

# Devon House of Mercy Bovey Tracey – a home for ‘fallen’ women

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The Devon House of Mercy in Bovey Tracey was a sisterhood of Anglicans of the order of the Sisters of Mercy of the Community of St John the Baptist, whose mother house was at Clewer, Windsor. They established a home for abused women, at that time called fallen women, which started at Chapple in Bovey Tracey in 1863 and then moved to prestigious new premises near the parish church in 1868. (Fig.1) The sisterhood came to Bovey Tracey at the invitation of the local vicar, The Hon. Rev. Charles Leslie Courtenay. Courtenay was the brother of the Earl of Devon and was a Canon of Windsor. He supported high church ritual which at the time was called Tractarianism. This sisterhood continued in Bovey Tracey until the end of 1939. The building has now become flats (Fig.2)



Figure I. Devon House, by kind permission of Bovey Tracey Heritage Trust.



Figure 2. Devon House of Mercy 2018. Frances Billinge

Janice Wallace wrote about the history of this Devon House of Mercy in Bovey Tracey which was published in the Transactions of the Devonshire Association 2001 (Wallace, Janice. *The Devon House of Mercy Bovey Tracey* in Transactions of the Devon. Assoc. Advmt. Sci., 133, pp 191-216). Recently I have been contacted by families whose ancestors had a particular involvement with the establishment. It would be interesting to trace more of the sisters, the 'inmates' and the visitors who lived at Devon House of Mercy, so if you have any information to share with me it would be very helpful.

### **SISTERS**

Information on the sisters has been gained mostly from data on the 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, and 1911 Census and later electoral registers. This means that only the sisters resident on each census date or electoral roll are known. There would have been others. The sisters so far researched are:-

**Bertha Foertsch** was professed in 1861 (Valerie Bonham, 1992. *A Place in Life* [Windsor, Community of St John the Baptist] p. 128). Wallace describes that she was one of the three sisters who worked at the Chapple site from 1863 and then became Sister Superior when the new Devon House of Mercy opened (Wallace 2001, p. 209). Bertha was born in Germany c 1832. For a while I have puzzled about this until my research on education and governesses led me to the answer. In Victorian times French and German governesses were popular partly to expand children's education but also because being foreign their social class was not immediately apparent at a time when such things mattered to the gentry. This has been described by Kathryn Hughes in *The Victorian Governess*, 1993, (London, The Hambledon Press) pp. 27-53; pp. 85-116). In the 1851 Census Bertha was a governess to the five daughters and one son of Rev. Edward Houghton Johnson the Eton educated curate of Lindfield in Surrey. By the time of the 1861 Census Bertha was living in the house of Charles Randle a gentleman at Shalford in Surrey. No occupation was given for her so we do not know why she was living there. There is a tantalising reference in Frederick William Henry Myer's 1903 *Human Personality : And its Survival of Bodily Death* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.377) describing that Bertha [later Sister Bertha] was the governess and dearest friend of Lucy Ann Gambier Parry of Highnam House Gloucestershire. This detail was provided by Lucy's step mother and cousin. The link between Bertha and the Gambier Parry family is confirmed by papers in the Berkshire Record Office in connection with the Devon House of Mercy and the Gambier Parry family's foundation of St Lucy's Hospital for Children of the Poor, Kingsholm Gloucestershire which was established to commemorate Lucy's early death ( Berkshire Record Office, Community of St John

Baptist Clewer and St Lucy's Hospital 1/12/16 and 1/12/18). The Gambier Parry family were also noted supporters of the Tractarian movement. Sister Bertha died in 1907 having been Sister Superior for almost forty years (*The Western Morning News* 17 January 1908, p.8). She was buried in the Bovey Tracey town cemetery, Figure 3.

