
FEATURE ARTICLE

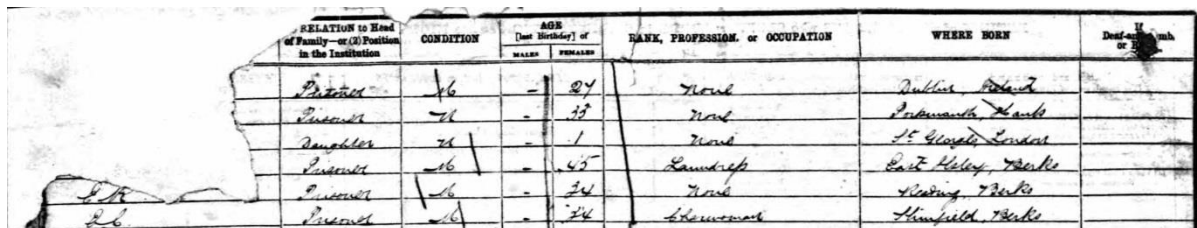
A wife of crime?

*This story originally came to light whilst researching the surname **Deacon**, which occurs more than any other in the East Ilsley Parish Registers*

Eleanor Mills and William Deacon were both born in 1815 at East Ilsley and were baptised a few months apart. They married in 1838, not in East Ilsley, but in Henley on Thames, where they were both apparently working at the time. Their first child, James, was baptised in East Ilsley in 1840 on 19th July, and the following year when the census was taken the family were living in Cow Lane. By 1851 they had two children and were still living, probably in the same cottage, in Compton Road, which is also known as Cow Lane. William was employed as an agricultural labourer.

In 1861 William, now employed as a carter, was living at Littleworth with three children, but his wife was not at home. She had not died, as she appears back with the family in the 1871 and 1881 censuses, so she could have been visiting relatives in 1861. A thorough search of the 1861 census eventually found her in Reading, Berkshire. Not with relatives, but in Reading Gaol!

There are several reasons why Ellen Deacon was so difficult to find in the 1861 census. Like the other prisoners, she was recorded only by her initials 'E. D'. Also, the corner section of the page containing those initials is missing from the original page. And lastly the initials had been incorrectly transcribed as 'E L'. Ellen was eventually found through the information on the remainder of the line. Prisoner/ married/ aged 45 / laundress / born in East Ilsley Berks.



RELATION to Head of Family—or (if) Position in the Institution	CONDITION	AGE [Last Birthday] of		RANK, PROFESSION, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN	Date of Birth or
		MALES	FEMALES			
Prisoner	16	-	24	None	Dullis, Oxford	
Prisoner	21	-	19	None	Portsmouth, Hants	
Daughter	21	-	1	None	St George's London	
Prisoner	16	-	45	Laundress	East Ilsley, Berks	
Prisoner	16	-	24	None	Reading, Berks	
Prisoner	16	-	24	Edmonval	Slough, Berks	

A detail of the page of the 1861 census which recorded Ellen Deacon (fourth line down), showing damage to the top left hand corner.

It appears that Ellen Deacon was occasionally employed as a charwoman by John Dawson, a racehorse trainer in Broad Street.

On 29th December 1860, she persuaded the cook in that household to put aside a piece of beef, so that she could smuggle it out of the house in her basket of dirty laundry. The cook, Esther Morris, took a piece of beef from the pickling tub asking if it would do. Ellen said yes, but it was rather too big, she asked the cook to put the meat in her basket partly filled with dirty clothes, which she was going to take home. Esther put it in the basket as requested. However, John Dawson's housekeeper, Miss Currie, discovered the meat and removed it from the basket.

Thinking the meat was in her basket Ellen Deacon took it home, but when she went to retrieve the stolen meat, it was not there. She returned to the Dawson residence to remonstrate with the cook.

Later in court, Esther Morris pleaded guilty, and was examined as a prosecution witness. She stated that several times during that day Ellen Deacon had asked her to give her a piece of meat to take home, and eventually she did as she was asked.

Ellen Deacon was charged with stealing 12 pounds of meat valued at 4 shillings and sixpence. In addition she was indicted for receiving the meat knowing it to be stolen. She was found guilty and sentenced to nine months' imprisonment with hard labour. The judge, considering that Esther Morris had been coerced, sentenced her to four months' imprisonment with hard labour. Hard labour would perhaps have been oakum picking or sewing mail bags.

The newspaper report raises a number of questions.

What prompted John Dawson to prosecute a servant for an attempt (which had been foiled), to steal a piece of meat? Ellen hadn't actually been in possession of the stolen meat at any time. Why not just dismiss her?

Did John Dawson or the housekeeper Miss Currie, have reason to suspect that this was not the first time Ellen had attempted to steal from her employer? Did they not trust her? Had there been previous suspicions, regarding Ellen's honesty?

What made the housekeeper look in the basket? She must have had good reason, not just idle curiosity. Perhaps she had overheard the conversation between Ellen and the cook earlier.

Was Ellen considered guilty simply because she believed, wrongly as it turned out, that she had the stolen goods in her possession? Was the intention to commit the crime enough proof of guilt? If she was actually present to witness the cook putting the piece of meat into her basket, was that sufficient proof that she had received it? If she was elsewhere, and had left her basket in the kitchen, assuming the cook would put the meat in it, she could not have known for certain that it had ever been there, and certainly was unaware that the housekeeper had removed it. Who, technically, was the thief, Ellen or Esther or both?

