

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written, in April 2025, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who can be found as prisoners or staff in Dorchester Prison in the census returns, or who appear in the prison's admission and discharge registers.*

## **Mary Voss and Elizabeth Legg (née Voss)'s Stories**

Mary Voss was born in 1816, the daughter of Thomas VOSS, a labourer, and his wife Elizabeth née STRICKLAND. She was baptised on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1816 at St Michael's, Stinsford, Dorset<sup>1</sup>, the same church at which her parents had married on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1811<sup>2</sup>.



St Michael's, Stinsford<sup>3</sup>

Stinsford is a rural parish in Dorset, about one mile east of Dorchester. Its main claim to fame is as the birthplace of the author, Thomas Hardy (actually born in

the hamlet of High Bockhampton within the parish, in 1840) and the place where his heart was buried in 1928. It is likely that the Voss family also lived in Bockhampton at some point given that Mary and her siblings variably gave both Stinsford and Bockhampton as their place of birth in censuses.

In 1841, however, the Voss family was definitely living in Stinsford rather than Bockhampton, with the family recorded in the census of that year<sup>4</sup>:

Thomas VOSS aged 55, born Dorset, agricultural labourer  
Mary VOSS aged 24, born Dorset  
John VOSS aged 23, born Dorset, agricultural labourer  
William VOSS aged 19, born Dorset, agricultural labourer  
Charles VOSS aged 10, born Dorset, agricultural labourer

A burial in Stinsford for an Elizabeth VOSS, aged 41, of Bockhampton is recorded for 10<sup>th</sup> January 1833<sup>5</sup>, which is plausibly (but not definitely) that of Mary's mother.

At some time prior to January 1845, Mary VOSS had moved from Stinsford to the neighbouring parish of Fordington.

Whilst Fordington was a separate parish to Dorchester, by this point in the nineteenth century, it had essentially become a suburb of Dorchester, with a none-too flattering reputation. Although Thomas Hardy published "The Mayor of Casterbridge" in 1886, it is set in the 1840s, with 'Casterbridge' being based on Dorchester and 'Mixen Lane' in the novel being based on Mill Street in Fordington.

*"Mixen Lane was the Adullam of all the surrounding villages. It was the hiding-place of those who were in distress, and in debt, and trouble of every kind. Farm-labourers and other peasants, who combined a little poaching with their farming, and a little brawling and bibbing with their poaching, found themselves sooner or later in Mixen Lane. Rural mechanics too idle to mechanize, rural servants too rebellious to serve, drifted or were forced into Mixen Lane.*

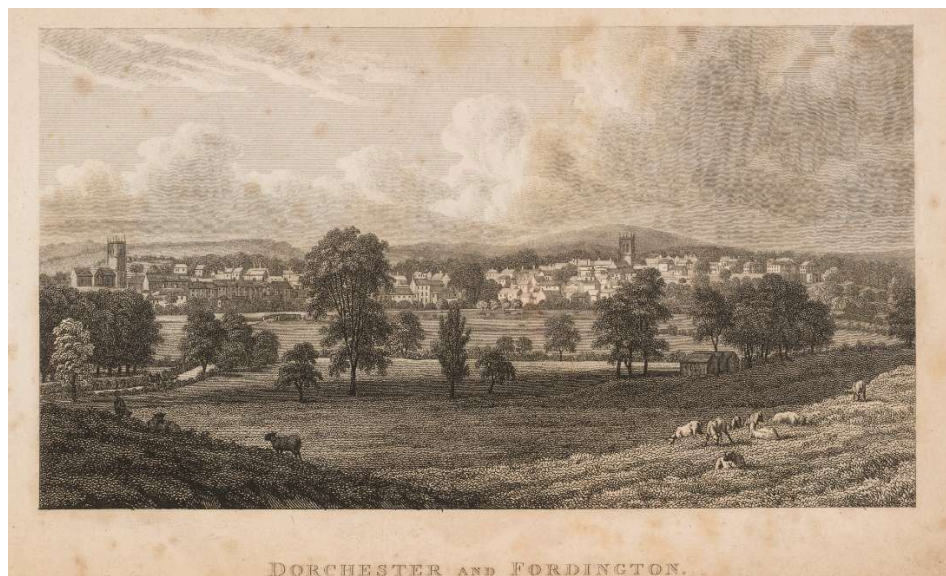
*The lane and its surrounding thicket of thatched cottages stretched out like a spit into the moist and misty lowland. Much that was sad, much that was low, some things that were baneful, could be seen in Mixen Lane. Vice ran freely in and out certain of the doors in the neighbourhood; recklessness dwelt under the roof with the crooked chimney; shame in some bow-windows; theft (in times of privation) in the thatched and mud-*

