

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written, in September 2024, as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of pupils at the Royal Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Poor (later The Royal School for the Deaf), Margate, Kent and The West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, Exeter, Devon.*

## **Emily Ann Smither's Story**

### **Early childhood**

Emily's parents William Henry Smither and Emily Clifton married in the third quarter of 1886 in Lewisham, south-east London.<sup>1</sup> Her mother would have been heavily pregnant at this point, because Emily's birth was registered in the next quarter.<sup>2</sup> In the 1891 Census Emily was living with her parents at 11 Mid Kent Cottages in Lewisham.<sup>3</sup> Her father was a house painter while her mother was a laundry woman. Importantly, the last column of the Census schedule has no mark against Emily's name to indicate that she was deaf and dumb. Given that she was over four years old by this point, any deafness might already have become evident. A few months after the Census was undertaken, William died.<sup>4</sup> He was aged 66 and buried in Ladywell Cemetery.<sup>5</sup>

Just a month after losing her father, Emily junior started in the infants' section of Plassy Road School, Lewisham.<sup>6</sup> In June 1896 she moved to Lewisham Bridge School, having been at Church Street, Lee, immediately prior to this.<sup>7</sup> She left the school on 12 November 1897.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915; 1886 Q3, Lewisham, vol 1d, page 1527

<sup>2</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915; 1881 Q4, Lewisham, vol 1d page 1135

<sup>3</sup> 1891 England Census, RG12, Piece 520, Folio 95, ED4

<sup>4</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915, 1881 Q3, Lewisham, vol 1d, page 602

<sup>5</sup> Information accessed via [www.deceasedonline.com](http://www.deceasedonline.com)

<sup>6</sup> London School Admission and Discharge Registers 1840-1911; LCC/EO/DIV07/PLA/AD/006 (© London Metropolitan Archives, accessed via Ancestry)

<sup>7</sup> London School Admission and Discharge Registers 1840-199; LCC/EO/DIV07/LEW/AD/003 (© London Metropolitan Archives, accessed via Ancestry)

None of the school records make any reference to Emily being deaf. What is more, she had reached the same academic standard (Standard II) as other pupils the same age.

In 1898 Emily spent a few days in Lewisham High Street Workhouse, being admitted on 11 July and discharged on 14 July.<sup>8</sup> The discharge entry indicates that she was then sent to Anerley School. This was a residential school established by a group of Poor Law Unions – including Lewisham – for pauper children.<sup>9</sup> In September 1898 Emily’s mother (also Emily) died, aged just 54.<sup>10</sup> She, too, was buried in Ladywell Cemetery.<sup>11</sup>

## **Margate**

What happened to Emily over the next year or so is unclear, but we know that on 8 March 1900 she was admitted to the London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb on Old Kent Road.<sup>12</sup> The record notes that both her parents had died; she was chargeable to Lewisham Union, and was sent directly to the Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor at Margate. The headmaster’s register includes details of how each child became deaf. In Emily’s case it states: “the aunt says through neglect”.<sup>13</sup>

What was life like at Margate? Even the word ‘asylum’ conjures up a picture of austere conditions and strict discipline. Newspaper articles from the time Emily was at Margate paint quite a kind and progressive picture, as this example shows.

### **Delightful Summer Fete**

“An exceedingly pretty fete was held on Saturday at Margate in connection with the Royal Asylum for the education of the Deaf and Dumb Poor. The inmates of this excellent institution have been gathered from the poorest parts of London—little helpless ones doomed to poverty-stricken lives, stunted and cribbed by their infirmities, taken in many cases from homes where they were only regarded as encumbrances to an environment where they first experienced the ameliorating influences of love and solicitude.”

Records from Margate describe Emily’s condition and education in some detail.<sup>14</sup> In May 1900 they noted:

“Has a considerable amount of hearing, which seems to be intermittent.  
She has acquired language by that means.”

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<sup>8</sup> London, England, Workhouse Admission and Discharge Records, 1764-1921. Ref LEBG/198/39 (accessed via Ancestry)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/NorthSurreySD/>

<sup>10</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915; 1898 Q3, Lewisham, vol 1d page 758

<sup>11</sup> Information accessed via [www.deceasedonline.com](http://www.deceasedonline.com)

<sup>12</sup> Admission Records for London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, Entry 287 Register of Children Old Kent Road [1-369] with transfers to Margate, Ch192/R2/1/6.

<sup>13</sup> The Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor, Margate: Headmaster’s Register of Children: Old Kent Road (1891-1904), Ch192/R2/2/2, page 87.

<sup>14</sup> The Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor, Margate: Headmaster’s Register of Children: Old Kent Road (5256-5670)(with transfers to Margate), Ch192/R2/1/5.

The intermittent nature of her deafness was mentioned again in November 1900:

“Not very bright – has intermittently perfect hearing followed by great deafness. Hearing continues about 2 days followed by deafness for about a week. Speech perfectly natural [...]”

In June 1901 the record was very similar:

“[...] it has been proved that her hearing is intermittent – at times nearly perfect, at other times quite absent, dependent apparently on her state of health, which is not very robust. I do not think she would be taught with advantage otherwise than in a school for deaf.”