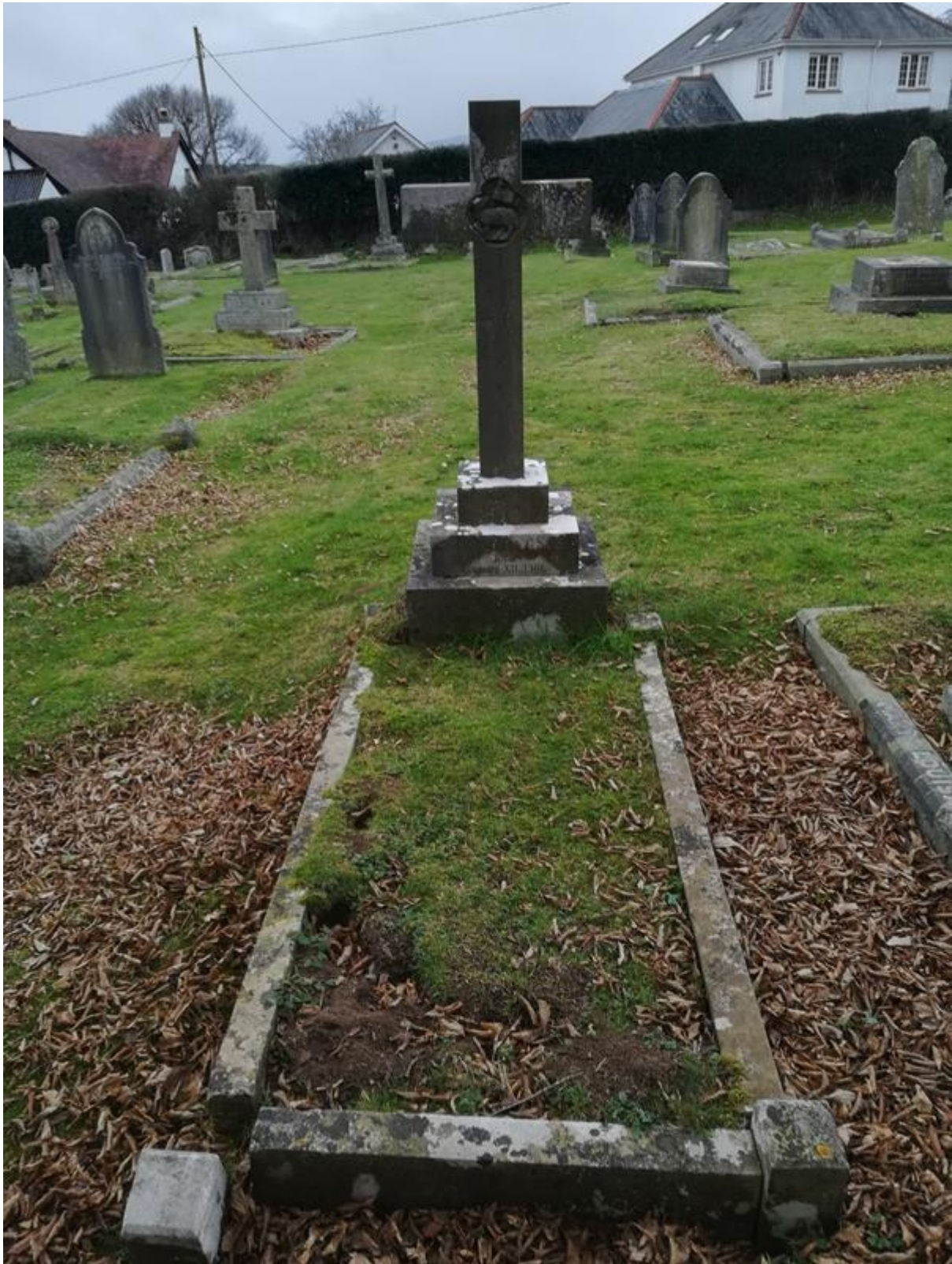


Figure 3. Grave of Sister Bertha, Sister of Mercy of the Community of St John the Baptist, died 1907. Bovey Tracey Cemetery. Frances Billinge 2019.

**Emma Frances Hicks** was the Sister Superior after Sister Bertha as shown on the 1911 Census. Emma was born in Piddletrenthide Dorset in 1844 and died at the Devon House of Mercy in 1933 (Death certificate 30 January 1933, The National Archives). She too was buried in Bovey Tracey Cemetery but her grave has no record to this effect. It is in the forefront on the left of Figure 4.



Figure 4. Front left hand side grave of Sister Emma, Sister of Mercy of the Community of St John the Baptist, died 1933. Bovey Tracey Cemetery. Frances Billinge 2019.

