

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.

ELIZA FLORENCE ASHTON'S STORY

The starting point for the research of Eliza Florence Ashton is the 1881 census [1] where she has been identified as living in Great Maplestead, Essex at The House of Mercy Magdalen Home, Toldish Hall Road; Eliza is recorded as being an 18 year old 'special inmate' who was born in Hull, Yorkshire. The House of Mercy Magdalen was established in 1868 by Elizabeth Barter who had been bequeathed the estate of her wealthy friend and philanthropist Mary Gee. [2] The home is also referred to as the House of Mercy / St' Mary's Babies Home and a Magdalen Home for 'fallen' girls and women aged 15 – 24 years. [3] This would infer that Eliza was at the home having become pregnant and to give birth to her child; however, research suggests that a 'fallen' woman fell from the expected societal norms of a woman in moralistic Victorian England.

Therefore, it cannot be assumed that Eliza had become pregnant and an unmarried mother; prostitution, promiscuity and alcohol abuse were also reasons for a female to be deemed as 'fallen', even if this was for a temporary period; or having an extra marital affair and included victims of abuse. In a period of industrialisation and rapid population growth some women turned to prostitution as a means of financial survival. [4] [5] [6] However, it is possible that as the home also had provision for babies then Eliza attended the home in disgrace, a very long distance from where she lived when growing up; Eliza would have been expected to stay at the home for two years of rehabilitation. In Victorian England it would be very difficult for a woman to become accepted back into society once they had 'fallen'.

It is likely that this was the case for Eliza; ten years later, in 1891, she was single and on her own living at 10 Broadly Square with three other families, she



is recorded on the census return as living on her own means. [7] No birth or baptism record has been located, to date, for a child of Eliza and in 1891 she had no children living with her.

Broadly Square was situated next to public houses Guildhall Vaults, Three Tuns and Mansion House Tavern and near the large docks of Hull; Queen's Dock opened in 1778, Prince's Dock in 1829 and Humber Dock in 1809. [8]

Eliza's place of residence was described as Off Hull River Humber, St Mary, Yorkshire, England.

It is easy to make assumptions, but it is probable that Eliza was earning her money through prostitution following her return to Hull from the House of Mercy. [9]

Eliza was not living a happy life, two years later in 1893, she appeared in a newspaper report as attempting to take her own life. The report states 'a young woman named Eliza Florence Ashton was charged with attempting to commit suicide by taking laudenam'; on her recovery she is reported to have said 'I thought it better to finish myself by sleeping than cutting my throat'. Eliza had paid a woman to buy her a pennyworth of laudenam which she took and stated that she would have liked another pennyworth; the woman went for the police constable and on their return to Eliza she was lying on the floor; she was taken to the police station and remanded for seven days.

At the time, 29th June 1893, Eliza was living with a man at the hospital gates, Hospital Court. [10] To date no more newspaper reports have been found relevant to Eliza and no entries on the criminal registers. It is impossible to know the reasons for Eliza's troubled life as a young woman.

Eliza Florence Ashton was born on 20th April 1862 at 7 Strawberry Street, Drypool, Hull to her parents John, a warehouse labourer, and Anne Elizabeth Ashton, nee Pickersgill. [11] [12] Drypool is an area of Hull in the vicinity of the docks, Strawberry Street is marked on the map below. [13]



Hull became the third largest port in the UK, [14] not only for fishing but also for commerce associated with the textile industries of West Yorkshire and the steel industry in Sheffield. This brought a rapid rise in the population which, in turn, gave rise to over-crowded living conditions; during the 19C housing was tightly packed in terraces and courtyards, with very little light and inadequate sanitation leading to poor health and poverty.[15]

It can be assumed that Eliza's father, John, died between 1867 and 1871; a reliable death record has not been identified but the 1871 census provides more information. Through research into Eliza's older brother, William, it has been possible to locate her and her mother, Anne Elizabeth.

