

## **THE WARD SISTERS**

Beatrice Ward was born in London in c. 1886 and her sister Gertrude was born the following year in c. 1887. It is stated in some early information about the family that they were the illegitimate daughters of Florence, who later took the surname of their father, John Michael Ward. In an article in the Daily Mail (1976), it stated that their father was a 'doctor on the South Coast'. In 1895, the two girls and their mother, Florence, were found wandering on the streets of St Pancras in London. When they were originally found, the mother appeared to be in a very distressed state and was unable to care properly for her children, who were 6 and 8 years old. They were all admitted to the St Pancras Workhouse on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1895 and discharged just over two weeks later on 13<sup>th</sup> May. Their father was alleged to have died on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1895, aged 48, which may be the reason that 'Mrs Ward' was so distressed at that time.

This information comes from a letter sent to Gertrude Ward by their solicitor, after their mother died on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1938. She had asked him to find out what he could about their background, because the sisters themselves knew so little. Their mother had not seen fit to inform them about their past for some reason.

In the article in the Daily Mail, written soon after Beatrice's death, it was stated that the sisters were illegitimate and that the mother had registered girls under their father's name of Ward, and called herself 'Mrs Ward' from then on. It stated that their mother was a 'dominating and well-connected Victorian woman, who could never face her "shame"'. The article also stated that she brought the children to Birchington in 1899, when the date was more likely to be 1906-7. It goes on to say that she brought the girls to Birchington 'as babies'. This is definitely not correct, judging by their dates of birth given by the solicitor in 1938. They would have been 20 and 21 years old by then. At some point during the next few months, there was a serious fire in their first property, which forced them to leave it. Mrs Ward then bought 'Homefield' in Minnis Road, (later No: 8) and moved her daughters there.

In 1911, Florence Ward had been asked to attend a meeting with her two daughters, in order for the trustees of her daughters' estates to confirm their existence and their well-being. Without this, they were not prepared to hand over any money for or to them. A meeting was arranged, but neither Florence nor the girls turned up. Then on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1911, they were given an ultimatum – "no meeting – no more money". Presumably they met up with the Trustees as this correspondence does not continue.

There were no further problems over money, as there always appeared to be more than enough for their needs. They were all generous in their gifts to charities, donating by post. There are letters of thanks from some of these charities among their papers, including some from the First World War. Another of their kindnesses was to pay the dog-licences for any poor person in Birchington. The cost of a licence was 7s. 6d. – or 37½p in today's money. When a family's wage was only, perhaps, £3 a week, the licence was equal to about three family meals – a huge amount to lay out in hard times. Without the licence the family risked having their pet removed and destroyed.

Mrs Ward had a strange way of looking at life and it was this odd outlook that made her keep her daughters hidden from the world. They were not allowed out of the house, except after dark or in the late evening in the summer time. They bought bicycles from George Cousins' Cycle factory. He started the 'Seabreezes Cycle Factory' in Station Approach IN C. 1885-90 (where the Wine Bar now stands). Cousins built the 'Observatory' houses in Minnis Road and lived in the first one, next door to Mrs Ward and her daughters. They used to go out for rides together during the twilight on summer evenings, usually down in the Minnis Bay area.

All the business with local trades' people was conducted by Mrs Ward herself. She did this through the letterbox or else through a very narrowly opened door. She had help in the garden from David Hutchings and also got him to pick up her orders from some of the shops – and obtain her money from the bank. She also used to put in orders for clothes and certain larger goods through the post, in answer to advertisements she found in the press, as they had a daily newspaper. In the early days of their stay in Birchington, Mr Hutchings' sister had been a maid to Mrs Ward, but this had ceased after quite a short time. When Mrs Ward became ill in the latter part of 1937, she must have realised how serious things were. She made sure there was quite a lot of spare cash in the house and she also wrote and signed a number of cheques. When she finally died in the April of 1938, the sisters chose not to tell anyone what had happened. This may have been because they were so out of touch with life in the 1930s that they didn't know exactly what to do. Once they had delayed doing something, it became more and more difficult to change the situation,

The discovery of the body on July 12<sup>th</sup> was quite by chance, although it could only have been a matter of time before the money ran out and they were forced into doing something more drastic. After their mother died, the sisters invited the handyman, David Hutchings into the house, mainly to help clear up the huge piles of newspapers, which had all been saved through the years, but they also asked him to do some much-needed decorating. He kept asking where their mother was, and they made various excuses about her absence from the scene. At first they said she was ill; then she was getting better but sleeping, and latterly that she just didn't wish to be disturbed. The upstairs room in which they finally laid their mother's body was always kept locked. Eventually, while the sisters were busy downstairs, Mr Hutchings was clearing some piles of papers from the landing in front of the normally locked door. Having made a space, he tried the handle and to his surprise found the door unlocked. He entered the room and found the corpse on the bed covered over with layers of brown paper and newspapers.

He came downstairs in great distress and said he would not come back to the house unless they did something about the situation upstairs. The sisters were very upset, but let him go and fetch one of the local doctors. Dr Bowie was called and once he had seen the body, he called the police. At this point the two sisters went to stay with David and Lillian Hutchings at 5 Westfield Road, until the inquest and the funeral of their mother.