**Ellen Miriam Horne**- also known as Helen or Nellie by her family, was born in London in 1887, one of seven children to a father who was a sewing machine engineer. She had a troubled childhood as when she was four years old her mother Annie was described as a lunatic on the 1891 Census and soon after placed in the London Asylum at Banstead in Surrey where she remained a patient for thirty years. The family has informed me that Annie had what would now be called post-natal depression and in the Banstead admission records was described as 'Impaired. A puerperal case,' which was, 'getting worse for two months'. The asylum also noted that Annie had had the condition four years earlier. That would have been at the time when Ellen was born. I am grateful to the family for sharing this information with me. (1891 Census; register of admissions to London Asylum Ancestry accessed 20 May 2020; 1901 and 1911 census).

By 1911 Ellen was living at the Nelson Square Home for Working Girls run by Sisters of Mercy of the Clewer Community. This home was not a penitentiary and provided a hostel for girls in work. At that time Ellen was a ladies hosiery worker. Nelson Square closed in 1923 as the community found it too expensive to run. We do not know when Ellen left Nelson Square but by 1939 she herself was a Sister of Mercy in Bovey Tracey, called 'Sister Helen'. Ellen was not like the sisters from the nineteenth century who were generally the daughters of clergymen, lawyers or other professionals. She would not have had the financial resources to contribute financially to the order so she probably would have been a lay sister who worked within the house, rather than a choir sister (Valerie Bonham, 1989. *A Joyous Life*, Windsor, Valerie Bonham, pp.129-30, Janice Wallace, 2001. *The Devon House of Mercy Bovey Tracey* in Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, 133, 191-216, p. 209 – both give descriptions of choir and lay sisters). Ellen died at the mother house in Clewer in 1964 aged seventy-seven. I am grateful to one of Ellen's descendants for providing me with information and a photograph of Ellen as an older lady who looked at peace with the world (Fig. 5). The photograph also included her biological sisters with whom she kept in contact.



Figure 5. Sister 'Helen' Horne. By kind permission of her great niece.

**Frances Henrietta Kilvert** was a sister at the Devon House of Mercy whose brother was the famous diarist whose work was later published as '*Kilvert's Diary*'. Frances was born at Hardenhuish Wiltshire in 1846. By 1901 she was a Sister of Mercy in London and she had moved to the Bovey Tracey house by 1911 where she was described as a teaching sister. This teaching post was at the Church of England National School. Frances died at the mother house in Clewer in 1929 aged 83.

**Gertrude Harriet Mitchell** was born in 1849 in Bognor Sussex and her father was a Colonel in the Grenadiers. By 1861 her mother was widowed. On the 1871 Census Gertrude was a Sister of Mercy in Bovey Tracey. At some time she moved to the mother house at Clewer as she was there by the time of the 1881 Census. By 1911 she was Sister in Charge of the Children's Hospital Service at Longford in Gloucestershire. This could be an interesting link with Sister Bertha's earlier life. This hospital had been mainly paid for by Thomas Gambier Parry who had also built the adjacent St

Lucy's Home of Charity (Gloucestershire Record office D177, St Lucy's Home and Children's Hospital Trust Deed 1875; *Gloucestershire Chronicle* 17 Dec 1864 p. 4; *ibid.* 15 Dec 1966 p.4; *Gloucester Journal* 4 May 1867 p.8.). Gambier Parry's daughter Lucy had died in 1861 and she was said to have been a close friend of Bertha Foertsch (see above under Bertha Foertsch). Perhaps a link between the Gambier Parry family and the Sister Superior of the Devon House of Mercy led to Gertrude's position at the Children's Hospital in Longford. I would be interested to hear from anyone who could shed any light on this.

**Frances Ruth Steward** was a sister at the Mission House as listed on both the 1881 and 1891 Census. She was well-known through her work in the centre of the local community. As Sister Frances Ruth she had a memorial in the parish church which was donated by her friends (Fig. 6). Her brothers were in the Madras Army, one as a general and the other as a lieutenant general.



