

# *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.*

## **Clara Bartlett's Story**

The first we read of Clara in the newspapers is of her as victim of crime, rather than a perpetrator. In September 1877, William Conway was accused of stealing a purse containing four shillings, two pence and a 'bad farthing' from Clara's house. Clara was described as 'an unfortunate' and the report states that she had taken Conway into her home and found her purse gone the following morning. Conway was sentenced to twenty eight days with hard labour.<sup>1</sup> A lengthier report adds that Conway was an eighteen year old seaman and that Clara was 'a woman of ill fame'.<sup>2</sup>

Three months later, Clara was sentenced to fourteen days in Dorset County Prison for riotous and indecent behaviour, 'she being a prostitute'. At a quarter to eleven on a Saturday night in January, Clara was drunk and in the company of three soldiers in Weymouth High Street. The men were pulling her one way and then another, at which point Clara began swearing and was arrested by P.C. Carter. From this report, we learn that Clara was from Long Bredy and she

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<sup>1</sup> *Blandford and Wimborne Telegram* 21 September 1877 p.4 col. b.

<sup>2</sup> *Southern Times and Dorset County Herald* 22 September 1877 p.6 col. a.

had been in prison before, as well as having spent time in the infirmary.<sup>3</sup> No sooner than she had served this sentence, Clara was back in prison for seven days for 'loitering for an unlawful purpose.'<sup>4</sup>

The offences did not stop there. In April, she served fourteen days imprisonment for prostitution.<sup>5</sup> In June, it was another month with hard labour, for indecent conduct in Weymouth. The prison records tell us that her literacy was imperfect and that her religion was Church of England.<sup>6</sup> In August P.C. Strickland found Clara being restrained by a man named Tizard, Clara said she was 'going to jump overboard. She had been seen in the company with another man, was tipsy and did not know what she was doing'. Four days with hard labour was the sentence on this occasion.<sup>7</sup> Her October court appearance led to another month in goal. This followed P.C. Delamont, finding Clara sleeping under a hayrick, on the Chickerel Road, with a marine, without visible means of support. 'There were no less than five previous convictions against this poor wretched girl. Who goes to prison for a few days and then returns to her own wretched mode of life.' There is no suggestion that Clara was offered any form of help or support and the marine does not appear to have been charged.<sup>8</sup> In December, Clara was found quarrelling with a soldier at 11.45pm. Having previously issued a caution, P.C. Mowlam then arrested Clara. Eight previous convictions were mentioned, although Clara argued that there had only been five. She was sentenced to another fortnight in gaol. 'The Bench feelingly advised her to lead a new life.'<sup>9</sup> It may be that Clara attempted to heed this advice as the next record of a court appearance was not until nearly a year later. The newspaper report does however refer to twelve previous convictions, so perhaps some have not been found in the press. This time Clara was drunk at Chesil at half past ten on a Saturday night, with a crowd of people around her. She was ordered home but remerged and was arrested. The sentence was one month with hard labour.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Blandford and Wimborne Telegram* 18 January 1878 p.4 col. b. *Blandford and Wimborne Telegram* 25 January 1878 p.2 col. e. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>4</sup> *Southern Times and Dorset County Herald* 9 February 1878 p.4 col. a. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>5</sup> *Weymouth Telegram* 3 May 1878 p.3 col. d. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>6</sup> *Southern Times and Dorset County Herald* 22 June 1878 p. 6 col. a. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>7</sup> *Weymouth Telegram* 9 August 1878 p.6 col a. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>8</sup> *Weymouth Telegram* 18 October 1878 p.5 col. d. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>9</sup> *Weymouth Telegram* 20 December 1878 p.5 col. d. Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers accessed via [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>10</sup> *Poole Telegram* 14 November 1879 p.7 col. b.

In March 1881, Clara, described as 'an abandoned woman', was sentenced to a month with hard labour for being drunk and disorderly near the 'Temporary Bridge'.<sup>11</sup> It is this sentence that led Clara to being one of seven female prisoners found in Dorchester County Gaol in the 1881 census.<sup>12</sup>

In common with many women who led dysfunctional lives, we only get glimpses of Clara Bartlett's life. Her entry in the 1881 census, when she was a prisoner in Dorchester Prison, suggests that she was born about 1856, in Long Bredy, Dorset.<sup>13</sup> Information in the prison's admissions' registers indicate that she may have been born slightly earlier, in 1853 or 1854. Despite the most creative searching, no birth registration or baptism has been found for Clara. She should appear in the 1861 and 1871 census returns but searches for all Clara Bartletts, and all Clara's living or born in Long Bredy have not found anyone convincing.

There were two households of Bartletts in Long Bredy in 1861. One is a family headed by an unmarried Anna Barlett, with two illegitimate daughters, Priscilla, born about 1844 and Emma born about 1852; all three were born in Long Bredy.<sup>14</sup> Neither of the daughters has a birth registration but there is a baptism in Long Bredy for a Tillah, daughter of Hannah Bartlett. Hannah was the daughter of Charles and Deborah Bartlett and 'Tella' is with her mother and grandparents in 1851.<sup>15</sup> It seems likely that Hannah and Tillah are Anna and Priscilla. Also in the household in 1851 is a Caroline Bartlett, another granddaughter of Charles and Deborah; there is a birth registration for Caroline and she too was a daughter of Hannah.<sup>16</sup> There is no sign of Anna/Hannah, Priscilla/Tillah or Emma after 1861. Caroline married in Winterbourne Steepleton, five miles from Long Bredy.<sup>17</sup> It seems that Clara could have been one of four illegitimate daughters of Hannah/Anna Bartlett.

Clara's life after her last spell in Dorchester Prison, is even more elusive than her early years. There is no sign of a likely Clara Bartlett anywhere in the country, no Claras from or in Long Bredy or Dorchester and no Bartletts from Long Bredy in the 1891 or subsequent censuses. There is also no likely marriage or burial for Clara therefore Clara's story must end here.

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<sup>11</sup> *Weymouth Telegram* 18 March 1881 p.6 col. b.

<sup>12</sup> 1881 for Dorchester Prison, Dorset RG11 2110 folio 89.

<sup>13</sup> 1881 for Dorchester Prison, Dorset RG11 2110 folio 89.

<sup>14</sup> 1861 census for Long Bredy, Dorset RG9 1356 folio 79.

<sup>15</sup> 1851 census for Long Bredy, Dorset HO107 1858 folio 547.

<sup>16</sup> The birth certificate of Caroline Bartlett 1848, from the General Register Office.

<sup>17</sup> Marriage register of Winterbourne Steepleton, Dorset, accessed via [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk).

## Sources

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