

The Tale of Two Soulbury Orphans in the Workhouse

An entry in the 1881 Census for the Leighton Buzzard Union Workhouse reads: -

Name	Age	Sex	Status	Occupation	From
Henry Whiting	7	M	Pauper	Attends school	Soulbury
Mary Ann Whiting	13	F	Pauper	Attends school	Soulbury

Life in the workhouse was intended to be harsh, especially to be felt so by the young and the very old. Leighton Buzzard's 'new' workhouse, built in 1836, in Grovebury Road was a model of what the workhouse should be. Its tranquil, rural location just outside of the town belied its harshness. Under the firm direction of its master, Joseph Rafferty and his wife, Henry and Mary Anne would have found the experience of living there to have been a big change from their earlier lives in the hamlet of Hollingdon in the parish of Soulbury, where they had been growing up. Rafferty was a bit of a rogue. He was investigated by the Leighton Buzzard Union for using Workhouse funds to order vast quantities of beer. It was forbidden to provide alcohol to the inmates, so who was drinking it?

Why were Henry and Mary Ann in the Workhouse? What had life done to them that led them there?

Henry and Mary Ann were brother and sister, both illegitimate children of Elizabeth Whiting. Their elder brother Thomas, born c. 1862/3, also illegitimate, had died a couple of years earlier in the early summer of 1879. Their mother, then thirty-eight years old, died at the same time as Thomas. It is highly likely that they both died of the same disease, such as cholera or scarlet fever, which arose because of poor sanitary conditions in their home. They lived in Great Hollingdon, in a cottage, which was located between Clay Hill Farm and Stone's Farm. Today these two farmhouses are known as 'Little Mead' and 'Upper Hollingdon Farm House' respectively and are but a hundred yards apart. Extrapolating data from Census returns it is highly likely that the Whiting's cottage on the other side of the lane was the left portion of the half timbered, thatched building that today is called 'The Old Cottage'.

Elizabeth and Thomas were not the first sudden multiple deaths in a labourer's family in Great Hollingdon in the mid nineteenth century. Some sixteen years earlier in February 1855 four tragic deaths occurred there in two neighbouring families. By coincidence both were headed by men called George Orchard who had been born in Soulbury. They were both agricultural labourers. One of these Georges, aged forty-three years, had married Hannah Pollard at Wing and had five children by her by 1851. The other George Orchard was ten years younger and was married to a Soulbury woman called Alice Scott. By 1851 they had two children. As neighbours it is likely that they shared the same ground water

supply and sanitary arrangements. The cottages were owned by the Liscombe Estate, which as late as 1876 was sanctioned by the Leighton Union Sanitary Board for dragging its feet in providing closet accommodation in their cottages. It is not clear which neighbouring cottages they lived in in Great Hollingdon. However there is some evidence, which suggests that their cottages may have been on the plot of land now occupied by a modern house called 'Clay Ridge'.

On the fourth of February 1855 George and Hannah buried their seven-year-old daughter, Ruth, at All Saints Church in Soulbury. On the seventeenth of February George and Alice buried their one-year-old son, Eli, at the same place. Two days later George and Hannah were back at the churchyard burying their five-year-old son called Job. About two weeks later George and Alice buried their five-year-old daughter, Eliza, at All Saints on the ninth of March. Four children of two neighbours of the same surname had died and been buried within a month!

The causes of these deaths have not been sought, but clearly such a pattern of deaths points to a contagious or infectious disease. Cholera, small pox or scarlet fever must be strong possibilities.

On the 6th September 1875, Elizabeth Whiting summoned Samuel Stokes, of Singleborough, Northamptonshire, only about ten miles from Soulbury, at Linslade Petty Sessions to show cause why he should not be called upon to contribute to the upkeep of her illegitimate child. This most probably refers to her son Henry born the year before. Elizabeth declared that Samuel was the father of her child and gave further evidence to substantiate her claim. Another, unnamed witness also gave evidence in support of Elizabeth's case. Samuel denied he was the child's father and sought an adjournment to bring along witnesses to support him. The magistrates agreed to this request provided he paid the five shillings costs of the adjournment. Faced with this financial penalty, Samuel said he preferred the case to be disposed of at once, where upon an order was made against him to pay Elizabeth one shilling per week in maintenance, plus costs. It is not entirely convincing that Samuel was the father.

Elizabeth Whiting never married yet bore at least three live children (Thomas, Mary Ann and Henry) over a period of eleven years. This does suggest that she was not merely sexually active and may point to her being a prostitute. Alternatively she may have been in a long-term relationship with a married man. Divorce was not available to married people of their class so she could not have married him. Her occupation recorded in the Censuses is as a straw plaiter, like most of the wives and daughters of agricultural labourers of Soulbury in the mid nineteenth century. There was a popular belief that many single straw plaiters had lax morals and many were free with their sexual favours or 'temped' as prostitutes. Prostitutes would have been marginalised as 'outsiders' in village life and Elizabeth was an outsider in two other senses.