Figure 6. Memorial to Sr Frances Ruth. St Peter, St Paul, and St Thomas Beckett, Parish Church, Bovey Tracey. Frances Billinge 2019, by kind permission of the Vicar and Church Warden.

### INMATES

As with the sisters, we only know the names of inmates who were listed on each census. As inmates might only remain for two years the census information is a snapshot. Some descendants have contacted me and given details to help uncover the lives of these young women, and I am grateful for this. It is a very small sample to date but does indicate that families continued to support their daughters and siblings. The inmates researched so far are :-

**Mary Ann Barwick** was born in Wootton Courtney in Somerset in 1856. From the 1861 census we learn that her father George was an agricultural labourer and the family lived at Ford. On 11 March

1870 Mary's son Edmund was baptised at the local parish church and no father was named. This led to Mary's placement in Bovey Tracey. By the time of the 1871 Census Mary was a sixteen year-old inmate at the Devon House of Mercy. At this time her parents were still in Wootton Courtney and by then they had six children and their grandson Edmund Barwick living with them.

On the 1881 Census Edmund, described as a grandson, was living with three of his uncles in Wootton Courtenay. His grandfather had died and his widowed grandmother was working as a servant at a nearby farmhouse. By 1891 Edmund had moved to Wales and was a coal miner in Bettws Glamorgan. In 1897 he married Gwenllian Nicholas in Bridgend, Glamorgan.

On the 1901 Census Edmund was a living in Oldcastle, Glamorgan with his wife and two sons together with his wife's young niece. On the 1911 census Edmund was widowed and a furniture haulier with a son Edmund John aged 12 and a daughter Winifred May living in Bridgend Glamorgan. Edmund died in Bridgend in 1947.

What happened to Mary Barwick? In 1875 she married William John Gilpin in the Newton Abbot district. By 1881 they were living in Dawlish with three children William, John and Frederick, and William senior was a mason's labourer. By 1891 they had six children and continued to live in Dawlish and Mary was working as a charwoman. By 1901 she was widowed and working in Dawlish as a cook.

On the 1911 Census Mary was widowed and housekeeper to a poultry farmer in Upton Pyne. Seven year old John Wilfred Gilpin born in Dawlish was living with her. He was Mary's grandson as he was the son of her son John who had five younger daughters living with him in Dawlish. So Mary was looking after a grandson in the same way her parents did.

**Lydia Eleanor Bush** was born in 1894 in Pembroke Dock. Her father was in the navy and by 1901 the family lived in Devonport. On the 1911 census Lydia was an inmate at the Devon House of Mercy. In 1915 Lydia married Thomas Morse, a miner, in Pontypridd and she then successfully managed to rear six daughters Throughout her life Lydia worked in some form of domestic service. Her descendants do not know the reason for her placement at the Devon House of Mercy. I am grateful to a family member for giving me these details and for sending me a photograph of Lydia showing four generation of the family – what a positive outcome for a girl who had some sort of difficulty in her teenage years (Fig. 7)



Figure 7. Lydia Bush, in brown dress on the left, showing four generations of her family

**Annie Eva Lavina Earney** was born in Bournemouth in 1884. At the age of seventeen she was an 'inmate' (1901 Census). Her father, Arthur Earney, was a house plasterer born in Handly Dorset and her mother was Rosalinda Urinsh born in Hampshire. Annie was one of five children and when she was at the Devon House of Mercy in 1901 her parents still had two children at home- Rosalinda H. aged five and William F. a son who was one month old.

We do not know the reason for Annie's placement in Bovey Tracey but after she left she returned to the area of her birth and had a close connection with her family. In 1907 she married Albert William Newell in the Christchurch area. By 1911 she and her husband, a marine store dealer, were living at 38, Somerset Road Boscombe Bournemouth. Living with them were and their two children as well as Annie's brother and his family, and her widowed mother and her mother's two youngest children. Annie was working as a laundress, the very trade she was taught at the Devon House of Mercy. They were living as a three- generation family unit.



