Blue Mondays: A Woman's Life in the East End

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Blue Mondays: A Woman’s Life in the East End

How does it feel
When you treat me like you do
And you've laid your hands upon me
And told me who you are?
I thought I was mistaken
And I thought I heard your words
Tell me, how do I feel?
Tell me now, how do I feel?

“Blue Monday” New Order

The weather on February 8, 1892 was temperate for that time of year in England. Windy at times, with passing showers, by noon of that Monday temperatures would reach the upper 40s. Also by noon of that Monday, fifteen-year-old Matilda Carter and nineteen-year-old Robert Hardy would be husband and wife. Mondays had been a popular day for weddings in the Victorian period, but that day had declined in popularity by the time Robert and Matilda

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3 Church of England Parish Registers, Tower Hamlets, St. Thomas, Bethnal Green, 1890-1893. London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: P72/TMS/038, p. 7. London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1938, Ancestry.com, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/5304604:1623. Their ages are listed here as eighteen and twenty one, but age seems to have been a moving target according to baptism, marriage, and census records. For my purposes here, I am using baptismal records as much as possible. I was unable to find those for Robert or his siblings, although their parents were married in the Church of England, (Same as above, St. James the Great, Bethnal Green, 1866-1886. Reference Number: P72/JSG/024 https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/5612544:1623) and of their children at least Robert and his elder brother John had all of their children baptized in the Church of England.
married.⁴ As parliament enacted labor laws over the course of the century, ensuring a half-day on Saturdays for factory workers and as the shift work system developed, the need for a cheeky “Saint Monday” observance lessened. Some may have seen losing a day’s pay as an impractical or impossible luxury. By 1895, Bank Holidays seemed to have become the days of choice for most marriages in East London. Helen Bosanquet wrote that year of having seen “some twenty to thirty couples” parade up and down a Shoreditch parish church’s walkway one Bank Holiday.⁵ February 8th, 1892 was just a regular Monday, though. A day that Robert saw fit to take off work for his wedding or perhaps just a few hours.

But this is not the story of one wedding; it’s the story of two. Maybe three. Twenty years later, on another Monday in a church less than a mile from her first marriage, Matilda declared she was a widow and married a man named Alfred Turner.⁶ This time she gave her age as thirty-three—three years younger than her real age instead of three years older. Three months after Matilda and Alfred’s wedding, Matilda’s eldest daughter Caroline Maud married, she too stating that she was three years older than she was. What haunts me about Matilda and her daughter are these patterns, these echoes, these ripples. Why did they both lie about their ages? There was no minimum age of marriage when either woman married, although consent of a parent or guardian was required if the bride were under twenty-one.⁷ Matilda’s father witnessed her marriage to Robert. Caroline Maud claimed to be twenty-one at the time of her marriage.

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But this is not only the story of three weddings. It’s also the story of working-class women at the turn of the twentieth century. It’s a story of women, families, communities, poverty, violence, education, and—butting up against all of these stories—a paternalistic legal system that affected most aspects of poor people’s lives. Looking at one working class woman’s life highlights the cyclical nature of unchecked violence against women. While there were laws in place that protected women and children from assault, marital violence and rape were not illegal. And even though laws against assault and rape existed, the attitude of the judge in the assault case that Matilda would bring on her husband reveals that violence against women was not seen as particularly unacceptable. This attitude towards the inevitability of domestic violence may lie in the Hardy family’s social class, the working poor of London.

1.

He’s out on the fuddle, with lots of his pals,
Out on the fuddle, along with other gals;
He’s always on the fuddle,
While I’m in such a muddle—
But I mean to have a legal separation.

Popular East End Music Hall Ballad, 1880s

Matilda and Robert were married at their parish church, St. Thomas, Bethnal Green, less than a quarter of a mile from Hassard Street where they both lived. In the register, Matilda signed her name and Robert made his mark. Bethnal Green was a particularly overcrowded area at the time. Made up of mostly working, working-class people, it was noted at the time for two things: its slums and being one of the three neighborhoods in London with the highest rates of

