

The Quadruple Headmistress

Miss Laura Hilton

1862 - 1934

York Place Headteacher 1901 - 1909

Laura Ann Hilton followed Miss North, not only chronologically, but also in being Brighton born and bred. She was the eldest of 5 children born to Joseph and Vashti Hilton.

Joseph, also a Brightonian, was the son of another Joseph, a boot and shoe maker, who had migrated from Islington and married Jane, from Southwick, who was also recorded as a 'shoe builder'. They lived in Camelford Street in 1841, moving by 1851 to Wood Street, which ran north from Trafalgar Street. Joseph (senior) died in 1859. The rest of the family were still in Wood Street in 1861. Joseph (junior) was now employed as a Merchant's clerk. The same year, he married Vashti Chatfield, a dressmaker from Poling, lodging in Ann Street. The 1841 census tells us her father was a Wheelwright, whilst her eldest brother was an apprentice Ship Carpenter.

There is no record of them for 1871, so we pick up the story 10 years later. Joseph was a Coal Merchant, living at 4, Cambridge Road, Hove. His elder son, Horace, was clerk to his father, whilst Albert and Helena Rose were at school. The two eldest daughters, Laura and Alice, were not at home. Alice was a Governess at a private school for 19 male pupils aged 6 - 16, based in the next street (29 - 30 Brunswick Road), run by sisters Charlotte and Catherine Ironson. Laura was training at Ditchling Road Training College (the flint building now called 'Citibase'). This was run by a 'Lady Superintendent', Miss Sarah Chambers. Laura was one of 65 students drawn from all over the South and Midlands. They all lived on the premises, with 6 other borders, who were either Governesses or School Mistresses, cared for by 7 domestic staff. At the end of the course she qualified as an L.L.A. (Lady Literate in Arts).

By 1891, the whole family was still living in Cambridge Road. All three daughters were teachers! The household also consisted of an 8 year old great niece, two borders of independent means, and two servants. Albert, the younger son, had died in 1887, aged only 20.

So what of Laura Hilton's career? We know that, by 1893, she was teaching at Preston Road Board School. The following year, she transferred to become one of the original three staff at York Place, responsible for the 25 girls in Standard VI.

Promotion followed in 1890, when she left to become Head of Hanover Terrace Girls' School. This was soon followed by a move to preside over the opening of Stanford Road School.

Following Miss North's resignation in 1901, she re-joined York Place as its new Head Teacher. She faced a major challenge in the school's development as it moved to the control of Brighton Council as York Place Municipal Secondary School for Girls. Her pay was £235 a year; equivalent to about £25000 today!

By the time she took charge, the Hilton family had moved to 17 Hove Park Villas. Joseph had metamorphosed into an Estate Agent. Horace had married and left home to set up a window cleaning business. All three daughters were unmarried, living at home and were, respectively, 'Head Teacher Board School (Laura); Principal Private School (Alice and Helena). The great niece, Olive, was now an assistant teacher in a private school - presumably her aunts'. They had one servant.

The pressures of headship, however, proved too much. She resigned in 1909 because of "the increased strain of the work". Her leaving present was a gold watch & chain. She finished her career back at Stanford Road School, where she was in 1911. Alice was a Music Teacher; Olive didn't seem to have an occupation and there was still one servant. Helena had married a retired farmer, 25 years older than her in 1907, and was now living in Buckinghamshire. Vashti died in 1911 and Joseph the following year. He left the equivalent, in today's money, of about £150 000 between Horace and his two unmarried daughters.

We know Laura kept in touch with York Place as she was present at the 21st anniversary of the Old Girls' Association in 1924. She would almost certainly have followed the move to Varndean with interest, as she remained in the area until her death in 1934. Amongst the floral tributes sent to her funeral was one from "Miss E.V. Ellis and Staff of Varndean Secondary School for Girls".