Was Ellen an habitual thief, or merely a mother who was trying to provide for her family at Christmas? In the circumstances, the sentence seems rather severe.

However, any sympathy one might have had for Ellen Deacon would be negated by the discovery that in February 1864 she was once more sent to prison for larceny, this time for 12 months.

Assuming she served all of her first sentence, Ellen Deacon would have been released from Reading Gaol around the end of 1861. It is hard to imagine how she could have acquired a position of responsibility merely 18 months later when she was employed

by William Channell who was training for the Earl of Strathmore in March 1863 and lived in what was described in the newspaper report as the Earl's hunting lodge in East Ilsley. The Earl had a room in the house. He left the Earl's employ in July 1863 and on the 10th July there was a sale at which some of his goods were bought for Lord Strathmore.

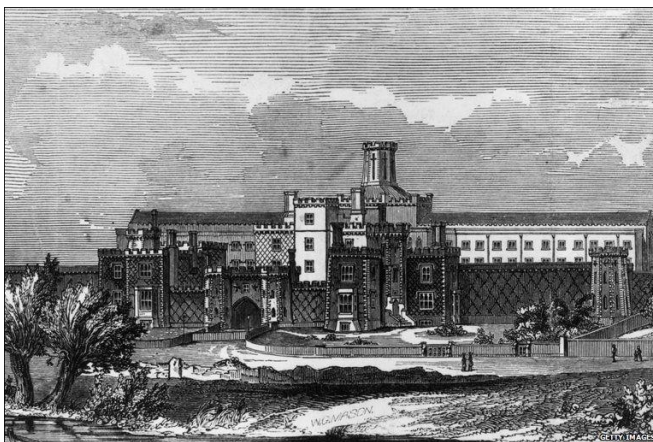
Sarah Channell, wife of William, later identified sheets etc., which had belonged to her and floor cloth belonging to the Earl of Strathmore. She stated that Ellen Deacon was employed in the house on the day of the sale, and also previously.

The Channells moved away soon after the sale and Ellen Deacon taken on as housekeeper to a Mr. Tiplady, who took over as trainer to the Earl of Strathmore. Her daughter, Mary Ann was employed as a servant maid. Mr. Tiplady, being single, was frequently absent and so Ellen and her daughter had the whole management of the house. Shortly before Christmas things were frequently missed from the premises and the circumstances were made known to Sgt. Fry, of East Ilsley, who communicated with his lordship who lived in Scotland. Consequently a search warrant was obtained and when Ellen Deacon's house was searched the following items were found, 10 blankets, 10 sheets, 3 pieces of carpet, one piece of floor-cloth, 3 horse bandages, and one fish can, identified as the property of the Earl of Strathmore, also, one tin bowl, one dog chain and collar, and one spittoon, the property of Mr. Channell. Ellen Deacon was committed on two separate charges to take her trial at the next Assizes.

At the trial Ellen was charged separately concerning the theft of the property of the Earl of Strathmore, and that of William Channell.

Other persons also identified various articles of property found at Ellen Deacon's house.

After the judge's lengthy summing up the jury returned a verdict of Guilty, there having been previous convictions. The sentence was 12 months.



The new Reading Gaol, which was opened in 1844

Although Mary Ann, Ellen's daughter was mentioned during the trial, only her mother was charged with an offence. Mary Ann seems to have disappeared from the records afterwards.

Ellen Deacon was 50 years old when she left Reading Gaol for the second time. Unless she had managed to arrange transport she faced a 20 mile walk back to her home in East Ilsley.

Ellen's crimes do not appear to have adversely impacted on her family whose lives continued in the usual way. They settled in Stanmore Road, for the rest of their lives. In 1871 Ellen and William were there with their youngest child, William Jesse, aged 13, a ploughboy. Their eldest son, James, now 31, was working as an ostler in the High Street. Alice was working as a general servant in Wantage. She married later in Lambeth in 1877. In 1881 the two boys were both living at home. Like their father both were described as agricultural labourers. Alice was a married woman living in Battersea.

No records of Mary Ann have been found after the report of the trial in 1864.

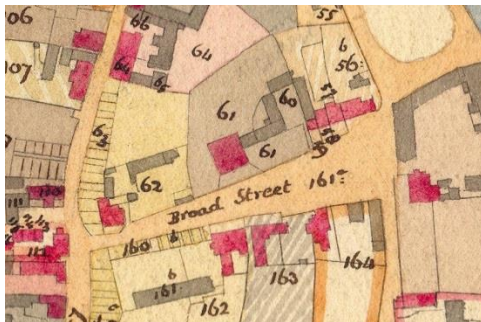
Ellen died aged 76 in 1887.

William died aged 77 in 1888.

Notes

1/ 12 pounds = 5.4 kg, 4 shillings and sixpence = approx. 22p

2/ Kennett House (161/162) is thought to be the most likely site of John Dawson's and William Channell's establishments.



3/ Littleworth is believed to be between the Stanmore Road and Fidler's Lane.

4/ Newspaper reports from the Reading Mercury and Reading Chronicle, etc.