

A New Headmistress

Miss Ethel Vera Constance Ellis

Headmistress of York Place 1909-1926

& Varndean Girl's School 1926-1937

Quite an impressive name, I think you'd agree! To her colleagues, and given the protocol of the time, she was known just as 'Miss Ellis'.

On her arrival as Head at what was then York Place in 1909, she was described as a 'dainty figure'. When she retired, in 1937, tributes referred to "this exquisite little lady".

Make no mistake about it, though, she was a formidable person, who masterminded the move from inner Brighton York Place to the leafy edge of town, as it was then, at Varndean.

So, what was her background? Her story is a fascinating one.

Miss Ellis was born in 1874...in Auckland, New Zealand, the older child of Edward Ellis and Constance Marion Smith. She was followed, 5 years later, by a brother, Gerald Edward Harold. The family was not, however, from New Zealand. Her parents had married at Gravesend, Kent in the year prior to her birth. The location suggests they were preparing to set sail, but it has not been possible to track them down in the shipping manifests. We can only speculate about why they emigrated and whether this was intended to be permanent.

Edward Ellis was a Londoner, born 1840 in the St Pancras area. He qualified as a doctor at St Andrew's University, Edinburgh, and was practising back in London by about 1863. In this, he was following in his father's footsteps. Cydwelyn Ellis, originally from Denbighshire, was also a doctor trained at St Andrew's, with a practice in Fitzroy Square. Edward obviously left to continue practising in New Zealand. The Medical Register for 1883 gives his address as Cranmer Street, Christchurch. Mysteriously, however, the 1879 Register has him in Fitzroy Square - rather a long way to commute!

Medicine also ran in his blood from his mother, Martha's, side of the family. Her father, Henry Blatch, was apprenticed as an apothecary in London in 1793 (the indenture document still survives). He was a surgeon in St Pancras - presumably how his daughter and Cydwelyn met.

More intriguing is how Constance and Edward met. Edward had married in 1863. His first wife was still alive in 1871, though she was not at the same address on the night of the census. Was she ill? Clearly, she must have died soon after. His marriage to Constance followed swiftly.

Constance Marion Smith was born in Liverpool in 1852. Her marriage certificate names her father as ...wait for it...Edmond Frederic (sic) Clarence De Courey Moleneaux Gerard Swinchatte SMITH. He was a Professor of Music originally from Cheshire, but living in Liverpool. With such a name, one expects to discover an illustrious family. Not so - his father, Thomas Barker Smith, was a schoolmaster. His family tree cannot be traced any further back. The same is true of Thomas' wife, Elizabeth, especially as her surname is unclear on the marriage certificate - bad writing is not new!

Constance's mother was, interestingly, a Harriet Jane Ellis, daughter of a Liverpool silk mercer. Ellis is quite a common name, but this does seem to be a bit of a coincidence. With several branches, it is almost impossible to discover the link which probably does exist. However, it's possible that the 'Ellis' name is the reason Constance, from Liverpool, and Edward, from London, met.

Edmond died in 1860, leaving effects 'under £450' - about £20000 today - to his widow. Constance and her sister, Edith, were sent to live with their uncle, Daniel Dale, a metal and copper agent in Liverpool. They were still there in 1871, having been joined by their younger brother, Harold.

Returning to Constance and her children; they were back in Britain by the time of the 1891 census. They were visitors staying with Colonel Thomas Rutherford and his family at 2 Onslow House, South Kensington. As there are two servants, this was clearly a fairly prosperous household. Mrs Ellis is described as a 'widow'; her children as 'scholars'. What happened to Edward Ellis? Did he die in New Zealand or did the marriage break up? 'Widow' and 'widower' were terms used less specifically than today. The records are not clear.

Both Ellis siblings were very intelligent. Gerald attended Epsom College, then a school for the sons of physicians, where he became head prefect. He won a scholarship to Lincoln College, Oxford before entering teaching. It would appear that he spent his entire professional life at Whitgift School, South Croydon, serving as headmaster from 1939 until 1946, when he retired. He married the daughter of Samuel Rowton, a famous composer in his time, who had, at one point, been an assistant master at Epsom College. It is hard to find out if they had children, as births before 1916 do not give the mother's maiden name and Ellis is a common surname, as we know. They do not seem to have been any offspring after 1916.

Ethel went to school in London. She then studied Medieval and Modern Languages at Newnham College, Cambridge. She was therefore one of only a few women who had a university education at this time. It is worth pointing out here that women were not awarded degrees on the same basis as men at Cambridge University until 1948. Finally, she did a year's postgraduate teacher training. By 1901, she was a fully-fledged school teacher. Her first job was at Hulme Girls' Grammar School, Manchester. The 1901 census places her in Wallasey as a visitor with a family including two teachers. As one of them is the same age, maybe they had trained or worked together. The census was taken during the Easter Holiday, so no help there. Alternatively, they may have been a family connection, as Constance was boarding in Liverpool at the same time.

Ethel Ellis was appointed to York Place, now renamed Brighton Municipal Secondary School for Girls, in 1909 - the first University graduate to hold the job at either the Girls' or the Boys' Schools. The following year, she appointed a former colleague, Harriet Jeanie Strange, with a BA from Oxford, as her deputy or Second Mistress, as the post was then called.

The 1911 census has both ladies living at 237 Preston Drove. This was a boarding house run by Mrs Grace Ginn. There are three separate returns for the property. Mrs Ginn had started to fill Miss Ellis' return in, but the latter had firmly crossed out these entries and completed it herself. She is definitely 'Head' of the household, consisting of 2 rooms - one assumes other facilities were shared. Interestingly, one of the other boarders was Herbert William Ellis, from Luton. Again, there could be a link, but it is not obvious.

Preston Drove was a good spot as a circular tram service from the Old Steine, via London Road, Preston Drove and Ditchling Road (and vice versa) gave easy access to the school.

It's not my purpose here to chronicle her career as Head- that information can be found elsewhere in 'The York Place Varndean Story'.

Miss Ellis retired in 1937. Miss Strange stayed on for one year to aid the transition for the new head, Miss Warmington (or keep her on the straight and narrow, who knows?). Both soon relocated to Torquay, Devon. They kept in touch with the school. For example, there was a Torquay reunion in 1944. They also travelled back to Brighton for special events such as the Old Girls' Golden Jubilee in 1954.

They died within a year of each other - Miss Strange in August 1960 and Miss Ellis in July 1961. Miss Ellis left £16042, the equivalent today of a quarter of a million.

Later that year, the Old Girls' Association launched a Memorial Fund to commemorate their joint contribution to Varndean. The Ellis-Strange Memorial Prize was set up and awarded for outstanding progress in the Sixth Form. It continued for a few years after the Sixth Form was lost, now being for outstanding progress in Year 11. Sadly, it seemed to drop out of use - maybe it should be revived within Ellis School?!