*walled houses by the willows. Even slaughter had not been altogether unknown here. In a block of cottages up an alley there might have been erected an altar to disease in years gone by. Such was Mixen Lane in the times when Henchard and Farfrae were Mayors..... Families from decayed villages—families of that once bulky, but now nearly extinct, section of village society called “liviers,” or lifeholders—copyholders and others, whose roof-trees had fallen for some reason or other, compelling them to quit the rural spot that had been their home for generations—came here, unless they chose to lie under a hedge by the wayside.”<sup>6</sup>*

On 26<sup>th</sup> January 1845, “Elizabeth VOSS, daughter of Mary VOSS, Mill Street, single woman” was baptised at St George’s, Fordington<sup>7</sup>.



St George’s, Fordington<sup>8</sup>



J. Criswick: Dorchester 1820 from the British Library Archive<sup>9</sup>

It seems likely that the whole VOSS family had moved to Fordington (noting Hardy's comments about the 'drifting' of rural labourers into the area). The 1851 census shows that Mary was living with her father, brother and daughter in Mill Street<sup>10</sup>:

Thomas VOSS Head Widower 64 Farm labourer born Dorset  
Mary VOSS Unmarried Daughter 36 born Stinsford, Dorset  
John VOSS Unmarried Son 34 Farm labourer born Stinsford, Dorset  
Elizabeth VOSS Granddaughter 6 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset

Mary had, in fact, given birth to another illegitimate child the previous year. On 19<sup>th</sup> February 1850, "George, son of Mary VOSS, Mill Street, single woman" had received "a private baptism" from the vicar of Fordington<sup>7</sup>. He had, however, only lived a few months, and was buried at St George's on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1850<sup>11</sup>.

Hardy, in "The Mayor of Casterbridge," depicted the women of 'Mizen Lane':

*"Walking along the lane at dusk the stranger was struck by two or three peculiar features therein. One was an intermittent rumbling from the back premises of the inn half-way up; this meant a skittle alley. Another was the extensive prevalence of whistling in the various domiciles—a piped note of some kind coming from nearly every open door. Another was the frequency of white aprons over dingy gowns among the women around the doorways. A white apron is a suspicious vesture in situations where spotlessness is difficult; moreover, the industry and cleanliness which the white apron expressed were belied by the postures and gaits of the women who wore it—their knuckles being mostly on their hips (an attitude which lent them the aspect of two-handled mugs), and their shoulders against door-posts; while there was a curious alacrity in the turn of each honest woman's head upon her neck and in the twirl of her honest eyes, at any noise resembling a masculine footfall along the lane."*<sup>6</sup>

Living conditions in Mill Street were as bad in the 1850s as those depicted by Hardy in 'Mizen Lane.' In the autumn of 1854, Fordington, and in particular Mill Street and Holloway Row/Road, was hit by an outbreak of cholera. A number of prisoners from Millbank Gaol in London had been rehoused in the barracks that

lay between the centre of Dorchester and Fordington because of overcrowding at Millbank. It is thought that they brought the disease with them and it spread to Fordington as women there were employed to launder their clothes. By the end of September, there had been at least 30 deaths from cholera in Fordington and its vicar, Rev. Henry MOULE, wrote an open letter to His Royal Highness Prince Albert (President of the Council of the Duchy of Cornwall – the parish of Fordington being one of the Duchy's estates), describing Mill Street:

