

Sarah Ann Hutchings: In the Shadow of St. Mary Magdalene

What could be more bucolic than an English parish church on a bluff overlooking the River Thames?



A postcard illustration of the St. Mary Magdalene church in Woolwich, dating to 1845, imparts a sense of serenity and stateliness — but also hints at the fate of its parishioners in its surrounding graveyard.

Such was my thought as I began a journey into the past to discover our family’s history in a town called Woolwich [pronounced Wool-itch]. Much of that history centered around the town’s parish church, St. Mary Magdalene, whose pastors performed, and thankfully recorded, baptisms and marriages of the townsfolk ... rites that ensured blessed lives for the faithful. Except when they didn’t. Then again, maybe our family wasn’t that faithful.

What I found was a gritty story of hardship, abandonment, and early death.

Yet it was also a story of survival and redemption ... and of finding one’s identity.

In the nineteenth century, Woolwich, east of London on the River Thames, was based on “the making and deployment of the matériel and personnel of war and the town grew thickly populous.”¹ Rural and idyllic no longer, it was home to the Royal Navy dockyard, the Royal Arsenal, the Royal Artillery barracks, and the Royal Military Academy, and the thousands of soldiers, sailors, and workmen that came with that. “By the century’s end Woolwich was ‘a closely-packed, toiling and moiling industrial quarter of London.’”² One could call it the arsenal of British empire, I suppose.

YET OUR STORY BEGINS, oddly enough, not in 19th century Woolwich but in 20th century Detroit,³ as our grandmother Bessie Schutze related what scant family history she knew to her

son Leonard. Bessie lost her mother at age eight, hardly enough time to absorb her mother's history. What Bessie recalled was that her mother, Sarah Billingshurst, had three children with a man named Hutchins, and then married William Estelle and had five more children with him, with Bessie being the first of them.

August 16, 1970
From Grandma

Sarah Billingshurst	
Mr. Hutchins	Alfred - boy killed by horse (10-12 yrs)
	Harriet - married (4 children) died about 1910
	Thomas - killed in Egypt (Eng Army)
Wm Estelle	Betsy - (Bessie)
	Susand (Aunt Lilly)
	Rose - lost on way to U.S.
	James = James Kent adopted name. His Uncle wrote letters to me (Aunt Rose).
	Robert - died at 9 months - His mother died when he was born

A note from my father capturing his mother's family in London.

Okay ... so as it turns out we have some identity issues right out of the box.

Bessie's mother was actually **Sarah Ann Hutchings**, born in 1860 in the town of Woolwich to an engine fitter named William Hutchings⁴ and his 22-year-old wife Harriet Montgomery. Sarah, their only child, was baptized at St. Mary Magdalene Church three weeks after her birth, receiving the blessing of the curate.

Her father probably worked in the neighboring Royal Arsenal smithy shop, one of the large industrial buildings of great noise, great heat, and apparently great danger.

BAPTISMS solemnized in the Parish of <u>Woolwich</u> in the County of <u>Kent</u> in the Year <u>1860</u>						
When Baptized.	Child's Christian Name.	Parents Name.		Abode.	Quality, Trade, or Profession.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
		Christian.	Surname.			
June 1 Born May 6 No. 1802.	Sarah Ann Daughter of	William & Harriet	Hutchings	Union Street	Blacksmith	Heardbrook Curate

Sarah Ann Hutchings' baptism record from St. Mary Magdalene Church

The first sign of trouble for Sarah came a year later, in

1861, when the census showed that her mother Harriet was already a widow, living again with her parents Robert and Mary Ann Montgomery.

Sarah's grandfather Robertⁱ was a shoemaker; her grandmother raised their five children — all baptized at St. Mary Magdalene's. In 1861 the grandparents were also helping to raise little Sarah.

i Robert Montgomery was born in Malta in 1808, the son of a deployed Royal Artillery soldier. One of his sisters was born in Sicily. The family returned to Woolwich by 1816, where his father, James, held various laborer jobs before dying in 1823 at age 43. Robert's mother was Mary, probably nee Hodge. Robert was the oldest of their six children, the last of which was born the same year as their father died.