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8 The song was made famous by Jenny Hill. See Jacqueline S. Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1975), 104.
9 *London Church of England Parish Registers*; Reference Number: P72/TMS/038, p. 7. For information on the now defunct St. Thomas, see https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/MDX/BethnalGreen/StThomas.
marriage for women under twenty-five. On her same essay on marriage in East London, Bosanquet called marrying young “the curse of the poor.” Particularly for young women it led to a life of “care and sickness and poverty, of hopeless squalor or unceasing toil, leading to premature old age or death. By the time they are twenty-five all the elasticity and vigour of youth are crushed out of them, and those who maintain their self-respect have nothing to look forward to but drudgery.” This decidedly middle-class perspective on the lives of the working class and expectations of married life seems to be rather more indicative of Bosanquet’s social values than those of the women she describes, but it does point out some of the issues faced by women in poor communities. What she leaves out, though, is an additional factor that may have crushed the “vigour of youth” out of these women, domestic violence.

On the 22nd of February, 1893, one year and two weeks after they were married, Matilda and Robert Hardy had yet another fight. Over the course of the past year they had had many fights, resulting in Robert giving Matilda twelve black eyes—an average of one black eye per month. Matilda’s face would have been bruised for roughly half of her married life. This night seems to have been like many others. The two had been drinking, and Matilda accused Robert of being drunk. According to her reported testimony, he then hit her hard enough under the jaw to blacken her eye and knock her to the ground. Matilda had had enough this time and brought charges of assault against Robert at the Worship Street Police Court. She wanted a judicial separation. In the proceedings, Robert defended himself by accusing Matilda of pushing him before he hit her. She admitted that she had, and Magistrate Henry Bushby then judged,
according to *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, “that was really beginning the attack. But for that he would have granted a judicial separation.” Matilda, not yet twenty years old, was to blame for her husband’s violent attack on her body, with the implication being that she must have provoked the previous attacks. More than that, she was expected to return to living with him.

Matilda’s case is far from unique. Her birth was in the midst of a time of crisis for English women. In 1878, when Matilda was beginning to form her earliest memories, Frances Power Cobbe published what would become a famous essay, “Wife-Torture in England.” In it, she attempts to trace the magnitude of violence against English women and calls for the need to pass a bill to give legal rights to women whose husbands have been convicted of assault against them. She cites the Judicial Statistics for England and Wales of Aggravated Assaults on Women and Children for 1874-76, the timeframe in which Matilda was born, as: 1874: 2,841; 1875: 3,106; 1876: 2,841. While the statistics do not indicate by whom the assaults were made, Cobbe suggests that it is likely that eighty percent of these cases were husbands assaulting wives.

Assault was a broad category in those days. Cobbe frequently references the Criminal Procedure Act of 1853, but the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 spells out sentencing for various offences. Assault is generally classified as a misdemeanor with a sentence of two months hard labor and/or a fine not exceeding 5 pounds. Aggravated assault against a woman or a male under fourteen years of age was a misdemeanor with a sentence not exceeding six months with

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or without hard labor and a fine not exceeding 20 pounds. Fifteen years after Cobbe’s plea to pass a bill further protecting women from violence by their husbands, Robert Hardy was given a fine of forty shillings or one month in prison for assaulting his wife. His name does not appear in prison records of the time. Forty shillings would have been on the high end of an artisan’s estimated week’s wages and not an easy sum to come up with. However, losing a month’s worth of wages would not have been desirable either.

Police courts were a sort of intermediary court where magistrates heard cases brought by members of the public. These were courts of summary jurisdiction, meaning no jury or trial was necessary for the magistrate to make his decision, and the magistrate could “dismiss the charge, send the accused for trial at the quarter sessions or the Old Bailey, or, in certain and instances, rule on the guilt and punishment of the accused himself.” Members of the police force or members of the public, for a small fee, could bring charges on someone. In the Hardy case, Matilda was the complainant. The police court was a common way for women to pursue a judicial separation from their husbands, but it was also a way for women to redress other issues like child support—for legitimate or illegitimate children—or protection of their property from husbands who had deserted them.

