

Charlotte Blears

Woodbridge 1843

By Kath Graham

Charlotte Blears was a local girl baptised on the 26th October 1822 at St Mary the Virgin, Leigh who was to lead a quite extraordinary life. Her mother, Elizabeth Blare, was described as a singlewoman and although no father's name is given on the baptismal record, many years later Charlotte herself names him as Henry Cordwall. This is the first and only mention of Henry who doesn't seem to have played much of a part in Charlotte's life.

Charlotte's mother, Elizabeth/Betty Blare was the daughter of John and Sarah Blair of Pennington and had herself been baptised at the same church on the 10th of November 1798 when her father's occupation was given as weaver. John and Sarah whose maiden name was Dickonson had married on the 22nd May 1791 at St Oswald Winwick and they had twelve children born between 1793 and 1818. Elizabeth or Betty as she was baptised was the fourth child and second daughter born to John and Sarah, her elder sister Betty having been born in 1793 had died a year later and was buried at Winwick St Oswald.

Charlotte appears to have been the only child born to Betty as a singlewoman but she appears again in the church records when she married a Richard Dickinson on the 6th June 1825 at St Oswald Winwick. The couple had a daughter Mary Ann Elizabeth who was baptised on 10 Jun 1826 St Mary the Virgin, Leigh when her parents' residence was given as Lowton, Winwick and her father's occupation that of weaver. Mary Ann married Michael Daniels on the 17th April 1843 in Eccles.

We next see the Blair family in the 1841 census living at Aspul Common Pennington. John and Sarah both give their age as seventy and John was still working as a silk weaver. Their two youngest daughters Sarah and Jane were living with them along with Sarah's three illegitimate children. Thomas, their son was also living at Aspul Common with his wife Hannah and their seven children. Charlotte wasn't with the rest of her family however as she was incarcerated at Kirkdale Goal having been found guilty of "larceny from the person before convicted of felony" and sentenced to 9 months imprisonment at Kirkdale Sessions on 16th January 1840. She was sixteen years old and her occupation was given as prisoner/factory girl.

This was not Charlotte's first conviction, as on 17th January 1839 she had appeared before the Kirkdale County Sessions and been convicted of larceny and sentenced to six months imprisonment. She was very fortunate that this conviction did not lead to transportation when she found herself in court again a year later as it was common practice to give a term of imprisonment for the first conviction leading to transportation if there was a second. The criminal Register for that year records that she was unable to read or write. No further information is given about her conviction 1839, but we have more details of her two later convictions. The Prosecutor's Bill dated January 1840 records the prosecutor to be one

Thomas Ramsdale and the cost of her to trial to be £9 15s 0d. When Charlotte again appeared before the Kirkdale Sessions in July 1842 her trial costs £7 16s 10d including 15/- for the two witnesses John Hilton and Andrew Milne. The prosecutor is given as John Hilton who is accusing Charlotte and Mary Clancy of stealing 3s 8d from his person. The Liverpool Mercury of 22nd July 1842 reports Charlotte aged 18 and Mary Clancy aged 17 as being tried at the Kirkdale Sessions for the theft of 3s 8d at Pennington and records their sentences. This seems a very small amount of money to result in Charlotte being transported for ten years but she must have been considered the more culpable as The Order Book for 1842 records that Charlotte Blears of Pennington, singlewoman, who had been convicted by the courts of “felony and having before the time of committing the said felony been convicted of another felony” was to be “transported beyond the seas for the space of ten years” while Mary Clancy only received a sentence of one year in prison. The Magistrate obviously felt that Charlotte was an incorrigible thief and were taking no chances that she would re-offend in the future.