But they were getting on in years and the coming decade was not kind to them. Robert, sick and destitute, was admitted to the Woolwich Workhouse in 1863; for many men in Victorian London sickness led to unemployment and destitution. In subsequent years he was readmitted a number of times either alone or together with his wife. Interestingly, in 1867 he was admitted on the way out of prison. Robert passed away in 1870 at age 62 and his wife moved in with their eldest son. She in turn passed on in 1882.

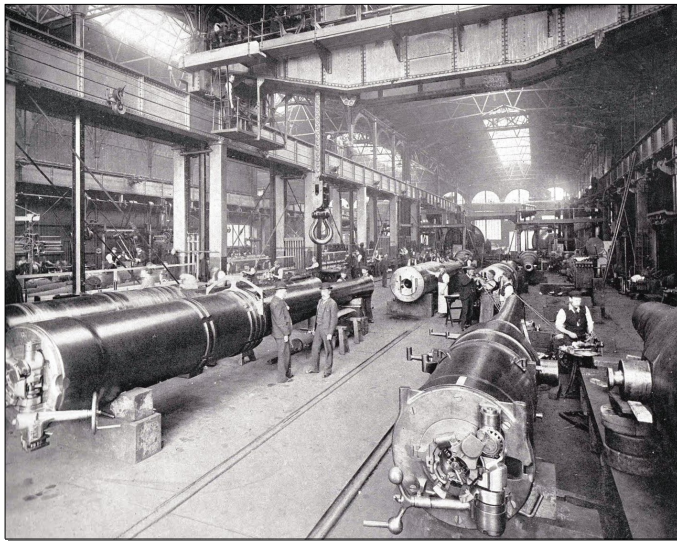
With her grandparents in and out of the Workhouse, where did Sarah and her mother live? The answer is somewhat sordid, but addresses why Bessie thought her mother was a Billingshurst.



Wooden shoe forms

THE 1871 CENSUS shows ten-year-old Sarah and her mother living in nearby Plumstead. They are recorded as the daughter and wife of Robert Billingshurst — a rather curious fact given Robert was still married to Ann, his wife of 27 years. Further digging revealed that Ann began showing up at the Workhouse in 1860 because she'd been “deserted by [her] husband.” In her last year of life, 1877, she showed up as “destitute” and finally as ill and a “vagrant.” This while her husband was living with Sarah's mother and passing her off to the census-taker and the rest of the world as his wife.

I'm hesitant to call Sarah's mother Harriet the ‘other woman,’ but as her father might say, “if the shoe fits...”. Billingshurst left his wife and took up with Harriet, a woman sixteen years Ann's junior and thirteen years his. Harriet, for her part, was both a new widow and a new mother, and living with her struggling parents wasn't a viable option. She moved in with Billingshurst by the autumn of 1861 when her daughter was still in diapers. Robert and Harriet had three sons and a daughter between 1862 and 1868, giving Sarah four half-siblings as well as the three ‘step-brothers’ by Robert's wife Ann.



The gun factory at the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich

Robert Billingshurst was a foreman at the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich, and by 1881, when Sarah was twenty, the family moved back to Woolwich — the old stumping ground for Harriet's family in the shadow of the parish church — and still within walking distance of his job. The census taker that year was again told that Harriet was Robert's wife, despite the fact that they didn't get married until the following year in — of course — St. Mary Magdalene's.

Sarah, however, at age 20 wasn't living with her mother and ‘step-father’ in the 1881 census. It took me many years to find her at age ten under the Billingshurst

surname. Finding her at age twenty took a while longer because her surname wasn't recorded at all.

This is where the issue of Sarah's emerging self-identity might have first appeared: her not identifying a family name to the census taker. She only went by “Sarah A[nn].” Why? Did she

have a falling out with her Billinghamurst ‘step-father’ and no longer wanted his name? Did she just find out she’d been born a Hutchings and wasn’t entirely comfortable with that name either? Was she trying to hide something, say from her employer? We don’t know.

John Plume	Head	Man	32	Licensed Victualler	Greenwich	Kent
Emily J	Wife	Woman	32	Wife	Woolwich	6
John	Son	Man	4		6	6
Lavinia	Son	6	3		Plumstead	6
Ethel	Son	6	7 ^{mo}		Woolwich	6
Sarah A	Barmaid	6	21	Barmaid		London

Sarah A. in the 1881 census. Her last name seems to start with a stroke (a B or H?) but ends without resolution.