The story of Robert and Matilda Hardy highlights the disparity of power based on gender in late nineteenth century Britain. In 1893, women had no legal grounds on which they could live

16 “Offences Against the Person Act 1861,” Legislation.gov.uk, accessed December 4, 2022, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/24-25/100/section/43/enacted Neither provision of the Act seems to have been updated until the 1990s. It is still, I believe, on the books, with the most recent emendation in 2011 to simply say that “Persons convicted of aggravated assaults on females and boys under fourteen years of age may be imprisoned or fined.”


apart from their husbands, potentially being ordered back to live with the men who endangered their lives, and it’s not as if domestic abuse occurred rarely. On an average morning at Worship Street Police court in 1890, eight of the thirty-one people who had come to apply for a summons were women seeking to charge their husbands with assault. But there were many women who did not bring charges against their husbands. Thomas Holmes was a police court missionary in the 1890s and describes cases of “wife-beating among a certain class” as being “so common that I have found plenty of wives who take it as a perfect matter of course, and some do not mind very much unless they are seriously damaged. But there are others with whom it is far different.” Clearly Matilda was one of those who did not see it as a matter of course.

The Victorian legal attitude towards domestic violence was confusing. Although there had been many court rulings against husbands who used too much force in “correcting” or “chastising” their wives, common perception was that it was not illegal for a husband to beat his wife. Two years after Matilda and Robert’s court case, the Summary Jurisdiction (Married Women) Act granted women more access to separation from their husbands by allowing them to petition for legal separation in cases of assault but also in the instance of financial neglect or desertion. It allowed the wife custody of the children if her husband had deserted the family. It also raised the charges for domestic abuse from common assault to aggravated assault, increasing the allowed sentences to be imposed. That same year, though, a bylaw was passed in the City of London, a mere stone’s throw from the Worship Street Police Court where Robert and Matilda’s

19 Davis, “A Poor Man’s System of Justice,” 320.
case was heard, forbidding wife beating between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. because the noise was keeping people awake. As Holmes wrote, “A volume itself would fail me to tell half the stories of tragedy and pathos connected with this branch of my work” Robert won this fight. Matilda lost her will to fight. Barring an epiphany, Robert must have continued to beat his wife, but Matilda never again pressed charges on him. For all of the legal and socially accepted ways that Robert had power in their relationship, though, there was one thing that Matilda could do and he couldn’t: write. In the parish registry at St. Thomas, Matilda had signed her own name, but Robert had only been able to make his mark. Matilda had an education. I keep returning to this fact. Was education the reason Matilda felt confident in bringing suit against her husband?

2.

We treads the parf o’ life as every married couple ought,
Me and ’er—’er and me;
In fact we’re looked on as the ‘appiest couple down the court,
Me and ’er—’er and me.
I must acknowledge that she ’as a black eye now and then,
But she don’t care a little bit, not she;
It’s a token of affection—yuss, in fact that is love
Wiv me and ’er—’er and me.25

Popular East End Music Hall Ballad, 1890s

Harriett Matilda Carter was born on New Year’s Eve 1876. Her parents, Thomas and Mary Ann, lived in four rooms at 12 Emma Street with their seven older children. After Tillie, as her parents called her, there would be three more Carter children. The older of her siblings had

24 Holmes, Pictures and Problems, 62
25 Gus Elen popularized this song as well as many other character songs seen as representing the East End way of life. Bratton, Victorian Popular Ballads, 101.
all been born in Sussex, but Tillie was a Londoner, born and bred in the Haggerston neighborhood of Bethnal Green.

Fig. 1 Charles Booth, "Detail of Haggerston," *Charles Booth’s London: Poverty maps and police notebooks*, 2016. https://booth.lse.ac.uk/map/16/-0.0645/51.5323/100/0.

Her family continued to live at 12 Emma Street into the 1890s. Although they lived in only four rooms, the large Carter family was relatively comfortable. Thomas Carter had been on the electoral rolls since at least 1873, an indication that they owned their own furniture and earned enough money to pay at least 10 pounds per annum in rent. Given that most working class Londoners spent 20-25% of their income on rent, the Carters, while living on one of the poorer streets in the area, were bringing home enough money to rent an unfurnished home from year to

27 Thomas Carter shows up in the electoral register as residing at 12 Emma Street from 1873 until 1893, then Matilda’s older brother George shows up in the rolls there in 1894 and 1895. Another man named Thomas Carter raised his family a few doors down at 7 Emma Street. For information across the decades, see *Electoral Registers*. London, England: London Metropolitan Archives. Ancestry.com, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/1795/.
year for almost two decades.\textsuperscript{28} A large employer in the area must have been Imperial Gas Works, which had locations across from where the Carters lived in the 1870s through the 1890s on Emma Street and near Nelson Place where Thomas and Maryann Carter would eventually move around the turn of the century. I think it’s safe to say that Thomas, whose occupations we know are gas stoker, laborer, deskmaker, and costermonger or hawker, would have some point been employed by Imperial Gas Works or another gas manufacturer in the area.\textsuperscript{29}