*“At the East end of Dorchester, then, and within a space that can scarcely exceed five acres, about 1,100 people are congregated in a set of dwellings, many of which are of the most wretched description and utterly destitute of the ordinary conveniences of life..... In Mill Street, the floors of the houses lie considerably below the highest elevation of the pond, some of them are even below its bed... In Holloway Road, about 20 cottages have a patch of ground, about 18 feet square, and a pathway and lane in front of them. They have a little space hollowed out of the hill behind them. But, with these exceptions, scarcely a cottage has a single inch of ground beyond that on which they stand. Their filth is consequently cast either into the open and wretched drain in the street, or into the Mill Pond. And it is this same Mill Pond, from which, the people draw their water for washing and sometimes even for culinary purposes, the “conveniences” of more than half the population empty themselves together with the filth of the County Gaol, and some of the portion of three Parishes of Dorchester. The population, with few exceptions, consists of mechanics, labourers, and paupers from this and many other parishes. Vice, in its worst forms, abounds amongst them.”<sup>12</sup>*

With this background, it is not wholly surprising that Mary VOSS was tempted to larceny to ameliorate her family's life, with four convictions in the period 1854 – 1870.

The first conviction occurred in April 1854, when she pleaded guilty at the Midsummer Assizes in Dorchester to a charge of stealing two pewter pint cups in Dorchester. This being her first offence, she received a sentence of just one week 'in the House of Correction.'<sup>13, 14, 15, 16, 17</sup>

Her second offence occurred just eight months later. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1855, at the Epiphany Assizes, she pleaded guilty to stealing a shawl and her term of imprisonment this time was ramped up to three calendar months, with her discharge from Dorchester Prison not being until 31<sup>st</sup> May 1855<sup>13, 14, 15</sup>. Within a

few months of her release, she was pregnant with her third illegitimate child; Charles VOSS was born on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1861 in Fordington<sup>18</sup>, although he does not appear to have been baptised.

One wonders who took care of Mary's two living children – Elizabeth and Charles – in 1857 when she was again sentenced to imprisonment, this time for stealing a piece of beef on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1856. Perhaps she wanted to provide a decent Christmas dinner for them for once? The meat was valued at 5 shillings and was the property of John YEARSLEY, who had a butcher's shop at 23 High East Street in Dorchester. Mary, at this point also going by the name of Amelia, was tried at the Epiphany Sessions on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1857 before C. PORCHER esq. of Clyffe House, Dorchester, and, having pleaded guilty of larceny after previous convictions for felony, she received a custodial sentence of six calendar months hard labour<sup>13, 15, 19</sup>.

After this, Mary seems to have stayed out of trouble for quite some time. Her father, Thomas, died in 1860, and was buried on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1860 in Fordington<sup>20</sup>. At the time of the 1861 census, Mary was still living on Mill Street, with her son and her brother<sup>21</sup>:

Mary VOSS Head Unmarried 46 born Bockhampton (Stinsford), Dorset  
Charles VOSS Son 4 born Fordington, Dorset  
John VOSS Lodger 44 Agricultural Labourer, born Bockhampton  
(Stinsford), Dorset

Mary's daughter, Elizabeth, was not with them and does not appear to be on the census; she would have been 16 at this point and therefore more than likely to be working, perhaps in service in Dorchester. She certainly must have continued to visit her family in Mill Street and been known to their neighbours. On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1864, a 19 year old chimney sweep called William LEGG, who was living on Mill Street in 1861 with his mother and stepfather, was locked up for seven days, having been found to be drunk. The description of the prisoner notes that he had a tattoo "E VOSS W.I." on the back of his right arm<sup>13</sup>. William and Elizabeth VOSS went on to be married at St George's, Fordington, on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1866<sup>22</sup>.

Mary's circumstances had perhaps not materially altered. She was committed to Dorchester Prison again on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1870, although her case was not actually heard until the Lent Assizes, on 1<sup>st</sup> March<sup>13</sup>. The charge this time again related to stolen meat, although this time it was for receipt of stolen pork,

valued at 3 shillings, rather than the theft itself. It is not clear what the outcome of this was; the return of persons committed for trial at the Assizes appears to state “bale ignored,”<sup>15</sup> suggesting that Mary failed to attend but if so, it is not clear whether this was because she was no longer required to attend or whether, if not, there was any detrimental consequence for her. A little light may be shed, however, by some comments made by the judge to the jury before the commencement of the Assizes:

