

# *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.*

## **Emily Leaves' Story**

Emily Esther Leaves was born in the second quarter of 1857 at East Stonehouse<sup>1</sup>, which is one of the three towns which were amalgamated into modern-day Plymouth, in Devon. Her father was a private in the Marines<sup>2</sup>, which accounts for the location of Plymouth, despite him coming from Somerset.

In the 1871 England Census<sup>3</sup>, we see that Emily's family have moved to Ilminster in Somerset. Her father, Thomas, is described as an 'Annuitant Pensioner', aged 52 and born in Kingstone, Somerset, while wife Jane is 53 years old and was born in Stafford, Somerset. Emily is 14 years old and is working as a collar maker. Her younger brother John is 7 years old and is at

school. He was born in Ilminster, suggesting that the family may have moved there between 1857 and 1864.

In 1875 in the 'Registers of Prisoners' in Wilton Gaol, Somerset<sup>4</sup>, there is a record for Thomas Leaves, 40 years old, who on 15 February 1875 was convicted of 'Neglect of Family' and was sentenced to 2 months' hard labour. It is likely but not certain that this is Emily's father.

In the 1881 Census<sup>5</sup>, Thomas is found with a wife named Elizabeth, born in Yeovil, Somerset, and 5 years younger than Thomas. We don't know what happened to Jane as no death registration has been found, but the surname 'Leaves' has been found to be difficult to trace as it is often spelled very differently. Elizabeth was Eizabeth Ostler, and she and Thomas married on 6 January 1880, with Thomas being described as a widower<sup>6</sup>.

Could Thomas' 1875 conviction have occurred after the death of his wife, Jane? At that time Emily would have been about 18 years old, and her younger brother John would have been just 11 years old. The children would perhaps have ended up in the workhouse.

On 31 January 1879 a report appeared in the Western Gazette newspaper, headed 'Chard, Drunken Women'<sup>7</sup>. The report said that on Monday two single women, one of them with three children, were charged with being drunk and disorderly on 25<sup>th</sup> January. The women were named as Emily Leaves and Ann Vincent. The report also said "Both prisoners have, for some time past, given a great deal of trouble to the master and matron of the Workhouse by their misbehaviour. They were sentenced to one month's imprisonment." There was

no indication as to which was the mother of the three children, but as Emily was just 21 and Ann was 26, it is thought that it was probably Ann.

This wasn't Ann Vincent's first time in the newspaper – the previous November it was reported in the Somerset County Gazette<sup>8</sup> that she had been repeatedly misbehaving in the Chard Union Workhouse, including assaulting the master and matron, for which she was sent to gaol for 21 days hard labour.

As a result of their conviction for drunkenness and one month's imprisonment in January 1879, Emily and Ann are to be found in the same 'Registers of Prisoners' in Wilton Gaol, Somerset<sup>4</sup> in which Emily's father, Thomas, was recorded.

In the 1881 England Census<sup>5</sup>, Emily is found at St. Thomas' Home for the Destitute and Fallen, Sherborne Road, Basingstoke, Hampshire and is described as a 22-year-old housemaid. Could her mother's death and father's subsequent marriage be related to this?

St. Thomas's Home<sup>9</sup> was established in 1864 near Gosport, with the aim of providing a convent-based home for 'penitent fallen women' – it was run by the Sisters of Charity. In 1874 a purpose-built home was constructed at Basingstoke for up to 48 women aged from 15 to 30 years old, who were expected to stay for up to 2 years and were trained in needlework, laundry, dairy work and cooking. Nowadays the building is a care home for the elderly.

Unfortunately it has not proved possible to find out what happened to Emily after she left St Thomas' Home. There are a surprising number of women with

this name, and I have not been able to definitely determine if any of the marriages, census entries or deaths relate to our Emily Leaves. On a positive note, there are no further prison records or newspaper reports, so let's hope that Emily settled down, married and had a good life.

Joy Smith

## Sources

<sup>1</sup>England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915 on ancestry.co.uk

<sup>2</sup>England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915 on ancestry.co.uk

<sup>3</sup>1871 England Census on ancestry.co.uk

<sup>4</sup>Somerset, England, Gaol Registers, 1807-1879

<sup>5</sup>1881 England Census on ancestry.co.uk

<sup>6</sup>Dorset, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1813-1921

<sup>7</sup>British News Archive, Western Gazette, Jan. 1879

<sup>8</sup>British News Archive, Somerset County Gazette, Nov. 1878

<sup>9</sup><https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/BasingstokeStThomas/>