The Runcorn Union Workhouse, where she was recorded with her daughter aged 1 year and 9 months. It is hard to know exactly what occurs in families from the basic records but it seems rather harsh that a young deaf woman, who bears an illegitimate baby, should be turned from her home, when there are 2 adult step children, still at home, the family capable of supporting her.

What happened to Mary next can only be speculation. In 1939 she was probably living in Widnes, working as a "domestic" with a family named Davies. Her date of birth is exact so this is the last record I could find for her. It was also rather difficult to find Mary's daughter. She has 2 entries as the record for Holly Tree Cottage Alvanley, Runcorn (now a grade II listed building) is obscured by Sellotape, one is for her alone, the original has Mary living with a family name Webster. Her occupation recorded as £manufacturing electric condensers". The problem arises with her name. As often happened with the

1939 Register, the woman's maiden name is crossed through and a new name added. This indicates either a change of name or marriage. When the change indicates marriage there is often a date when the authorities were informed of the change, which is usually close to the marriage date. In Mary's case there is no date indicated and I could not find any marriage for a Mary Humphreys to a Mr. Mallett.

Both mother and daughter appear to be living separate lives and nowhere near their family. Being deaf for Mary was a hardship to begin with but later being abandoned to the workhouse was sadder still. Despite searching several records on various sites I could not find what happened to Mary or her daughter after their entries in the 1939 Register.

Ann Simcock (Autumn 2024)

Sources:

Records from Ancestry

Records from Find My Past

Records from The Genealogist

Records from the Royal School for the Deaf, Margate: Ch192/R1/1/1, Ch 192/R2/1/4, Ch 192/R2/1/5,

Ch192/R/2/1/6, Ch192/R2/2/2. Ch192/R2/3/1, Ch192/R8/1/2, Ch192/R8/1/3, Ch192/S8

Record no, 5433

Wikipedia

GRO

https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1138480

FreeBMD