*“The next case to which I desire to make reference also concerns two persons; it is the case of Elizabeth LEGG, No. 19 on the calendar, who is charged with stealing a piece of meat. As to her, the offence is of a very simple character, and I shall say no more about it except by way of introduction to the case of Mary VOSS, No. 9 on the calendar, who is charged with receiving what is alleged to have been stolen by LEGG. It is a common observation in cases of this kind that the possession of stolen property immediately after it is stolen is in itself some evidence of guilty knowledge but that of course has relation to the particular character of the property, which has been stolen. If a person without means is found immediately after a watch and chain has been stolen, in possession of the property, with no reasonable ground for the same, the inference is very strong that he must have come by it in some improper manner. But the case of a piece of meat is quite different; it is not an uncommon thing for a person to have in his or her possession a piece of meat. You will have to see whether you find anything which leads you to the conclusion that there is a case made out against the prisoner – a prima facie charge, which she can be called upon to answer.”<sup>23</sup>*

The Dorset County Express and Agricultural Gazetteer, on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1870, reported on the trial:

*“Stealing pork at Dorchester. Elizabeth LEGG was indicted for stealing a piece of pork, value 3s. 6d., the property of Robert HAYWARD, at Dorchester, on January 29. Mr. COLLINS prosecuted. Mr. HAYWARD deposed to having a certain piece of pork in his shop on the day in question, and knew it by a certain hole in the blade bone. That piece of pork he missed; but he had afterwards been shown it by P.C. KEECH. Mr. HAYWARD’s son deposed to prisoner coming into the shop asking if they had any scraps. He did not sell her the pork. Prisoner’s defence was that she had bought the pork for 2s. Mr. GREY, baker of Mill-street, said a*

*woman called VOSS brought the pork to his shop, to be cooked, and he delivered it to the police. P.C. KEECH said VOSS was the prisoner's mother and they lived together. Prisoner was found guilty, but recommended to mercy, and the Judge sentenced her to a fortnight's imprisonment."*<sup>24</sup>

As noted at the trial in 1870, Mary was living with Elizabeth and her family, together with her son Charles VOSS, as they all appear together in Mill Street in the 1871 census<sup>25</sup>:

William LEGG Head 26 Mason chimney sweep born Athelhampton, Dorset  
Elizabeth LEGG Wife 26 born Fordington, Dorset  
William LEGG Son 5 born Fordington, Dorset  
Elizabeth LEGG Daughter 2 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset  
Mary VOSS Wife's mother 53 Laundress born Bockhampton, Dorset  
Charles VOSS Brother-in-law 14 Assists his brother-in-law born Fordington, Dorset

Although at that point in the year Charles VOSS was assisting William LEGG, by 20<sup>th</sup> September in the same year, he had a change of career, signing up for the Royal Navy. As he was a minor, his mother had to give her consent and she made her mark on his attestation papers, with an added comment that he "has never been an inmate of a Reformatory."<sup>18</sup> Unlike his sister and mother, he therefore appears to have been able to have kept out of trouble and his naval records show that he went on to have a successful career; in the 1881 census he is married with a family and living in Devonport, Devon, a gunner on HMS Cambridge."<sup>26</sup>

William LEGG appears in the newspaper records of petty sessions hearings throughout the 1860s, in relation to further charges of being drunk or of other breaches of the peace such as fighting<sup>13, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32</sup>. With William perhaps spending money on drink, which would have better been spent on feeding his family, Elizabeth, continued to find 'creative' ways to obtain food. Her first appearance in court had been on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1869 when she was sentenced to 14 days' hard labour for stealing growing potatoes<sup>13</sup>. She was then convicted on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1876, again for stealing pork, valued at 2s.6d., serving a sentence of six weeks' in gaol<sup>13</sup>. The Weymouth Telegram reported on 22 December 1876:



*"Shouldering pork. Mrs. Elizabeth LEGG, a married woman of Fordington, was charged at the borough police court, Monday, before the Mayor and Mr. DEVENISH, with having stolen four pounds of pork from the premises in the market occupied by the well-known provision merchant, Mr. Thomas WALDEN, of Came. On Saturday night it appeared that the "lady" went into the shop to negotiate for the purchase of a piece of the animal, but, as it came to more money than she had in her pocket she confessed her inability to pay, and was about to leave the shop. Mr. WALDEN, it would seem had had suspicions of his customer and noticed that she had under her arm a shoulder of pork. She was asked to give up what she had taken, which she said was nothing. Ultimately she made a clean breast of it and wanted to be forgiven. Mr. WALDEN told her that this couldn't be done; it had been done so often before that he must send for P.C. DUNN, by whom she was taken into custody. It wasn't the first time Mrs. LEGG has had to stand up before the Bench and she was sentence to six weeks' hard labour."*<sup>34</sup>