**Martha Susanna Froude** was born in Stoke Gabriel in 1852 the last of nine children of Thomas and Elizabeth Froude. Her father was a farm labourer who died in 1853, and her mother died of consumption in 1857. Immediately Mary L Gotbed, a woman of private means from Torquay, applied for Martha who was five years old to be admitted to the 'Müller' orphanage at Ashley Down in Bristol. Mary Gotbed came from a Plymouth Brethren family of local standing and her father sat on the Grand Jury of the Devon General Sessions session. George Muller, a non-conformist minister, who had set up the Bristol orphanages, had lived in Teignmouth for a time and was known to have preached in the Torbay area. Perhaps this is why Mary contacted this well-known institution. (Devon General Sessions, Exeter and Plymouth Gazette 18 February 1842, p.3; Plymouth Brethren, Hampshire Advertiser 26 December 1868, p. 7). Mary Gotbed's letters of application for Martha to be accepted at the orphanage can be viewed on the Froude family tree on [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) accessed 10 May 2020). A condition of entry was that a child had lost both parents, and was in need. Martha fitted these criteria (Nancy Garton, 1963. *George Muller and His Orphans*. London, Hodder and Stouton p. 175) Mary Gotbed was a woman known for her charitable deeds as mentioned in her obituary (Totnes Weekly Times 19 May 1894, p. 3).

On the 1861 Census Martha was listed by her initials as MSF aged 9 born in the Paignton area resident at in New Orphan House number 2 Ashley Down Bristol. In 1864, aged twelve, Martha was discharged to the care of her sister Elizabeth and Elizabeth's husband Captain George Devereux of 3 Brighton Terrace, Park Road Liverpool. He was seaman, later to become a master mariner. He had been born in Dartmouth in 1830 (documents on Froude family tree [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) accessed 10 May 2020).

By the time of the 1871 Census Martha, aged eighteen, was again in a West Country institution as an inmate at the Devon House of Mercy. We do not know the date of, or reason for her admission. We do not know how long Martha remained in Bovey Tracey but by 1880 she had returned to Liverpool where she married Joseph Sillitoe. In 1881 she and her husband were both gardeners living in Gayton Cheshire with their five-month old child Thomas Froude Sillitoe.

Martha and Joseph had eight children (Fig. 8). She died in Heswall in Cheshire in 1899 at the age of forty-seven, the same age at which her mother had died, and her death certificate described her as a domestic gardener. Despite her early hardships Martha was later cared for by her family who had moved to Liverpool, and in adulthood she continued to live near them while she successfully raised her own family (The National Archives Elizabeth Froude probate 1892 resident at Wavertree Liverpool).



Figure 8. Martha with her daughter Mabel Sillitoe by kind permission of her family.

As a sad outcome to Martha's death, history was to repeat itself. Martha's husband Joseph then had four sons aged eleven to sixteen and three daughters Bertha aged ten, Mary Margery aged nine and Mabel Martha aged five to care for on his own. Martha's family have told me that Joseph could not cope with so many children and his employer helped find an orphanage for the three youngest. The 1901 Census shows that the three sisters were placed together at All Saints Home an orphanage on Christchurch Road Birkenhead. It was a home which trained older girls in laundry work- so Martha's daughters had a similar institutional experience to her, even to the extent of her youngest child Mabel having been placed in an orphanage at the very same age.

I would like to thank Martha's descendant for providing me with so many details of Martha's life.

**Rosina 'Maud' Heath** was born in Exeter in 1872. Her father was a carpenter and Rosina 'Maud' was one of many children. We do not know why she was placed at the Devon House of Mercy, or how long she stayed there, but she was an inmate on the 1891 Census. In 1900 she married Frederick James Jones in Dunmow in Essex. In 1901 she was a refreshment coffee house keeper and her widowed father was living with her in Braintree in Essex. Rosina 'Maud' and Frederick had five children by the time of the 1911 Census, he was a house painter and they were living in Budleigh Salterton in Devon. I am grateful to a family member who gave me some information on Rosina 'Maud' which helped me find out more about her.

**Rose Lilwall's** birth was registered in Wandsworth in the first quarter of 1911. Her father was a successful mercantile agent as later her widowed mother lived on private means. On the 1939 register Rose was an inmate at the Devon House of Mercy training as a laundress. I am grateful to a descendant for letting me know that Rose had a son in 1938 who was adopted within the family. Rose went on to marry Percy Nash in 1941 and had another son. This is another example of the family taking on the responsibility of caring for the child who was born before the mother married.

