

WARD SISTERS – A Puzzle

1908 – 1976

The 'full' account of the story of the Ward sisters is told in the Birchington Heritage Museum archives, but there are still many unanswered questions. When we recently discovered a newspaper cutting in Alfred Walker's old files about the inquest on their mother's death, we thought we might be able to answer some, if not all, of them. As so often happens in these searches, some of those questions were answered – but even more questions were generated.



The reason given by Beatrice, the elder of the sisters, for the delay between the date of their mother's death in April and the discovery of the body in July was that their mother did not want to be 'put in a box underground'. But by the time this event happened the sisters had been kept out of sight from the public for 30 years. Their mother had more or less brainwashed them into believing that there were no people of 'their class' in Birchington that they could mix with. As far as can be ascertained, Beatrice Ward had been born in London in about 1886, with her sister Gertrude arriving the following year.

It is stated in some early information about the family that the two girls were the illegitimate daughters of Florence Greatrex, who later took the surname of their father, John Michael Ward when they arrived in Birchington. 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 young children, who were about 8 and 9 years old. They were all admitted to the St Pancras Workhouse on 25th April 1895 and discharged just over two weeks later on 13th May. Their father was alleged to have died on 25th March 1895, aged 48, which may be the reason that 'Mrs Ward' was so distressed at that time. She may have been hoping to marry the father of her two little girls eventually.

This information comes from a letter sent to Gertrude Ward via their solicitor, three months after their mother eventually died on 21st April 1938. Once the body was discovered, 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 an article in the Daily Mail, written soon after Beatrice's death in 1976, it was stated that the sisters were illegitimate and that the mother had registered the girls under their father's name of Ward, and called herself 'Mrs Ward' from then on. In searches made for us in 2010, no trace could be found of the births of either of the girls or even of their mother. It would appear that Mrs Ward 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 to them 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 (probably rented), which forced them to leave it. Mrs Ward then bought 'Homefield' in Minnis Road, (now No: 8) and moved her daughters there. From that point onwards, until she died in 1938, she always kept the girls with her. There was a time when they each bought ladies' cycles from their neighbour, George Cousins, who had invented the ladies' cycle with the lower, curved cross-bar and in late evenings during the summer would ride together along the coast road for short distances. During the Inquest into their mother's death, a reporter remarked that there was "nothing unusual in their appearance apart from the unnatural pallor of a sunless life".



The house in which the Ward family lived for 30 years