In a large family, the common perception is that each child grows to be either loud enough to have their voice heard or quiet enough to not have to compete. I can’t imagine the Matilda that took her husband to court as a quiet child. The only girl sandwiched between two boys on either side of her, she must have been an independent spirit even then. In 1880, at only three and a half, little Tillie was enrolled in Pritchard Road School. The school wasn’t far, just the next street over. It’s almost easy to imagine Matilda and her older brothers walking to school together in the morning, coming home for lunch, and returning to school for afternoon lessons.

Was she good at reading and writing? Her hand on her marriage certificate is steady, if a little cramped. It doesn’t look like a signature that she labored over. It looks confident. Maybe she was good at arithmetic, adding up sums on slates that would be cleaned and reused throughout the day. I wonder if she misbehaved and got in trouble. I don’t see a boisterous kid like Matilda

\textsuperscript{28} The Booth map in figure 1 shows average incomes by block or street. Hashed blue, as seen on Emma Street, indicated that the average income was poor, bringing in 18 to 21 shillings per week (a pound was the equivalent of 20 shillings) for a moderate family. The solid purple shows that families in that block had mixed incomes from poor to comfortable, hashed red indicates a comfortable, “good ordinary earnings,” and a darker blue shows “chronic want” and unstable work. Red and yellow coded areas, none of these located in this part of Bethnal Green, were middle class and well to do, respectively. See Charles Booth’s London Maps for information on how income was distributed in the late nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{29} These Victorian structures known as gasometers are not protected as historical buildings and are mostly being torn down or repurposed. They are rather beloved parts of the landscape, and much can be found about them and their fate online. A few sources of information are:

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/news/2022/apr/reminiscences-wanted-bethnal-green-gasholders
And https://spitalfieldslife.com/2019/05/09/the-fate-of-the-bethnal-green-gasometers/
being the star pupil. As she got older, maybe she daydreamed about getting out of school and being a proper grown up. But she would have woken up and left her house every day to head around the corner to school. All under the shadows of the Imperial Gas Works gasholders.

Fig. 2 View from Emma Street, 2014. Emma Street has been reoriented since the Carters lived there, and now is to the south of the site instead of directly facing its length. "So Long, Bethnal Green Gasometers," Spitalfields Life | In the Midst of Life I Woke to Find Myself Living in an Old House Beside Brick Lane in the East End of London, last modified September 21, 2022, https://spitalfieldslife.com/2022/09/21/so-long-bethnal-green-gasholders/.


Although Matilda lived at 12 Emma Street her entire childhood, her view each day may have been different. Each morning, men would have streamed down Emma Street, entering and exiting the gas works at shift changes. The large scaffold-like structures known as gasholders or gasometers rose well above the level of buildings or perimeter walls that housed the business. The gasholders housed the vessels that stored the harvested gas, and depending on how much gas it held at any point during the day, it would have seemed full or empty from the street.  

irony is that the very object providing gas to light the streets and houses of the better off would have blocked the light at times to the houses nearest it. I wonder if Matilda noticed the levels in the gasholders each morning or if she took it for granted that everyone in her world lived under structures like these. Maybe she looked at these from the schoolyard or window and wondered what her father and brothers were doing at that exact moment in the factory while she was learning her two times tables.

In 1881 there were four working members of the family. Ten years later, there was only one, Thomas. The three children still at home by then, Matilda was not one of them, were all in school. If Mary Ann took in work to make extra money, she didn’t list it on the census; they had a boarder to help make ends meet. In 1880, compulsory education for children between five and ten years old was enacted into law. Although school had been voluntary previous to that 1880 act, Thomas Carter had been enrolling his children in school at least since the family moved to London some time before the 1871 census. Twelve-year-old James Carter was old enough to work in 1891, but he was listed in the census as a scholar. Much of the push toward universal education in the late nineteenth century stemmed from a desire to stop child labor. Although we have no way of knowing whether or not the Carter children worked outside of school hours, their being registered in school beyond the legally required age shows that Thomas Carter believed in education. His children would be a part of the literacy explosion in the second

31 The National Archives of the UK (TNA); Kew, Surrey, England; Census Returns of England and Wales, 1891; Class: RG12; Piece: 259; Folio: 100; Page: 10; GSU roll: 6095369, Ancestry.com https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/9430791:6598.
33 At that time, the school leaving age was 10, and in 1893 it was extended to 11. The school leaving age was raised to twelve in 1899. “The 1870 Education Act.”
half of the nineteenth century that saw men’s literacy rise from 69-97 percent and women’s from 55 to 96 percent of the population.  

