

# MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

How much do you know about your great-grandmother? I expect many of you will know very little except for the family relationships, and perhaps some old photographs.

One of my great-grandmothers was Ellen Cawsey, a working-class Victorian woman. She was illegitimate and uneducated and she died at the age of 42, nearly 150 years ago. She had given birth to 17 children! Her life was remarkable, given the handicaps and burdens, and her short life. So this is her story - a piece of social history.

I must start by setting the scene. The Industrial Revolution came late to North Devon. But in the mid-1820s a large lace factory was built in Barnstaple, which became an industrial town. This attracted indigent agricultural workers who included John and Prudence Cawsey. It was a good move for them; John had been declared a pauper in 1827, and the move to Barnstaple led him to relative prosperity and assured jobs for his family. John and Prudence had five sons. They were an unruly family. One son, James, was transported to Australia - for stealing apples from an orchard when he was only 14 years old. Three more, George, William and Robert, were all in court from time to time for numerous offences, throughout their lives - mainly disorderly conduct. But the second son, John Cawsey junior kept out of trouble. So enter Ellen.

Ellen Perryman came to Barnstaple to work as a servant. and married John Cawsey junior early in 1850, already expecting her first child at the age of 18. She was soon involved in a tragedy. At that time it was common for working women to administer opium-based sedatives to their fractious babies. Such medicines were uncontrolled and readily available. Ellen had used "Mr Weeks' mixture", and recommended it to a neighbour, Caroline Brent. And that caused the death of baby Charles Edward Brent, followed by an inquest which concluded that the mixture contained far too much opium, blaming Mr Weeks, a grocer. Such poisonings were common and led to the passing of Pharmacy Acts.

Ellen's own baby, Elizabeth, did not survive long either, dying in 1853. Soon after this the cholera pandemic of that period took many lives in North Devon. (Could life ever be the same again?). But John and Ellen survived, and by 1859 they had 5 healthy children, all boys. In that year there was the first of several incidents which showed that Ellen was no shrinking violet. I will return to this.

Most years brought yet another baby! Ever more mouths to feed. But clearly Ellen managed the family finances well. And in the indisputably prosperous 1860s '***an affluence came to the artisanate***'. John's earnings as a skilled lace twister were good and were supplemented by Ellen's earnings as a bobbin winder, and before long by the wages of the older boys. And enterprising Ellen started a second-hand clothes business, publicised by weekly advertisements. That was clearly profitable. They were able to move to a larger house further from the factory, and Ellen had a 'servant' - a 14 year-old girl.

But of course this area was no place for the genteel - and Ellen certainly wasn't genteel, as we realise from the reports of her appearances in the magistrates' court. In the 1859 case, Ellen had been summoned, and we read "***Mrs. Cawsey, having a suspicion that complainant had some hand or part in casting a foul imputation upon her fair fame, applied to her certain uncomplimentary epithets, which, it was alleged by one of the witnesses, Mrs. Cure freely reciprocated.***" Ellen paid a small fine and was cautioned to be more correct in her deportment in future. A case in 1871 was very similar, and she, together with a neighbour, was fined 5/- "***for bad language ..... an offence against public morality***".

But another case in 1872 was unusual, and local newspaper readers were entertained by a long report of Ellen's complaint against her husband, John. We learn that John was quietly supping his ale in the Union Inn, when Ellen stormed in, her purpose being to make him "**bring his sovereigns home for the support of the family**". She hit him with her umbrella and broke it. She threw a 'beer warmer' at him, denting his hat. His retaliation gave her a frightfully black eye. But when three women took her out, she struggled to get away and wanted to go back again. However her complaint was upheld, and John was fined £1.

Their normal married life resumed. This family photograph below must have been taken only a few months after the last incident. My grandfather, Thomas, is the tiny boy by his mother's knee. After this, one more pregnancy was one too many for Ellen. She, and the last baby, Alfred, did not survive.



That was life in the mid-nineteenth century, a time of large families brought up by hard-pressed parents living in crowded conditions with no mod-cons and threatened by rampant disease. There may be similar stories to be told about your great-grandparents.

Life will never be like that again. (Or will it?)

*(The North Devon Journal was the source for most of this - and much more. Almost all copies from 1824 have been digitised and indexed in the British Newspaper Archive, where a great many other local newspapers can also be explored online)*

**DAVID CAWSEY**