There is great doubt over the ages of the Ward sisters as the dates given them by the solicitor after their mother's death cannot be verified, because it now appears their births were never registered officially. No trace can be found for them at the present time (March 2014). By using the solicitor's dates in 1938, they were 51 and 52 by 1938 (not 42 and 43 as the Mail suggested, if their original birth dates are correct), but they were completely unworldly. They did say at the inquest that they did not know exactly how old they were, which is presumably why they instructed their solicitor to try and find out for them.

Another reason for their silence over the mother's death may have been because they feared contact with the outside world (and who can blame them, under the circumstances?). It was even suggested that they might have hastened her end, but this was eventually ruled out. As someone at the inquest pointed out, it paid the sisters to keep her alive as long as possible, because as far as they knew, she was their only source of income. At that time, they were unaware of the fact that they were already heiresses in their own right.

When they were questioned as to why they did not inform anyone about their mother's death, the only reason they seemed to feel they could state was that their mother had a fear of being buried in the ground. This was not acceptable to the coroner, so other reasons were sought. No one seems to have looked at the situation from the strange position that had formed the sisters' view of the world, which is rather sad. The feeling seemed to be that they had almost 'chosen' to live as they did. The fact that they had been brainwashed into believing this was the only way possible for them, does not seem to have occurred to anyone. There was a suggestion at the inquest that they had perhaps imprisoned their mother in the house, but again this was refuted. David Hutchings said "No, I should imagine vice versa."

Once the inquest was over, the sisters took their mother's body down to Hove to be buried. There was some connection with this particular cemetery. Whether it was because John Ward, their father, was buried there, as the sisters thought, or because of a Roman Catholic friend of their Mother's, as was also suggested, we can only guess. As soon as it became known that they were heiresses, they received a constant stream of begging letters. This they found very distressing and difficult to deal with. In later years Beatrice became quite involved with the Red Cross.

Both the girls were educated at home by a governess. They continued to educate themselves through reading daily newspapers, which continued when they arrived in Birchington. These daily newspapers were delivered, and from the huge piles of them that were discovered after their mother's death, none of them were ever thrown away. This was one of the problems that David Hutchings was called in to help them with, after their mother died. Whole rooms had been given over to storing of these papers.

Gertrude found it very hard to integrate back into the community, but Beatrice was much more adaptable. For a short while they both continued to live at the Hutchings' home at 5 Westfield Road after their mother died. At one stage both the sisters each had dachshunds, which they greatly treasured. Sadly, Gertrude's dog got out of the house and was run over in Westfield

Road. Eventually, Gertrude decided she wanted to live alone, so she left the Hutchings' home. At one time she lived in Westgate and later in Wilkie Road in Birchington. Unfortunately, she found it almost impossible to manage on her own and used to shut herself away for days at a time. The police were often called when her neighbours grew concerned about milk bottles lined up on the doorstep. She eventually died in 1971 (aged 84 we are told) and was buried in the cemetery in Hove, beside her mother.

Beatrice lived on with the Hutchings until the end of her life. When Mrs Ward had died, they were informed about their own fortune. Beatrice used this to buy a house in Dane Road called 'Greenroofs', where the Hutchings moved with her in about 1946. They continued to live there until about 1974. While they were living at 'Greenroofs', Beatrice's dachshund 'Nigger' strayed onto the railway line. Peggy, the Hutchings' daughter who was staying with her parents on holiday from her job in the north of England, rescued the dog from the line, much to Beatrice's joy and relief. She could not get over how Peggy had 'risked her life' for Beatrice's pet.

Eventually the house and gardens became too large for them, once David had died and his children had grown up and left home. So Mrs Lillian Hutchings and Beatrice moved back up into the village again. Before Beatrice died on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1976, she was universally liked by everyone who came to know her. She enjoyed people and entered into the life of her little community with great enjoyment. She always seemed to be trying to make up for all those 'lost' years when she and her sister were locked away with their mother in Minnis Road. She actually died with Peggy Nash (nee Hutchings) up in Walsall in Cheshire. Peggy and her mother then took Beatrice's body by train down to Hove to be buried with her mother and sister.

In her will, Beatrice left £10,000 "to any residents in Birchington over the age of 75, who had lived in the village since 1938", the year when the girls received their 'release'.

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Information in this article has been taken from reports in the press, some of which has now been proved erroneous:

**Isle of Thanet Gazette**, dated 16<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> July **1938**:

**The Daily Mail 1976**: [date and month unknown]

**Thanet Times** 21<sup>st</sup> January and 7<sup>th</sup> September **1976**:

**Isle of Thanet Gazette** 6<sup>th</sup> Feb., 11<sup>th</sup> June and 10<sup>th</sup> Sept. **1976**.

Other information has come from original documents and letters held by the Hutchings family relating to the Ward sisters, kindly lent to me by David Hutchings' son, John, for which many thanks.

Help has also been received from Pat and Cliff Cole, with regard to certificates (where obtainable) and census returns, which was a great help, and for which I give my warmest thanks.