Robert Hardy, on the other hand, was part of the three percent of the male population that could not read or write. Born around 1871, there is no record of his being enrolled in school. In the 1881 census, listed as age nine, he does not have anything next to his name under “rank, profession, or occupation” where the word “scholar” should appear if he had been in school, and it is recorded there for other children within the range of ages affected by compulsory education. Maybe he was one of the eighteen percent of children who were not complying with the new Education Act. What is certain is that he could not write his name in the parish register on February 8, 1892 when he and Matilda were married. Matilda signed her name; Robert made his mark next to his name. Thomas Carter signed his name as witness to Robert and Matilda’s union; Robert’s witness, Emily Marsh, a neighbor of his mother’s, gave her mark. The two young people were not raised far apart, the two addresses we have for Robert before their marriage are well within a mile of 12 Emma Street. The cause of Robert’s illiteracy couldn’t have been the fact that he was older than Matilda since her older siblings had gone to school. It must have either been because of need or a belief system that didn’t give much credence to education. Of course, either position is filled with nuances that cannot be completely understood from this distance. Robert’s older brother could read and write. His maternal grandfather had been an attorney’s clerk, and Robert’s father had signed his own name in the parish register at his


“The 1870 Education Act.”

Robert was a glassblower his entire working life. Perhaps he struggled in school. Perhaps he struggled to see a need for literacy since he knew he would be working with his hands like his father and siblings. But the fact that he couldn’t write stands out in stark relief compared to those around him.

3.

Sweetness, sweetness I was only joking
When I said I’d like to smash every tooth
In your head
Sweetness, sweetness I was only joking
When I said by rights you should be
Bludgeoned in your bed

“Bigmouth Strikes Again” The Smiths

After Matilda and Robert’s assault case was heard, they remained together. In 1894, their first child, Caroline Maud Hardy, was baptized at St Stephen’s Haggerston, the same church where Matilda had been baptized. Matilda was now eighteen years old, and she and Robert had moved in next to her childhood home on Emma Street. A year later their son, also named Robert Edward Hardy, was born and all four of them now lived at 12 Emma Street along with Matilda’s brother George, maybe her parents and perhaps even some of her younger siblings. By 1896, there ceases to be a Carter on the electoral rolls at 12 Emma Street for the first time in more than twenty years. Were they victims of the rent explosion of that last decade of the century? Or was it just time to move on? Perhaps by this time four rooms was simply an unnecessary luxury.

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38 Although his mother, Jessie, could not write. In the future, it would be worth exploring literacy and possible learning disabilities in these generations and families. London Metropolitan Archives; London, England; London Church of England Parish Registers; Reference Number: P72/JSG/024, ancestry.com https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/5612544:1623
39 The Smiths, “Bigmouth Strikes Again,” by Morrissey and Johnny Marr, recorded August-September 1985, Rough Trade Records, track 6 on The Queen is Dead, 1986, vinyl LP.
40 The average rent in nearby Hackney went up by 33% between 1894 and 1901. Ellen Ross, Love and Toil: Motherhood In Outcast London, 1870-1918. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 42. https://hdl.handle.net.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/2027/heb04540.0001.001. EPUB.
When Caroline Maud and little Robert were enrolled in Mowlem Street Primary School the Hardys were living on Cambridge Road.\(^{41}\) No longer were they looking out at a gas works every day, on Cambridge Road they were at most a quarter of a mile away from some kind of green space, whether the Bethnal Green Museum Gardens or Bethnal Green itself. Granted they may have had to pass the Bethnal House Lunatic Asylums to get to green space, but this perhaps would have been better than living across the street from a gas works. The Hardys were moving up in the world. After all, the twentieth century was on its way and the worst slums of Bethnal Green and the rest of the East End had by now mostly been torn down to make way for new and, supposedly, better buildings. But what had been rows and rows of two up two down houses with communal outdoor spaces were now being replaced with four or five story buildings. Instead of the community being at their doorstep, people were being funneled up and isolated.\(^{42}\)