However, we’re certain we found her. We reviewed all of the 335 Sarah’s of her general age in the Woolwich census and she’s the only one who qualifies by name, age, birthplace, and family situation. Sarah was living a couple of blocks from her mother’s home near the parish church. Interestingly (and maybe further confirming her identification), Sarah didn’t report her birthplace as Woolwich, only as greater London, which demonstrates she wasn’t related to the family she was listed with, and also agrees with later statements that she didn’t know where she was born (a rather sad and telling fact in itself).

The census put Sarah in the home of the John Plume family, a “licensed victualler” and owner of the Mitre public house, or as it was also known around that time, the Mitre Music Hall. The Mitre was situated just north of St. Mary Magdalene’s church, a probable inspiration for the pub’s name, mitre being a bishop’s head-dress. Sarah worked there as a bar maid. With all the soldiers, sailors, and tradesmen concentrated in the area the pub would have done a booming business and Sarah would not have been wanting for attention and tips. She may have been working there for a couple of years.⁵



The Mitre, now closed, stands largely unchanged in Woolwich

SARAH ESCAPED FROM THE SHADOW of St. Mary Magdalene in the next chapter of her life, though perhaps only geographically, as her post-Woolwich years seemed to distantly echo her patron saint’s own life and transformation.

Sarah Hutchings — and from here out she went exclusively by her birth surname — showed up later in 1881⁶ in Bethnal Green, the notorious slum in London’s East End.⁷ We find her in the Workhouse in 1884, at age 23, having the first of her three illegitimate children, Alfred. She may have chosen the name after her half-brother Alfred who was close in age to her. Sarah was in and out of the workhouse over the next five years, twice more giving birth to illegitimate children, Harriet in 1886 and Thomas in 1889. She may again have delved



Bethnal Green Workhouse

into her former family for the names: Harriet was her half-sister (as well as her mother) and Thomas was her older ‘step-brother.’

Given Sarah’s three illegitimate children, a prominent Estall family historian believes she was a prostitute.⁸ It seems possible; something like one in eight women plied the trade to earn or supplement their meager income in London’s East End. But when Sarah had her first three children she identified herself on their birth registers as a stay (corset) former, a machinist (machine operator: probably a sewing or weaving machine), and a fur sewer respectively, indicating she had legitimate employment. Her sin, if any, may have been that she loved too freely rather than for a price. Regardless of her circumstances, it’s safe to say that as a single working mother she was in a difficult situation.

THE QUESTION OF WHETHER SARAH was a prostitute echoes that of her patron saint.



Mary Magdalene was thought to be a prostitute by the Church for centuries, though now that is generally discounted. Whether a prostitute or not, Mary had seven devils cast out of her, indicating she may have had what today we’d call ‘some issues.’ Sarah too appears to have had issues, what with her recurring visits to the workhouse for deliveries of illegitimate children.

But like Mary, Sarah eventually found redemption and turned her life around. I can’t say whether she found Jesus, but maybe she found the next best thing, a person committed to her. Some time shortly after having her third illegitimate child Sarah began living with William Estall on Cornwall Street in Bethnal Green. William took her older son Alfred to the local school to enroll him in 1890, recording himself as the boy’s step-father, even though he wasn’t married to Sarah yet.

WILLIAM ESTALL HAD A FEW ISSUES of his own. The son of a local silk weaver, he joined the Army at age 22 and was sent to Ceylon, but was discharged four years later due to recurring health issues, including epilepsy and heart palpitations. He was certified at the lowest level of education in the Army, only able to read and write simple sentences. He fathered two children with another man’s wife and posed as her husband to the 1881 census taker, which I’m beginning to sense was a not altogether uncommon practice. His unskilled labor was funded by the vestry, or local government: he was at times a general labourer, a dock labourer, and a grounds labourer, the latter of which meant he was either repairing roads or sweeping horse dung off of them. Nevertheless, despite poor health, a rudimentary education, and low wages, he committed to Sarah and married her a month before their first child, Bessie, was born.

