

# *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.*

## **Bessie Noon's Story**

On the 1881 census Bessie is listed among the "special inmates" at The House of Mercy Magdalen Home in Toldish Hall Road, Great Maplestead, Essex. The record states that she was 16 years old and was born in Portsmouth in Hampshire. This led to the discovery of Bessie on the 1871 census for Park Street, Alverstoke in Hampshire where she is listed with her parents, James and Fanny, and her siblings William, George and Kate, all younger than Bessie. This census gives Bessie's birthplace as Gosport. There was another brother, Edward, but he had died aged three in 1870. The birth registrations of Bessie's brothers and sister took place at Alverstoke in Hampshire and record that Bessie's mother's last name was previously Humby. There was no birth registration for a Bessie Noon for the right year and place but there was a registration for Bessie Northover born on 26 November 1864 at Forton near Gosport. She was the daughter of Fanny Northover formerly Humby, and George Northover, a Sergeant in the Royal Marines. Bessie's birth was registered by Fanny on 30 December 1864 at Alverstoke. There are no records to confirm that Fanny was married to George so she possibly lied on the birth registration document. Fanny was eighteen years of age when Bessie was born.

Fanny married James Noon during the fourth quarter of 1865, about a year after Bessie's birth. The census for 1871 (see above) seems to confirm that Bessie was accepted into the new family, at least to begin with, and that she took her step-father's last name. Bessie's brother Alfred was born two years after the census in 1873.

By the mid-1870's, the Noon family had moved to Reading in Berkshire. Bessie's brother, William, was enrolled at St Mary's School in the town in 1875 and brother George joined him there two years later. On 20 January 1881, all the Noon offspring who were still with their parents were baptised at St Mary's, The Minster, in Reading. Bessie was not present; she was already over a hundred miles away at The House of Mercy. The 1881 census has the Noon family living at 18 Chain Street in Reading. James was working as a porter for a furniture and upholstery firm. The eldest boy, William, had also joined the workforce as a labourer at the tin factory. Three years later in 1884, another daughter, Mabel Fanny, was born.

Meanwhile, Bessie was at the House of Mercy for "fallen" girls and women in Essex where there was accommodation for fifty girls and women aged between 15 and 24, so Bessie was at the younger end of that range. The House was established in 1868. Some cases were free and the young women had to be of sound mind and body and to remain at the House for two years. They were trained in needlework and laundry work. When Bessie was there it was run by the Sisters of the Name of Jesus. The girls and women at the home were either pregnant or involved in (or suspected of being involved in) prostitution. They had been cast out of their families because it was felt that their behaviour/lifestyle had brought shame on the family. There was little distinction made in this regard between single mothers and prostitutes. Rescue and reform were the stated aims of the Magdalen Homes like the House of Mercy where Bessie was. These Magdalen homes were distinct from the Magdalen Laundries in Ireland.

During the time she was at the home, under her full name of Florence Bessie Noon (or is Florence a special baptismal name?) and aged 16, Bessie was baptised at St Giles' Church in Great Maplestead on 27 May 1881. The record includes the names of James and Fanny, as her parents.

The next record available for Bessie is the 1891 census. She was still away from her family but had moved to Reading where they were living. She was among the eight inmates of the Southern Hill "Female Home" in New Road, Reading. This was a refuge for women and girls. The ages of Bessie's fellow inmates ranged from 17 and 24. All of them were listed as general servants. The establishment was funded and the house furnished by donations from the local community.

Things changed for Bessie as the 1890s progressed and on 3 June 1895 when she was 30, she was married at St Mary, The Minster, in Reading. Her new husband was a widower who was nineteen years older than her called William Barnett. He was a railway clerk who lived in Bermondsey at the time of their marriage. Bessie's address on the marriage record was 34 Tilehurst Road, Reading. This was where her family were living at the time of the 1891 census so she had perhaps renewed contact with them. In fact, the two witnesses at the wedding were James Noon, Bessie's step-father, and Kate Noon, her younger half-sister.

Bessie gave birth to her daughter, Florence Kate, in 1896 and her son, Wilfred James, in 1899. Both were born in Reading. The 1901 census shows Bessie, her husband and her son living in Camberwell, in London. Florence Kate was living with her grandparents, James and Fanny, in Reading and she stayed with them until after the 1921 census. She was baptised on 24 August 1902.

Bessie's husband died before the next census in 1911 and Bessie moved with her son back to Reading, near her family and especially her daughter. On the census form their address was 102 Castle Street and under occupation it says "private means" next to Bessie's name. There was also a boarder living with them.

Young Wilfred enlisted in the Royal Horse Artillery during World War I and he lost his life, dying of his wounds, in 1917.

By the time the 1921 census was taken, Bessie was living alone but in a multi-occupancy house at 19 Zinzan Street, Reading. There must have been some kind of reconciliation between her and her daughter in the following years because when Florence Kate got married in 1925,

Florence Bessie Barnett was one of the witnesses. Florence Kate probably met her husband William Edward Graeme-Brown at work because they were both employed at the Ministry of Pensions office. He was seventeen years older than her and a widower at the time of their marriage so there were some similarities with Bessie's own experience.

Florence Bessie Barnett died on 3 February 1934 at 344 Oxford Road, Reading which was the address of Battle Hospital, previously the town's workhouse. Bessie's home address at the time of her death was 25 Zinzan Street. The causes of death were myocardial degeneration and chronic bronchitis. Her death was registered by her daughter. Bessie was buried on 7 February 1934 at the London Road cemetery in Reading which was also the final resting place of James and Fanny who both died during the 1920s.

Researched by Jennifer Grice

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