William Benjamin was the first child of John and Anne, born Q2 1860; [16] the 1861 census shows William living with his parents on Strawberry Street, where Eliza was later born; John was born in Hull, about 1826, and Anne was born about 1841 in Winterton, a market town in Lincolnshire close to the south bank of the River Humber. [17] [18]

The 1871 census provides further information about Eliza and her family; [19] Anne Elizabeth had remarried therefore Eliza, William and their younger sister

Anne were living in South Myton, central Hull with their mother and step-father. Anne Elizabeth was now using the name West and recorded as a wife and living with John West, an ironmonger's clerk. However, a reliable marriage record for Anne and John West has not been located so far; there is a marriage for Annie Eliza Ashton and John West in Lincolnshire in 1896 [20]; it is possible that Anne's younger daughter, Eliza's sister, married John West junior. The mystery remains.

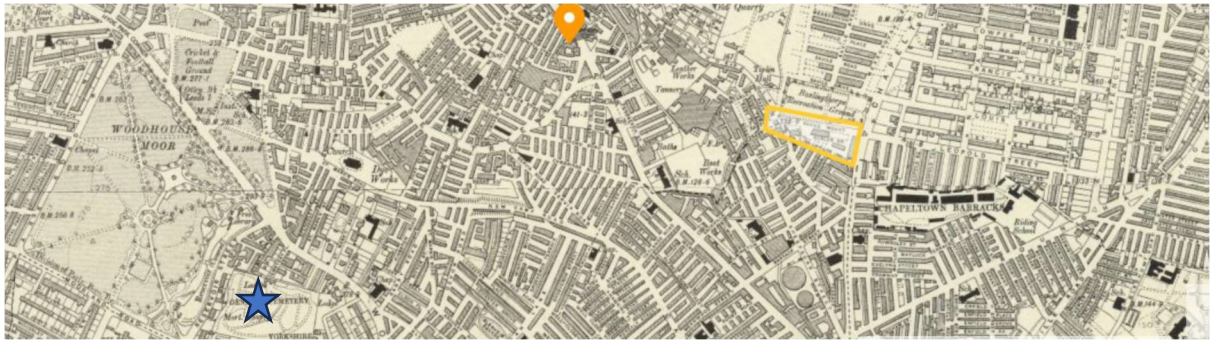
It is not known exactly what happened in Eliza's teenage years but by 1881 her life and childhood had started to unravel, it is possible that she was living on the margins of society, before her admission to The House of Mercy Magdalen Home. Her brother, William, had joined the Royal Navy in July 1878 for ten years but this was a very short-lived experience as in April 1879 he was discharged for having a bad character and being 'objectionable'. [21] On 23rd March 1879 William Benjamin was charged with breaking and entering a house in Portsmouth and stealing jewellery and money; he was imprisoned. [22] Only seven years later, in 1886 aged 26 years, William died in Hull from 'serous apoplexy'. [23] At such a young age to have a stroke it is likely that William had received a blow to the head, this would be consistent with developing serous apoplexy. [24] [25]

Perhaps Eliza had been influenced by her brother's behaviours or perhaps they had both learnt to fight for survival while growing up; it is not known how their parents led their lives and it would appear that brother and sister, William and Eliza, were not necessarily protected from the social and financial difficulties they may have faced in an overpopulated port city.

Following Eliza's life after her time in Essex and her desperation when living in Hull afterwards, she moved to Leeds to start a new chapter of her life. In 1901 Eliza, now 38 years old, is living at 2 Fosters Building just north of Leeds city centre in an area generally overpopulated in poor housing; she is recorded as a housekeeper for 51 year old William Ellis, a joiner; there were no other occupants in the home. [26] It is probable that Eliza and William were co-habiting and in 1906 they were married at Woodhouse Carr Wesleyan Church in Leeds on 23rd April; they were living at 7 Rhodes Square, near to their previous home. [27] Eliza signed her name neatly and perhaps this was the start of some stability in her life, William appears to have been in regular employment.

Five years later Eliza and William were living in a two roomed home at Cross Chancellor Street, also in the same vicinity as their previous homes; aged 62 years William continued to work as a joiner and Eliza is not recorded as having an occupation. [28] There are no children recorded as having been born from this marriage and it can be assumed that Eliza never had any children who ever lived with her. It is hoped that she was now living a more comfortable and stable life and enjoyed the next few years.

The map below indicates with a pin the first home Eliza lived in when she moved to Leeds and the outlined area where she later moved to with William. [29]



Eliza had a stroke and died when she was about 54 years old on the 2nd August 1917; she was buried at Leeds General Cemetery ★, not far from where she lived her more settled adult life. [30]

Jude Rhodes

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