1891. Marriage solemnized at <u>the Church</u> in the parish of <u>St James the Great</u> in the County of <u>Middlesex</u>								
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
94	March 2nd 1891	William Estall	39	Bachelor	Labourer	Bethnal Green	Henry Estall	Deceased
		Sarah Ann Hutchings	30	Spinster	—	Bethnal Green	William Hutchings	Deceased
Married in the <u>parish church</u> according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church, by <u>Canon</u> or after _____ by me,								
This Marriage was solemnized between us, { <u>Wm Estall</u> }			in the Presence of us, { <u>Henry Thomas Hussey</u> <u>G. M. Stippell</u> <u>John Brown</u> }					

The marriage registration of Sarah (Hutchings) and William Estall

Sarah Hutchings became Sarah Estall in March of 1891 — redefining her identity now as a wife and mother of a growing family.

SHE WAS NOT FATED to live happily ever after, however. Saints don't attain their status by easy living. Mary didn't, and neither did the modern-day Sarah: she was to suffer significant hardship and loss.

Sarah and her husband William moved frequently, a common practice among the poor in the East End slums, either to find better lodgings or keep one step ahead of the rent collector. They lived in tenements: when Bessie was born, the family of six was living in a one-room unit of a four-story building on Green Street, the main shopping street of the district. Things improved slightly over the next couple of years, when they moved to a couple of different two-story row houses. Bessie's younger sister Lily was born on Usk Street, which a policeman related as having "some ragged children." The residents were "working class but quite 9/10 of them have been at the station for drunkenness."⁹ With Sarah's history as a bar maid and William's occupation, it's not beyond the pale to envision them joining their neighbors in quaffing the local brew.

In 1894 Sarah lost her oldest child, Alfred, to diphtheria at the age of ten. Childhood survival rates weren't very high in Bethnal Green. But after his death the family moved into an even worse environment when they moved into Quinn's Buildings on Russia Lane, which a police inspector described as being among "no worse places to be found."

Quinn's Buildings was a block of ten six-story tenements arranged in a square. There were two rooms to a family. The police inspector called it "very rough, very poor, very noisy." A poverty map surveyor added "windows broken and dirty, curtains torn, six children looking out of one window high up."¹⁰



Quinn's Square (a 1936 photograph)

This was to be the last residence for Sarah, and probably with reason. The overcrowding of families living on top of each other, sharing bathrooms and water taps among them, would not be a health inspector's model dwelling. In addition to the physical duress, there was the mental: ears assailed by the noise of children wailing within their apartment and of hundreds echoing without; nostrils assaulted by the smells of cooking, garbage, sewage (still primitive in those days), and week-worn clothing; eyes irritated by London's coal-fired pollution. If the sun shone, the buildings would cast long shadows. She probably looked forward to leaving the square for food shopping at street coster barrows or to take the children to nearby Victoria Park for fresh air and sunshine.



Quinn's Buildings layout

Her children, knowing only poverty, happily trod off to the local school and played with the neighbor kids, adding their squeals and voices to the din of the square. It wasn't a great place, but it was home, and Sarah was with the family of her making.



Interior view of St. John's Church

Sarah gave birth to three more children here and she faithfully took them to St. John's Church a few blocks away for their baptisms. She had come from the parish of St. Mary Magdalene's, after all, and the teachings and rituals seemed to stick with her.

But the gathering of family, friends, and witnesses in December of 1899 for the baptism of their infant son Robert at St. John's — an occasion equally dignified, promising, and joyous — was likely the last social event in Sarah's abbreviated life.

Baptisms Solemnized in the Parish of ST. JOHN, on BETHNAL GREEN, in the County of Middlesex, in the Year 1899							
When Baptized.	Child's Christian Name.	Parents' Name.		Abode.	Quality, Trade, or Profession.	Sponsors.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
		Christian.	Surname.				
Dec 8 th . No. 752	Robert. Born Nov 26 th .	William Sarah Ann.	Estall	53 Quinn's Labour Buildings	Labourer -	Fanny Bonjea + The Mother.	Ed. Halliday Vic.

Robert Estall's baptism registration

Later that month Sarah contracted acute meningitis, and if her symptoms were typical, she developed a high fever, an unrelenting headache, a stiff neck, and vomiting. Worried, her husband would have taken her to the Workhouse Infirmary. But Sarah didn't recover, and she died at the workhouse, passing away on Christmas Eve, 1899, at the age of 39.

ONE OF MY COUSINS told me that she tries not to judge people too harshly. "I believe in going back and trying to see what makes people people."¹¹ Or in words Sarah's grandfather, the humble shoe maker, could have uttered, "Don't judge someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes."

I also hear the dialog of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* running through my head when I read about the dubious moral behavior of some of our struggling London ancestors.