One wonders if Emily suffered from repeated ear infections and/or perforated eardrums, rather than being profoundly deaf. The leavers’ record from December 1902 provides an insight into Emily’s abilities, which again hints that she had a fair amount of hearing.<sup>15</sup>

Subject	Marks	Point of progress reached
Religious knowledge	76%	Old Testament, New Testament, Faith & Duty (all)
Articulation	100%	Quite intelligible
Lip-reading	48%	Depends too much on hearing
Language	89%	To lesson 128 in language course
General knowledge	72%	Common things, vocabulary etc
Geography & history	88%	Europe, and events in short history
Arithmetic	78%	To compound rules and simple bills etc
Sewing		Standard V
Conduct		Good but very peculiar

Emily also signed her name in very neat writing, indicating that her abilities were far from limited.

### Adult life

We don’t know where Emily went or what she did upon leaving Margate. The only known family member was an aunt, Mrs Clifton, who lived in Lewisham. What we do know, however, is that at the time of the 1911 Census Emily was living back in Lewisham and working as a servant in the household of James and Annie Davenport.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb Children of the Poor, Margate: Registers of Children Leaving School (1902-1912), Ch192/R8/1/3 Entry 30.

<sup>16</sup> 1911 England Census, RG14, RD29, ED07, Piece 2756 (accessed via Ancestry)



15 Limes Grove, Lewisham (left) © Google Streetview

The address where Emily was living was – quite literally – just a stone’s throw away from her childhood home in Molesworth Street, as shown on Google Maps.



Roll forward ten years and we catch up with Emily once more in the 1921 Census. She was still working as a servant, this time at Line Villa, 444 Woolwich Road, Charlton in the household of Frederick George & Jane Nichols.<sup>17</sup>

In 1932, at the age of 45, Emily married Frederick Alfred Southby in Thanet Registration District.<sup>18</sup> The town of Margate lies within Thanet, but only the marriage certificate would tell us whether Emily was actually married in Margate. Frederick was a widower, having previously been married to Emily Elizabeth Andrews. They had four children together, of whom two (Emily and Frederick) survived into adulthood. Two

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<sup>17</sup> 1921 England Census, RG15, Piece 02962, Schedule 29, RD30 RS1 ED5

<sup>18</sup> England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916-2005; 1932 Q1, Thanet, vol 2a, page 2086

other children (Irene and Ellen) died as children. By the time of Frederick's marriage to 'our' Emily, Frederick's two surviving children were both adults.

In 1939, at the outbreak of the Second World War, Emily and Frederick were living at 21 Ashingdon Villas, Ashingdon Road in the borough of Rochford in Essex.<sup>19</sup> The head of household is shown as Elizabeth Baines, a widow; it therefore seems possible that Emily and Frederick were lodgers. Frederick's occupation is given as 'house decorator, incapacit[ated]'. On 6 March 1941 Frederick died, aged 56, in Surrey.<sup>20</sup> His death register entry shows that he lived at The Hut, Brooklands, Dunsfold; Emily registered his death.

After the War we can trace Emily by using the electoral registers. In 1946 she was registered living at the address Brooklands, Dunsfold, Surrey.<sup>21</sup> Also at the same address was Alfred Carter, so it seems likely that Emily was his housekeeper. Frederick had perhaps been a chauffeur and/or odd-job man; this combination of roles was often advertised looking for a married couple, and my own great uncle and aunt held such roles for many years. The following year Emily is living at 46 Brighton Road, Godalming in Surrey, along with a George Oliver.<sup>22</sup> In 1948 she has moved along Brighton Road to number 99, with the other resident being an Edmund Elliott,<sup>23</sup> and subsequent registers show her at the same address until 1953.



*A rather frustrating glimpse of 99 Brighton Road, Godalming. © Google Streetview*

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<sup>19</sup> 1939 Register, RG101/15871/010/32/DDSf, accessed via FindMyPast

<sup>20</sup> Digital image of entry from England & Wales, Civil Death Registration Index 1916-2007; 1941 Q1, Surrey South West, vol 2a, page 1092

<sup>21</sup> Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1962; Surrey History Centre, Woking, Surrey; Surrey Electoral Registers, Reference: CC802/57/6

<sup>22</sup> Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1962; Surrey History Centre, Woking, Surrey; Surrey Electoral Registers, Reference: CC802/58/6

<sup>23</sup> Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1962; Surrey History Centre, Woking, Surrey; Surrey Electoral Registers, Reference: CC802/59/6

Emily herself died on 28 January 1955 at St Thomas' Hospital, Hambledon in Surrey.<sup>24</sup>  
The digital image of her death register record shows that she was, indeed, a  
housekeeper. She was buried on 2 February 1955 in Eashing Cemetery in plot J3993.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Digital image of entry from England & Wales, Civil Death Registration Index 1916-2007; 1955 Q1, Surrey South West, vol 5g, page 1155

<sup>25</sup> Godalming Town Council Burial Records, Book/Entry No: E10/4861, Page in Register: 24, accessed at:  
<https://godalming-tc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Combined-Surname-Order-A-Z-to-December-2022-Web-R.pdf>