

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2027 Elusive Eliza - Opening Pandora's Box

by Leonie Worrall

Elusive Eliza - Opening Pandora's Box

Dear young Eliza,

We have been searching for you so very long - my cousins Sue and Jenni, and I. You were the lastborn of the six children of our great, great grandparents, Samuel and Eliza. For 20 years you existed in the records.ⁱ And then, you seemed to disappear without a trace. For the first five children we could document a name, a beginning and not always a happy ending - you alone had no conclusion.

With each baptism and census, we three had tracked your growing family, as Samuel dragged them through the rapidly industrialising landscape of Greater Manchester, from one failed enterprise to another.ⁱⁱ Two young lives lost along the way: Lydiaⁱⁱⁱ in 1841 and Elizabeth Ann,^{iv} the firstborn, in 1844.

It seems you were the last nail in the coffin, when you emerged into that dysfunctional family in unfamiliar territory at Castleton Mills, Leeds, in December 1851^v. Here your father Samuel was making a final, futile foray into the fly and spindle making business. Then he abandoned you all and, as far as we know, never saw you again.

Afterwards, we searched back in the grit and grime of Lancashire's industrial wastelands and found four of you remaining^{vi}. Your pious mother, too proud to surrender her brood to the greedy cotton factories or coal mines,^{vii} ensured you all had religion and education through the Swedenborgians in Kearsley. Your oldest brother John was to assist her as a landscape painter, and your youngest brother Thomas as a news vendor. Not for you the mills or the mines!

However, fate had other ideas. Overwhelmed by poverty, your mother's once genteel world was fast disintegrating. In desperation she consigned poor undernourished Samuel to Bolton Union Workhouse, where, described as of "weak mind", he died in 1857 scarcely 13 years old.^{viii} Certainly she hadn't counted on the rebellion of underage son, John, and the imposition of his hasty new wife!^{ix} "Repenting at leisure", John simply disappeared - he deserted that unhappy family and the older wife, and didn't resurface until he reached Australia. Young Eliza, by the last time your name ever appeared in the Census, in Farnworth, in 1871,^x you were labouring in the cotton mill. Next, with a new family to feed^{xi}, Thomas descended deep into the coalmines, dashing the last of your mother's ambitions.

Mother and daughter now left to fend for themselves.

Eliza, by 1881^{xii} it seemed you had completely eluded us - and perhaps it would have been better if we had left you there amongst the machines.

However you were never meant to be forgotten. Every year you were there in the Christmas Box from Lancashire sent to John's faraway family. Sue, direct descendant of John, inherited those three treasured photographs: our great aunt, evolving from bewildered adolescent to demure young lady to solemn spinster, peering wistfully down through the generations, accompanied by the echo of your mother's bitterness: "*Eliza W... forsaken by her father but not by the father of the fatherless*"...

Where did you go?



The earliest photo of Eliza, location Greater Manchester area

Doggedly Sue pursued you. After exhausting all other leads, and following up on a hunch, she unearthed this in the 1881 Census: “E.W. unmarried, 30, milliner, born... Leeds ..., Lunatic” - Lancaster County Lunatic Asylum.^{xiii} We had found you at last!

Slowly but inexorably your life had begun to unravel from the day your mother committed you to the local workhouse at Ormskirk,^{xiv} just as she'd disposed of young Samuel.

Then she surrendered you to the Asylum – forlornly concluding the Admission Questionnaire: *Shall be thankful to hear how she is.*^{xv}

Thus you were forsaken by your mother, too.

On May 29th, 1880, you were transported, kicking and screaming, and resisting with all your might, to the Lunatic Asylum at Lancaster. ... *extremely excited ... hardest case officer ever brought [in] noted the Admission Register ... recent marks or injuries: Bruise above right knee, marks (probably of restraint) on calves both legs- bruises on both arms ... above nape & under left ear reddened (by restraint?)...Height 5ft weight 112lb condition fair ... Mental condition: acute mania ... Mother and daughter ... in very reduced circumstances ...mother constantly brooding over money ... they have been wronged...*

Your mother's views regarding the main causes of your "insanity" - *Obstruction and scantiness of her monthly discharge ... and a sudden check when in flow. Also grief and fear she was going to lose one she loved, the only one she ever did love... being under a promise to join her eldest brother in Australia* - may all have been part of the problem but, following Victorian-era medical thinking which insistently linked madness to menstruation, it was the amenorrhoea on which the doctors focussed.

They confined you to a padded room, they strapped you to the "cheval" and the bed; they gave you hot showers, cold baths, mustard baths; they pumped into your stomach compounds of iron and strychnine, phosphorous and bitter purgatives; they shaved off your long black tresses, they dimmed your dark blue eyes.

Poor Eliza, they battered your body into submission – did they succeed? On 29 April, 1882: *...for first time ...Profuse flow. [But] No mental improvement yet.*^{xvi}

They lost interest.

You lingered there neglected and desolate, on through the following year, when, like ships passing in the night, your mother Eliza passed away,^{xvii} and your brother Thomas sailed off to Australia.^{xviii} Completely alone now.

Two interminable years elapsed with just five brief entries.

Finally, for 1886:

Jan 26 As last [year]...

Aug 23 Very ill with high temperature ... & great restlessness turning & twisting & throwing legs & arms about constantly.

Aug 24 Became unconscious last night & died this day.