In the 1881 census, the family is to be found still in Mill Street<sup>35</sup>:

William LEGG Head 36 Chimney sweep born Dorset

Elizabeth LEGG Wife 36 born Fordington, Dorset

William LEGG Son 14 Agricultural labourer born Fordington, Dorset

Elizabeth LEGG Daughter 12 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset

Flora LEGG Daughter 3 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset

Mary LEGG Daughter 0 born Fordington, Dorset

John LEGG Son 5 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset

Mary VOSS Mother-in-law 65 Of no occupation born Fordington, Dorset

Circumstances may, however, have improved after 1888. The Dorset County Chronicle, on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1889, reported on a Temperance meeting held in Fordington, noting that:

*"...Bob WHITE, who was received with great applause, gave a satisfactory account of his 13 months' experience as a teetotaler, stating he was better in health and wealth and better in every respect. He said he intended, with God's help, to continue an abstainer, and advised everybody else to do*

*likewise. William LEGG, the sweep, next spoke in the same strain, both he and WHITE stating the past 13 months had been the happiest of their lives, as their wives could testify.”<sup>36</sup>*

It is perhaps a note of the family’s newfound respectability that Mary VOSS’s death was reported in the papers. The Bridport News, on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1890, carried the notice of her death “July 7 – at Mill-street, Fordington” aged 74<sup>37</sup>. She was buried at St George’s, Fordington on the same date<sup>38</sup>.

William and Elizabeth LEGG continued to live in Mill Street. The censuses record:

1891<sup>39</sup>

William LEGG Head Married 46 Chimney sweep born Puddletown, Dorset  
Elizabeth LEGG Wife Married 46 born Fordington, Dorset  
John LEGG Son 15 Carters boy born Fordington, Dorset  
Flora LEGG Daughter 13 General servant born Fordington, Dorset  
Mary LEGG Daughter 11 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset  
Harry LEGG Son 6 Scholar born Fordington, Dorset

1901 51 Mill Street<sup>40</sup>

William LEGG Head Married 56 Chimney sweep born Fordington, Dorset  
Elizabeth LEFGG Wife Married 56 born Fordington, Dorset  
Harry LEGG Son 16 Bricklayers labourer born Fordington, Dorset

William died in 1906; he was buried at Fordington on 29<sup>th</sup> December<sup>41</sup>. Elizabeth continued to live in Mill Street:

1911 63 Mill Street<sup>42</sup>

Elizabeth LEGG Head Widow 66 born Dorchester, Dorset  
Harry LEGG Son Single 26 Mason born Dorchester, Dorset

Elizabeth died on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1920, with her funeral being reported in the Dorset County Chronicle, in far more respectable terms than her earlier appearances in the county’s newspapers:

*“The Late Mrs. LEGG. The funeral of Elizabeth, wife of the late William LEGG, a former well-known resident of Fordington, took place on the 9<sup>th</sup> inst. The mourners who followed were Mr. William LEGG (son) and Mrs. HELLARD (daughter), Mr. John LEGG (son) and Mrs. WHITE (daughter), Mr. Harry LEGG (son) and Mrs. ROBINS (daughter), Mr. HELLARD (son-in-law), and Mrs. LEGG (daughter-in-law), Mr. BEAVIS (brother-in-law), and Mrs.*

*LEGG (daughter-in-law), Mr. William LEGG (nephew), and Mrs. LEGG (daughter-in-law). The coffin was of polished elm with brass fittings, and on the breastplate were the words "ELIZABETH LEGG, died November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1920, aged 75 years."*<sup>43</sup>

Both Mary VOSS and her daughter Elizabeth LEGG (née VOSS), thus appear to have been victims of poverty, opportunistic petty criminals when the need to provide for their families forced them to steal, but ultimately both died in much more stable circumstances.

**Sheila Jones, April 2025.**

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