

## More Than Oliver Twist: Biography

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Name: Isabella Ferguson

B. 1840 d. NK

According to her 1881 Leeds Workhouse census return, Isabella Ferguson was born in Scotland in about 1840 (1). On that record she is described as 41 years of age, unmarried and a laundress. In 1871 an Isabella Ferguson, unmarried and born in Scotland in 1840, worked as a domestic servant in the household of Adam Howie Wylie, 33, in Oldham, Lancashire (2).

On 26 June 1876, an Isabella Ferguson was tried for larceny at Durham Court Sessions (3). The record states that because of her previous convictions for felony under the alias of Isabella 'Smith', she should be sentenced to seven years imprisonment. The trial of Isabella Ferguson under the name 'Smith', took place on 19 February 1875 (4). A month after her trial and seven years prison sentence, on 17 July 1876, Isabella Ferguson alias Smith was admitted to Millbank Prison in Middlesex (5).

At some point during her sentence, she was transferred from Millbank Prison to the Battery House Refuge in Winchester. This is evident from a discharge record from The Battery House Refuge, dated 8 March 1881 (6). On that record she is recorded as Isabella Ferguson alias Smith, born 1840, Scotland, and married. In the later workhouse record she is described as unmarried (7). The Battery House Refuge record goes on to describe her as having a sallow complexion, brown hair, being just over 5' 4", slender, with a long face, and a mark on her third right finger (8). She had lost several top teeth and had a mole on her left cheek.

Isabella left the Refuge on 9 March 1881 and was discharged to Menston, near Leeds (9). This would have brought her to the vicinity of the Leeds Workhouse prior to the 1881 census which took place on 3 April 1881 (10).

According to the research of Dr Jo Turner and Dr Helen Johnston related to the treatment of female prisoners in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (11), the Battery House Refuge was a liberal and forward thinking setting. It housed 65 women for the last 6 months of their prison sentence. It provided a form of rehabilitation, through care and enabling them to find paid employment and therefore future financial security which would avoid them offending again.

It was not clear why Isabella was discharged to Menston, near Leeds. The Asylum in Menston was not opened until 1888 (12). At some point after arriving in Leeds, Isabella found her way to Leeds Union Workhouse (13). It is not known how long she stayed at the workhouse as no further convincing records for her could be found.

References

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