**Beatrice Tothill** was born in Shaldon in 1894 and her father was a farm labourer. In 1910 she had had an illegitimate son Francis George Tothill. On the 1911 Census Beatrice was a 16 year old inmate and general servant in the laundry at the Devon House of Mercy. Her son Francis 'George' Tothill was living with his grandparents Edwin and Emma Tothill at Sandygate, Kingsteignton. By this time Beatrice's father was a clay miner. We do not know how long she stayed at the Devon House of Mercy but in 1917 Beatrice married Edward Ellis Bowden and they went on to have four children. Beatrice died in Kingsteignton in 1971. I am grateful to someone with knowledge of this family who kindly sent me these details

**Isabel Whitley** was the daughter of a steam engine mechanic. She was born in Leeds in 1892. She was listed as an inmate in 1911. After leaving the Devon House of Mercy she married an Australian in 1919 who was in England as part of the Navy in WWI. Sadly Isabel died in childbirth and her daughter only lived a few months. Her Australian husband returned home where he re-married and has living relatives. I am grateful to them for providing me with this information.

## VISITORS

Each census listed a small number of resident visitors. We do not know how long they stayed. What was the status of these 'visitors'? They are not listed on the census as inmates so could have been paying guests who needed support, someone wishing to live in a retreat, or perhaps someone seeing if they had a religious vocation. There were two visitors recorded in 1871 and 1881 and only one in 1891, two in 1901 and four in 1911. One enquirer wonders if the institution was helping young widowed mothers. Do you have any information on this?

**Jane Ann Anderson** was born in Hickling in Nottinghamshire in 1828. Like many of those associated with the Devon House of Mercy her father was a Church of England minister. He was the Rector of

Hickling and died in 1843. By 1851 Jane then aged twenty-two and her older sister Catherine aged twenty-seven were visitors living with Edward Cayley, a banker, and his family in Lincolnshire. This suggests they might have been paying guests. The link between Andersons and the Cayleys is not yet known.

By 1861 Jane was living with her brother Rev. William Paley Anderson in the vicarage of Winsford Somerset along with her mother, sister and a cousin. On the 1871 Census Jane was living as a visitor at the Devon House of Mercy. Ten years later, on the 1881 Census, Jane was still a visitor. She was one of only two visitors at the time. By 1891 Jane was 'living on her own means' at the Royal Oak Hotel in Winsford Somerset. A rather different setting from a religious house but it was near her extended family.

In 1911 aged eighty-two Jane was living with her cousin in Cheltenham. She never married. She died in 1923 and her grave is in Winsford churchyard Somerset. Jane was one of the more fortunate of her era who had the private means to live as she wished as on her death she left £6,549 the equivalent of £290,00 today.

I am grateful to Melanie Mileham an historian from the Winsford Archive for confirming some details of Jane's family.

**Florence Alicia St John** was a visitor at the Devon House of Mercy in 1901. She was still there in 1911 as a visitor and assistant. This suggests that she helped the Sisters of Mercy in their work. Florence was born in Mysore Madras India on 3 December 1870 to Colonel Fredrick Charles St John. Florence was descended from the aristocracy. Her great, great grandfather was Lt Charles Spencer 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Marlborough. Her great grandmother, Lady Diana Spencer, was his daughter ([www.thepeerage.co.uk](http://www.thepeerage.co.uk) accessed 10 May 2020). We do not know why Florence resided at the Devon House of Mercy for at least ten years. We do not know when she left but she was not on the first available electoral roll of 1929. Florence died in Worthing in 1951. Despite such an illustrious heritage and the family serving in India her father and siblings had little wealth when they died. Her father left £505 in 1901, and a brother left £844 when he died in Sussex in 1908.

I wonder of Princess Diana, née Lady Diana Spencer like her forbear, glimpsed through the trees and saw the Devon House of Mercy when she visited Bovey Tracey pre-school in 1983, and if she knew that one her distant cousins had lived there.

### **Acknowledgment**

I would like to thank the Town Clerk of Bovey Tracey for his help in checking the Bovey Tracey Cemetery records to find Emma Hicks' grave.