Cause of death: meningitis & pneumonia.^{xix}

Dear Eliza, though you were left forsaken in a distant time and place, you and your precious memory live on in the hearts of the many descendants of John and Thomas in Australia. Yes, we opened Pandora's box and finally you escaped. Now in sorrow and in shame we put you to rest.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Ancestry.com*: UK Census 1861 and 1871

ⁱⁱ *Ancestry.com*: UK Census 1841 to 1881

ⁱⁱⁱ GRO UK Death Certificate COL843019 DISTRICT OF PRESTON, County of Lancaster
24.11.1841 **Lydia W** 3 weeks daughter of Samuel W. shopkeeper cause of death: a cold; residence Upper Walker St

^{iv} GRO UK Death Certificate 4974940-1 BOLTON UNION Eastern Bilton, County of Lancaster
13.12.1844 **Elizabeth Ann W**. 7 years & 6 months, daughter of Samuel W. spindle maker cause of death: inflammation of the brain & water in the head; residence Bank St Great Bolton

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- ^v GRO UK BIRTH Certificate COL803399 HUNSLET, Wortley County of York
28.11.1851, Castleton Buildings Armley, **Eliza** father Samuel W., spindle maker, mother Eliza W. formerly Hodson, residence Castleton Buildings
- ^{vi} *Ancestry.com* 1861 UK Census: Manchester Road Kearsley, Lancashire
- | | | | | | |
|----------------|----|----------|-----|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Ellen (sic) W. | 45 | head | mar | Artist, landscape painter | b. Lanc Manchester |
| John W. | 21 | son | mar | Artist, landscape painter | b. LAnc Rochdale |
| Caroline W. | 24 | d-in-law | mar | cotton winder/factory worker | b. Yorkshire Ripon |
| Thomas W. | 14 | son | unm | scholar | b. LAnc Bolton |
| Eliza W. | | 9 | dau | unm scholar | b. Yorkshire Leeds |
- ^{vii} *Worrall's Directory of Bury and Bolton 1871 Lancashire*: W., Eliza, artist, 111 Albert road
W., Thomas, newsagent, 111 Albert road
- ^{viii} GRO UK Death certificate COL635058 Registration District BOLTON/ Eastern Bolton, Co of Lancaster
18.2.1857 Union Workhouse **Samuel W.** 10 years cause: diarrhoea 8 weeks, x the mark of Thomas Crompton, present at the death Union Workhouse Great Bolton
- ^{ix} *Ancestry.com* (image): Marriage 6 Mar 1860, Parish church of St George Bloomsbury London: **John W.** minor, Assistant, father Samuel W. spindle manufacturer and Caroline Spence, of full age father Richard Spence, farmer
- ^x *Ancestry.com* 1871 UK Census: 111 Albert Road Farnworth, Lancashire
- | | | | | | | |
|---------|----|------|----------------|--------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Eliza W | 55 | head | marr/Not known | husband left her in 1862 | artist, painter | b. Manchester |
| Thomas | 24 | son | unm | news vendor | | b. Bolton |
| Eliza | 19 | dau | unm | cotton hank winder | | born Wortley, Leeds Yorks |
- ^{xi} www. lan-opc.org.uk/Farnworth Baptisms:
25.8.1872 Annie W. child of **Thomas H W** & Charlotte, abode Farnworth, occup. Stationer
3. 5.1874 Alice W. child of **Thomas H W** & Charlotte, abode Little Hulton, occup. Collier
30.1.1876 Richard W. child of **Thomas H W** & Charlotte, abode Little Hulton, occup. Collier
8.9..1878 James L W. child of **Thomas H W** & Charlotte, abode Kearsley, occup. Collier
- ^{xii} *Ancestry.com* 1881 UK Census: 45 Percy St, North Meols, Southport, Lancashire
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----|--------|-----|---------------------|--------------------|
| Eliza W. | 66 | lodger | wid | landscape artist &c | b. Manchester Lanc |
| Abraham Dickinson | 50 | head | mar | shoemaker | |
- Plus Dickinson Wife and children
- ^{xiii} *Ancestry.com* 1881 Census : Lancaster Lunatic Asylum Lancaster
- ^{xiv} Ormskirk Union Workhouse – no records extant
- ^{xv} Lancaster County Lunatic Asylum Admission Questionnaire, obtained from Manchester Records Office
- ^{xvi} Lancaster County Lunatic Asylum Admission Register and Case Notes, obtained from Manchester Records Office
- ^{xvii} *Manchester Evening News*, 3rd September 1883: “Sudden Death at Southport – On Saturday night an old woman named **Eliza W.** died very suddenly at the residence of her son, Thomas W., 203, Milton-street Southport. ... W. and his wife... found the deceased ... She was quite dead and cold. Dr Hawksley ... gave it as his opinion that death had resulted from heart disease.”
- GRO UK Death certificate Registration District SOUTHPORT/North Meols, County Lancaster
1.9.1883 **Eliza W** 69 years widow of Samuel W. spindle manufacturer, death from natural causes, heart disease. Inquest held 3rd Sep 1883

^{xviii} Qld State Records: Immigration Ships' Arrivals, Series 1D p. 485: *Nuddea* dep Glasgow 20.9.1883, arr Moreton Bay 15.11.1883. Passenger List: **Thomas W.** age 37 Mrs W age 33 Joseph inf, John 2, Richard 7, James 5

^{xix} TNA Lunatic Asylum Register - no. 61044 **W., Eliza** female pauper Adm 29 May 1880, Asylum Lancaster, date of death 24.8.1886

GRO UK Death certificate 6408611-1 Registration District LANCASTER
Eliza W. Death 25.8.1886 at Lancaster Asylum 35 years formerly a milliner of Southport, cause meningitis P.M....