First, in living in Hollingdon she was geographically removed from the mainstream of Soulbury village life. As such her 'sin' would have been a bit less unacceptable as it was out of sight of the great and the good of the village.

Secondly, she also was part of a very small group of Soulbury residents who were Primitive Methodists. She had Mary Ann baptised into Primitive Methodism on the twentieth of February 1870. This was quite a statement as in Soulbury the popular choice of non-conformism was Wesleyan Methodism whose members worshiped at Soulbury's Wesleyan Chapel close to the Church. To stand up as a Primitive Methodist was a conscious decision to be apart from the orthodox Church of England majority in the village and the substantial dissenting yet respectable minority of Wesleyans. 'Primitives' worshipped in the 'open air', for example in an orchard in Great Hollingdon or at the Primitive Wesleyan Chapel at Stewkley. Moreover they stood apart for being associated with a more militant left wing brand of non-conformism that supported strikes by farm labourers.

It must be more than coincidence that on the same day that Elizabeth Whiting had her illegitimate daughter baptised, that her close neighbour, Catharine Robinson, also had three of her illegitimate children baptised by the same Primitive Methodist Minister. Catharine would go on to have seven illegitimate children in total. She too was a straw plaiter so did she share her 'calling' with Elizabeth or were these bastards the product of a long-standing union with someone she could not wed?

Why were young Henry and Mary Ann not taken in by other members of the family when their mother Elizabeth and their brother Thomas died suddenly in 1879? They may have been at first, but it could not have been long before they were taken into the workhouse for them to be recorded there in 1881.

It appears that only one adult member of their family remained alive. She was their mother's sister, Martha Syrratt. She had been widowed in 1868 and left with five children. In the 1870's she lived in Hollingdon in a cottage near the Red Lion on the Stewkley Road. She was a pauper in receipt of poor relief and living off any income her teenage children could muster. She may have wished to take Henry and Mary Ann in but there could have been no space available in her tiny cottage.

Earlier, Elizabeth and her illegitimate children had lived with her parents. Why could her surviving children not have remained with their grandparents? Unfortunately, Elizabeth's mother, Mary had died in 1867 and her father, Henry died of a fall from a straw rick in August 1872, so in the 1870's Elizabeth was bringing the children up alone.

Could the children have gone to live with any other aunts or uncles? Elizabeth did have an elder sister, Eliza who died in 1856 and a brother, Thomas, who died in 1849. This only left Martha, who, as discussed earlier, was most probably not in a position to take in the two orphans.

With no family left, bar the destitute aunt, Martha, the two orphans, Henry and Mary Ann were placed upon the mercy of the Parish. If no one could take them in, this meant going to live in the Workhouse in Leighton Buzzard. There were a considerable number of children in there in 1881. There were some thirty-seven of them described as 'attends school' and there were another four who were under five years of age. So, they were not alone and

would have found the company of the other children some comfort despite the harshness of conditions in the workhouse under the Rafferty's iron rule.

The census return says that Henry and Mary Ann 'attends school'. There was a school within the workhouse at Leighton Buzzard so it is likely that they were pupils there.

What happened to them?

It would seem that both orphans survived the rigours of the workhouse and migrated to the London where they found good employment. Given her age Mary Ann probably left a couple or so years after being placed in the workhouse. She may have lived back in Soulbury before moving to London. Henry would have remained in the workhouse until he was fourteen or fifteen years old in the late 1880's.

In 1891 Henry was recorded in Lambeth, where he was lodging with Frederick Birdsey, a butcher, and his family from Leighton Buzzard. There had been a family of Birdsey's in Soulbury who had been cattle farmers. Undoubtedly they were of the same family. Possibly Henry worked for Birdsey in Leighton Buzzard and then moving with him to London.

Ten years later in 1901 Henry was living in Newington, London, working as a butcher's assistant. By then he was married to Emily and had two children, Edith, age two and Harry, aged one.

In 1911 Henry Whiting was still working as an assistant in a butchers shop in London. He was still married to Emily, now with six children born in Lambeth and Camberwell. They were living in at 132 Farmers Road, Camberwell - a small three-roomed terrace house just off Camberwell New Road, between the Oval cricket ground and Camberwell centre. Henry, the illegitimate, orphaned lad from Hollingdon had become a Londoner and a family man. It is not known where and when he died.

Mary Ann Whiting went on to become a nurse. In the 1891 Census she was listed as one of the nurses living in and working at the London Ophthalmic Hospital in the City of London. She was single. Unfortunately she does not appear in the 1901 or 1911 Censuses under maiden name, so she may have married, emigrated or died. A Mary Whiting died in Leighton Buzzard registration district in 1900, aged 30. This just possibly may be Mary Ann from the workhouse, but if so, why did she return to the area of her birth? Her only remaining relative in the area was her aged and infirm aunt, Martha Syrett who had not taken her in when she was orphaned twenty years earlier. Martha died in 1904 of throat cancer caused by licking prepared straws before plaiting them.