

A PRECOCIOUS POISONER

The Life of Flora Everett from Sturminster Marshall

Flora was born in Sturminster Marshall and baptised there on the 21st March 1841. She was the daughter of Bidcar and Susanna Everett.

She was recorded on the 1851 census as living with her parents and siblings in King Street. Bidkar was a shoemaker. Flora had two older sisters, Mary & Catherine, and a younger sister, Bridget.

By 1855 she is working as a servant for William and Marcellia Martin. William Martin is 44 years old and a significant local landowner and farmer. Unusually he had remained single until that year and had recently married Marcellia Shepherd, a pharmacist's daughter from Dorchester.

William Martin was the owner of Moor Court Farm. It comprised of 700 acres of farmland and he employed 26 people, he also owned properties within Sturminster Marshall and rented these to farm workers. We cannot be sure of how he was perceived by his workers, was he a popular, respected employer or was he something of a tyrant? I guess we will never know. What we can be sure of is that he held a powerful position within the village and surrounding area, with accommodation that went hand in hand with work for the local farm workers and their families. These people would have been very reluctant to speak out against him.

An incident took place on the 30th of October 1855 that involved Flora Everett who was just 14 years old. She was accused by her employer of having taken some stockings from the drawer of her mistress. At the time she vehemently denied the theft.

The next morning Flora made tea in the Martin's breakfast room. Mrs. Martin complained that her cup of tea had a strange taste, which produced sickness and a burning sensation in her throat. Her husband also cautiously tasted the tea and was convinced something was wrong with it. Flora was summoned and categorically denied having put something in the tea. William Martin questioned her and eventually she admitted having put some soda in the teapot. William Martin challenged this and said it looked more like blue vitriol. He had a large quantity of this poisonous substance which he kept wrapped in the pantry for use on his farm. Flora eventually admitted to putting about an ounce of the blue

vitriol into the tea kettle. She said she had done this because she had been accused of stealing the stockings the day before.

Witnesses were another domestic servant, Maria Hayter, the cook. At the trial her version of events tallied with the version given by William Martin and his wife. It was Maria who had persuaded Flora that it was best to tell the truth. One aspect of her evidence was quite intriguing. She said 'I have always got on well with Flora. She never accused me of taking spirits'. What could she have meant? Was she drinking alcohol at work? Or maybe she was stealing it from her employer.

The village blacksmith who was working for William Martin at that time, also confirmed the events of that morning.

Charles Ingram, a surgeon from Blandford Forum, was summoned by William Martin to attend to his wife Marcellia, who had become quite ill after drinking the tea. He described her as 'suffering from violent pain caused by the ineffectual effort to vomit.'

The Constable was called and Flora was arrested for attempted murder of her employers. The following morning she was up before the magistrate in Wimborne and committed to Dorchester Prison to await trial. She was held in Dorchester on remand until her trial which was heard on 12th March 1856 at Dorchester Assizes.

The witnesses were called and all gave similar accounts of the event in question. None of the subsequent newspaper coverage recorded Flora's version of what had happened.

There was some discussion between the prosecution and the defence regarding William Martin who had not actually swallowed any of the poisoned tea. For some reason no evidence was offered re. the administration of poison to Marcellia Martin, so Flora was acquitted on that charge. However she was found guilty of attempting to administer poison to William Martin and was sentenced to six years penal servitude. The first six months to be spent in Dorchester Prison in solitary, silent confinement, it is hard to imagine what effect this would have had on Flora, it must have been a dreadful experience. Her physical description at this time in Dorchester was recorded as 4 feet tall, fair complexion, brown hair and hazel eyes.

Her trial was held in the same courtroom as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, which has been preserved to this day---so it's possible to visit the

courtroom and the cells beneath where Flora spent a night awaiting the verdict. In court were a Grand Jury, all wealthy landowners and businessmen, and a petit jury, probably all employed as farmers and tradesmen by members of the Grand Jury!

Whilst she was in solitary confinement in Dorchester prison, a Martha Brown was hanged outside the prison doors in front of a huge crowd, in which stood a young Thomas Hardy. Martha had been found guilty of murdering her abusive husband. It is thought that Tess of the Durbervilles was based on the story of Martha Brown. I am sure Flora would have known about the hanging and would have heard the crowds from her solitary cell. One can only imagine her thoughts!

She spent the next few months in Dorchester Prison and on the 18th October 1856 she was transferred to Millbank Prison in London. Millbank was a fortress of a building, on the left bank of the River Thames, close to Vauxhall Bridge. It was mostly used as a holding facility for prisoners awaiting Transportation to Australia. It was at that time the largest prison in London, holding approximately 450 male and female prisoners. It was demolished in 1890 and the site is now occupied by the Tate Gallery (now Tate Modern).

Flora remained at Millbank Prison until 10th March 1857 when she was moved to London's Brixton Prison. She spent the next three and a half years there. On 22nd August 1860 she was transferred to Fulham Refuge for the final year of her sentence.

The Fulham Refuge in Burlington Lane was a prison for women. It was another vast building holding around 200 inmates. When Flora was there it was primarily a place where women convicts, who had behaved well during their sentence, would be taught skills that would benefit them on release from prison.. such as laundry skills, needlework, cookery, etc.. On the 1861 census she is recorded as Prisoner 603. She was eventually released on the 11th July 1861 and it was recorded that her destination was Sturminster Marshall.