This was how Charlotte was to find herself on the ship the “Woodbridge” sailing from London on 26 Aug 1843. The voyage took 113 days through rough seas in overcrowded and insanitary conditions but Charlotte like the other 203 female convicts on board all survived the journey and arriving in Hobart, Van Dieman’s Land on Christmas day, 25 Dec 1843. She was aged just nineteen. The Master of the Woodbridge, William B. Dobson, made no comment about Charlotte’s behaviour whilst on board ship and the Surgeon Jason Lardner recorded no illness so she must have kept out of trouble and remained fairly healthy. When, on arrival at Hobart she would have been required to give details of her place of birth, family and conviction so when asked her place of birth she said Leigh which was recorded by the officials as “Leath”. They would have written the name as they heard it, no doubt spoken with a broad Lancashire accent and Charlotte being illiterate would not have been able to correct them. She also volunteered the information that her father’s name was Henry Cordwall and that she is an illegitimate child. When asked about her family she said that her sisters were Mary Ann and Catherine. It isn’t clear if she is referring to three sisters and no evidence of these sisters exists in the records although she does have a half sister Mary Ann Dickinson. This day was to be the start of a new life for Charlotte because the length of the sentence was irrelevant as, in effect, transportation was a life sentence. The vast majority of convicts would never see their families or homeland again and Charlotte was never to return to Leigh.

We have very little information regarding Charlotte once she arrived in Tasmania and what we do have is incomplete. We have no photographs of Charlotte but we do know that a number of men applied to marry her.

In 1846 a Joseph Wilcox made his application and on the 8th April 1846 she had a child which unfortunately died. However, there is no record of her marriage to Joseph. Subsequently a Mr Fry makes application to marry her but this is refused once and approved at the second application but again there is no evidence of the marriage taking place. On 11 November 1848 a newspaper article in the Cornwall Chronicle reports a complaint brought by Charlotte Blair against her husband Mr Robinson for an assault alleged to have taken

place on Tuesday, the 30th October. The article comments: *“This was one of those disgraceful scenes that too frequently occur— the wife flying to a police officer, for protection from the violence of her husband, and the husband exposing his wife's every failing to a crowded court— such scenes are disgusting. We have not given the whole of the evidence, as it would be uninteresting to our readers”*. I suspect their readers would have been very interested as it appears that after many beatings Charlotte had threatened her husband that she would inform the authorities about some stolen goods that were kept in his house. On sureties of ten and twenty-five pounds Mr Robinson was bound over to keep the peace for a period of six months. After the events of the 30th October Charlotte probably wanted to get away from her husband but until she gained her freedom she was not allowed to move freely from place to place. She therefore applied for and received a pass at the Launceston Police Office on that date to travel from Hobart. We have no idea where she intended going but she obviously failed to return by the agreed date as the Hobart Town Gazette published an absconding notice a few days later. This notice gives us the date of Robinson’s trial as 14th July 1842 but no other information about him. It seems likely, however, that Mr Robinson is Benjamin Robinson a carter and dealer of Little Hampton who was later mentioned in a newspaper article dated 21st September 1850.

On the 22nd November 1848 the Cornwall Chronicle is again reporting an incident involving Charlotte. Mr Robinson is this time accusing Sergeant Scalph of the Longford Police of misconduct by allowing “a woman named Charlotte Blair, whom he had in custody, on escort, to enter a public house, for the purpose of drinking”. The constable pleaded guilty but added that the woman had travelled twelve miles, and he did not think he was committing an offence in allowing the prisoner to have a glass of ale. It is likely that Charlotte was being transported to the factory in Launceston to serve a sentence for absconding. Sergeant Scalph although described as “been nearly eight years a constable, and is one of the best conducted in the force” was severely reprimanded by the Magistrate and fined ten shillings for his kindness. We don’t know what happened to Charlotte.

By 1851 things are looking up as she has a bank account under the name of Charlotte Blears containing eleven shillings. She then appears to leave Tasmania as The Cornwall Chronicle for 13th November 1851 lists Charlotte as a steerage passenger on the Sea Belle heading for Geelong Australia. She is recorded as arriving in the colony via Scotia and claims to be free. Also on board ship, occupying a cabin with two other men, is a Mr Wiggins, perhaps a misspelling for Higgins and Charlotte’s future husband. Although it appears that she did marry a Mr Higgins there is no evidence of the marriage and no record of her death under Higgins or Wiggins has been found in Tasmania or Australia and at this point Charlotte disappears from the records for ever.

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With particular thanks to:

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