The dawn of the twentieth century saw two more children for the Hardys and at least two more homes. In 1900 Matilda Beatrice was born, the last of the Hardy children to be baptized at St. Stephen’s Haggerston.\(^{43}\) At that time they were still living on Cambridge Road, but by the next year, they were living over a mile and a half from the Haggerston area in south west Hackney. For a woman like Matilda who had spent almost her entire life within a half mile of her childhood home, this must have been an enormous disruption. The 31\(^{st}\) of March, 1901 does not stand out as a particularly notable day in Hackney. It had been an unseasonably cold March, but now at the end of the month the Atlantic current had changed and the weather was becoming

\(^{42}\) “Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1876 to 1914.”
milder. It was the weekend before the Easter holidays, a Sunday. On Tower Street, the census forms had been duly distributed the day before and the instructions were clear—write down the name of everyone who spent the night of March 31st under your roof. It’s impossible to know when Matilda sat down to fill out the forms. Did she do it during the day to benefit from natural light? Did she wait until her children were asleep in the two rooms that the family occupied to sit at the kitchen table in the light of the almost full moon that night? But it must have been Matilda who found time in her day to write down her husband and abuser’s name Robert Hardy as head of family, age 29, occupation: glass-blower, before she dutifully listed herself, age 25, and their children Maude; age 7, Robert; age 6, and Matilda; age 1 year, 2 months. The census didn’t ask for the months, but Matilda included that for her namesake. Perhaps the baby had been ill in the harsh winter and Matilda was afraid she would not reach her second birthday. Perhaps she was simply enamored of her youngest after five years between children. Had there been pregnancies in the five years between her son and younger daughter? There would be another child in February of 1902, when the Hardys would be living on Durrington Road, and by September that year they would be at yet another address.


From the time Robert first declared an occupation on the 1891 census, he was a glass blower.\(^4^8\) Given the economic makeup of where the Hardys made their homes from 1893 to 1902, the employment status a glass blower was likely somewhere between a skilled labourer and an artisan. In the 1911 census someone penciled in the word “bottles” by the location where Robert worked.\(^4^9\) In 1921, the company Ludford and Co Glass Works, Brooksby Walk, Homerton is given. Ludford and Co were specialists in medical glass bottles and perfume bottles.\(^5^0\) Glass bottle manufacturing seems to have been a pretty big employer in the East End, especially Homerton. As Robert progressed in his career he worked on finer and smaller bottles that required precision. As a young husband in the 1890s, though, he may have worked in one of the many companies that supplied glass bottles to the numerous breweries in the area. Alcohol had played a part in the fight that landed Robert in court. It may have been more than a recreational past time for him. It’s very likely that at some point in his life the beer industry could have been his employer as well as a way to spend leisure time.

The family had occupied at least four different residences in three years, and as the family grew, the Hardys moved further and further north toward the neighborhood of Homerton where Robert was likely employed. Was this new transience as they followed Robert’s work what would lead to Robert and Matilda’s living apart by the next census? Was it the distance


\(^4^9\) See n35

\(^5^0\) There were many medical bottle manufactories in East London, specifically the neighborhood of Homerton, and perfume bottle manufacturers in North and East London. *Kelly's Directory of the Chemical Industries including Chemists and Druggists and Drug Stores. Chemical Manufacturers, Manufacturing Chemists, Wholesale Druggists, Drysalters and All Other Trades Connected Therewith, in England, Scotland and Wales, and the Principal Towns in Ireland, The Channel Islands, and Isle of Man* (London: Kelly's Directories, Ltd., 1921), 459; 470. [https://books.google.com/books?id=Qw1aAAAA1AYAAJ&pg=PA445&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false]
from her community? Or were there other factors in play? In the previous decade the family had enjoyed some stability, remaining at the same address on Emma Street for the births of their two oldest children and on Cambridge Road for two years. Robert was making good money, and the homes they lived in over these few years were in areas that had more money than they had ever lived in before. It’s likely that Robert had continued to use physical violence against Matilda, and this could be one reason for the five year age gap between the births of young Robert and young Matilda. Alcohol use may have continued to plague the family. Over the previous ten years, each move the Hardys made had been to an area that was a little more well off than the previous one. A fixed cost like rent was non-negotiable. Where a family’s expenditure varied was in food and leisure activities like drinking. Maybe too much of the family income was going back to the breweries that may have supplied Robert’s living. Whatever the reason, something in their circumstances had changed because they were living with Thomas and Mary Ann again by the end of 1902. The family of six now lived with the Carters in two rooms back in Haggerston, back in a poor neighborhood.