It is not known what happened to Flora over the next two years. Did she go back to Sturminster Marshall and her family? Her crime would have caused a great scandal in the village and I doubt she could have ever returned there except for brief visits.

What is known is that by 1863 she is living in London and working as a laundress. She gave birth to a son who was registered in Pancras in

September quarter of that year as Charles Everett. At some point he was taken to Sturminster Marshall and left with Flora's family. Her sister Catherine also had an illegitimate child born in Sturminster Marshall earlier that year. He was called Robert and he was baptised in Sturminster Marshall on the 18th January 1863.

In 1864 Catherine Everett married William Burt. Her nephew Charles Everett was baptised in Sturminster Marshall on the 9th February 1868 and the 1871 census records them living as a family unit in the village.

Charles and Robert remained close for many years. On the 1881 census they are recorded at the same address in Sturminster Marshall. Robert is trading as a baker and Charles is working as a farm labourer. By 1891 Robert has married and has 3 small children and is working as a baker in Shapwick, Dorset. Charles is unmarried, boarding at Winton on the outskirts of Bournemouth, and working as a baker. By 1901 Charles has also married and has a young family. Both men are living in Winton and are still working as bakers.

Meanwhile Flora is back in London and in 1869 gave birth to a daughter, Georgina. Flora gives her surname as STRAIN but I have been unable to find a record of a marriage for her. Nevertheless by 1871 she is living in St. Pancras with her daughter and is working as a laundress. On the 1871 census she is recorded as Flora STRAIN. Her partner is George STRAIN from Bromsgrove and in 1871 he is working as an attendant at the Retreat in Clapham. The Retreat was a private lunatic asylum which closed in 1874.

By 1881 Flora is still living in St. Pancras and by that time has three children. Georgina aged 12 years, Elizabeth, aged 7 years and George aged 5 years. Flora is working as a laundress and her partner, George is recorded at a different address working as a butler.

In 1884 Flora's daughter Georgina married William Dymond in Lichfield and by 1891 Flora has moved to Bromsgrove although George is still working as a butler in London.

By 1901 they are living together in Bromsgrove where they remain for the rest of their lives. Flora died there in 1917 and George died in 1920.

Flora's story came to light after an enquiry from one of her descendants, Martyn Allen, who was one of Flora's great, great grandchildren. A quick glance at the records showed Flora had a prison conviction and from

thereon research moved at a rapid pace. Martyn's research took him from the archives at Kew and down to the Dorset Family History Centre as well as the newspaper archives available at most of the larger libraries.

Between us we pieced together Flora's life and I was also able to contact descendants of Marcellia and William Martin who had been unaware that their ancestor had been a victim of such a crime. Over the following few weeks emails were flying between us as the facts were revealed and dissected. The elusive proof that Flora Everett and Flora Strain were one and the same was eventually nailed when Martyn received a copy of Georgina's birth certificate showing her mother as Flora Strain, maiden name Everett.

It is impossible to know for sure what led Flora to take the action she did, and many questions remain unanswered. Was it really because she had been accused of taking the stockings or was there a more serious catalyst? The blue vitriol is very...blue! It should have been a very obvious addition to the teapot, and yet Marcellia had by her own admission consumed at least one mouthful of the liquid, certainly enough to produce some seriously uncomfortable symptoms. The cook stated she did not know what was wrapped in the paper in the larder, and yet we are supposed to believe that 14 year old Flora did know it was there.

Other witnesses all produced similar statements, but it must be kept in mind that William Martin was a man of much influence in the village. The Tythe Map and Apportionment records for Sturminster Marshall show that at that time he owned much of the village. Many families were renting homes owned by him, or farming plots also owned by him.

There is also some mystery as to why the prosecution offered no evidence at all for the charge of administering the poison to Marcellia Martin. After all it was Marcellia who became ill and yet Flora was acquitted on this charge. She was found guilty of the lesser charge of attempting to poison Mr. Martin. It was noted that because of her youth the prosecutor recommended a merciful sentence. Was this also the reason for the lack of evidence and subsequent acquittal on the more serious charge. If so does this imply some doubt in the court regarding the original accusation?

Why is there no record of Flora's side of the story?

Was Flora, as she was described in one newspaper 'A Precocious Poisoner' or was there more to it? I guess we will never really know!

After all she had gone through, I find it amazing that Flora left prison and went on to settle down with a partner and raise a family after such a disastrous young life. The illegitimate son, Charles and his cousin Robert appear to have grown into fine young men each with a family and remaining close to each other.

I have often stated whilst researching my own family history that some ancestors are so elusive I feel they just don't want to be found. In the case of Flora I had a strong feeling all the way through that she wanted her story told. From start to finish this research took a little over 5 weeks to come together, despite the fact that on census evidence, the name STRAIN was often misspelt. The only glitch was not being able to find her on the 1891 census. She was not in London with partner, George. She was eventually found in Bromsgrove living with her children, but although her name was clearly written on the actual census as STRAIN, she had been indexed as SMITH.

Flora was released from prison 11th July 1861. Exactly 149 years later on 11th July 2010 her story came to light.

Terri Davies

Sources:

UK Census material.

Parish Records.

Various newspaper articles

Court Records

Prison Records

Local Archives