Colonel Pickering: "Have you no morals, man?"
Alfred Doolittle [unabashed]: "Can't afford them, Governor."

SARAH WAS NO SAINT. But by the time she died, she was no sinner, either.

I like to think of her as our own family's patron, Sarah Ann of Woolwich, a woman with the strength to define herself on her own terms. A woman who struggled, survived, loved, evolved ... and then passed away too early.

A woman who was raised in the shadow, literally and figuratively, of St. Mary Magdalene.

Coda

A motherless home is like a house without furniture. It's barren. But the Estall apartment in Quinn's Square wouldn't be the family home for much longer. Sarah's husband William contracted bronchitis and had to admit himself to the Bethnal Green workhouse infirmary a couple of months after Sarah's death. The children were scattered: one went to live on the streets, one was adopted, two were admitted to the infirmary (with the youngest, Robert, dying shortly thereafter), and three were sent off to the workhouse school miles away.

Nevertheless, Sarah's life wasn't lived in vain. Her first two daughters by William survived workhouse schools for six years and emigrated together to Canada, and later the United States, to start families of their own. The son who was adopted out grew up in a stable household, volunteered with the English Army during the first world war, married a good-natured woman and raised two sons (one of whom unfortunately died serving his country in WWII). The rest of the Hutchings-Estall children didn't seem to fare as well, with one of them committing suicide at age 21 and two others dropping off the radar.

Sarah's husband William Estall became destitute and had to abandon his children in 1901. He lived another five years, checking in and out of the Mile End workhouse and infirmary, and finally succumbed to an aorta aneurysm that ruptured into his bronchus in 1906.

Sarah's mother, Harriet (nee Montgomery) Billinghamurst, moved to Brighton on the south coast of England with her husband after he retired. She lived to the age of 72, passing away in 1910, outliving her husbands, Sarah, and at least a couple of Sarah's children.

Last thoughts

One of the greatest gifts is the life we give to others, passed on like a torch. Sarah's descendants are a testament to that. Our gift in return is trying to keep her memory alive.

Her story reminds us of the importance of family, the value and dignity of struggle, the potential for recovery and redemption, and the need for faith in whatever sustains us and keeps us moving forward.

- 1 Peter Guillery, ed., *Survey of London, Volume 48: Woolwich*, (London, 2012).Introduction, 1.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Considered in the 20th century to be the arsenal of democracy.
- 4 Despite numerous attempts to find more information on William Hutchings, including a record of his death in 1860 or 1861, I've not been able to find documentation on him before or after Sarah's birth.
- 5 Sarah's workhouse examination says the longest situation (job) she'd had lasted two years. She had a history of frequent moves, which probably indicated frequent job changes too.
- 6 In a Bethnal Green Workhouse Poor Law Examination of 1887, Sarah gave a history of her residences and time spent at each which, if correct, indicates she started living in Bethnal Green in 1881.
- 7 It's difficult to understand why Sarah Hutchings moved from Woolwich to Bethnal Green. Usually a person moves for a job, for an adventure, or for another person, i.e., to be with a family member or a loved one. Given Bethnal Green's high unemployment and low wages, it's not likely Sarah moved there for a job. If she was seeking adventure, going to a slum wouldn't be a likely destination either. I suspect she went to Bethnal Green to be with someone she was interested in.
There were no relatives in Bethnal Green, according to her own workhouse deposition, and confirmed by a lack of any discernible ones in the Bethnal Green censuses. My guess, then, is that she followed a man there, perhaps one she met at the Mitre pub, or perhaps a sailor or artilleryman passing through Woolwich on his return home to Bethnal Green.
- 8 Conversation with Kim Baldacchino in June 2013.
- 9 George H. Duckworth's Notebook: Police and Publican District 7 [Mile End Old Town and Spitalfields], District 8 [Aldgate, St George's in the East, Shadwell], District 9 [Bethnal Green, North and South], District 10 [Bethnal Green East], District 11 [Poplar and Limehouse], 1898-1899, BOOTH/B/350, p23.
- 10 George H. Duckworth's Notebook: Police and Publicans District 10 [Bethnal Green East], District 15 [South West Islington], District 17 [Upper Holloway], 1897, BOOTH/B/349, p245.
- 11 Conversation with Joan Godfrey in August 2018.