There were two tragedies that could have also contributed to the breaking up of the Hardy family. In the summer of 1904, baby Edward Percy died. Mortality rates of children in urban areas surged at the end of the nineteenth century, especially after hot dry summers. Some evidence has connected the flies drawn to street manure to diarrhea in young children. In children diseases like pneumonia, measles and whooping cough could be fatal, and even as late as 1904 a tainted urban milk supply and improperly sterilized bottles could lead to illness causing death in children, especially poor children. Edward Percy had been born in the middle

of a smallpox outbreak in London, what would turn out to be the last one of the more deadly strain of smallpox. What cold irony to survive to two and a half only to die by accident or another disease. The other tragedy had the potential to be equally damaging to a family that may have already been breaking apart.

4.

The sheriff he’ll come too
With all his ghastly crew,
Their bloody work to do,
Damn their eyes!

Mid-Victorian Music Hall Character Song

On the 7th of March 1906, thirteen years almost to the day of their appearance in front of the magistrate that would not grant Matilda a separation from Robert, the Hardys were at Worship Street Police Court again. This time, the crime was rape. John Crighton, a thirty-seven-year-old salesman, was on trial for “carnally knowing Caroline Maud Hardy, a girl under the age of thirteen years.” There are few details recorded, but according to the law if she had been physically able to, eleven-year-old Caroline Maud would have been required to give testimony and that testimony would need corroboration in order to result in a conviction. Crighton had been brought into custody almost a month before his trial. If he was a newspaper reader, he might have fancied his chances. In the last few years, a few cases had appeared in the papers with similar charges. A sixteen-year-old in Northamptonshire had been given a good character

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54 Popular songs about criminal heroes have a long history in Britain. Some, like this one from the perspective of murderer Sam Hall, were intended to be shocking. Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* 98. This song has been recorded many times, including by Johnny Cash in the 1960s.
by the police and he had been given a sentence of six months. The judge seemed to regret handing down a sentence to someone so young, but he was unwilling to let him off completely.

57 In Poole just a few months before Crighton’s trial, a man had been given twelve months for raping his ten-year-old niece. The judge in sentencing Joseph Orchard blamed the girl’s mother and stepfather, saying that “looked at from one point of view, the crime was an awful one; yet, on the other hand, the prisoner was tempted, and the temptation was brought on by his own goodness in taking the child in. If the child’s mother or step-father—and particularly her mother—had shown anything like moderate kindness or care of the child this offence might never have happened.”

58 In both cases, the justices seemed more than willing to find reasons to forgive the accused. Another recent case, though, had resulted in three years hard labour. When he had been arrested, Ernest John Moden had denied that he had done it. In the trial his victim, who required medical treatment, had testified that she continued to meet Moden because he had given her money. When Moden took the stand, he “practically [admitted] the offence.”

59 The judge said that Moden had behaved in a “most abominable manner,” and that he could not pass over the offence lightly.” Moden was sentenced to three years penal servitude. Without knowing the details of Caroline Maud’s case, her testimony must have been compelling because Crighton

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was remanded to prison for three years. He served a little over two years, and was registered as a habitual criminal upon his release in 1908.

Imagining Matilda’s experiences until now, the panoply of emotions she may have experienced, has not been hard. Growing up in a large poor family, marrying young, being the target of domestic violence, a culture of alcohol abuse, struggling to make ends meet—even the death of a child—all of these things feel easily recognizable and palatable from Victorian novels. The modern reader is comfortable with these aspects of Victorian life. We expect to hear about these kinds of things when reading about the Victorian working class. Of all the known events in Matilda’s life, this rape case is the hardest one to parse. It’s especially difficult when the circumstances surrounding Caroline Maud’s case do not survive. Did Matilda feel guilty? Was she angry? Did she blame her daughter? This is the moment where I find myself confronting the fact that I may be guilty of romanticizing Matilda’s life. Maybe Magistrate Bushby was right all those years ago and she had consistently provoked her also young husband. That didn’t mean she deserved to be beaten, but maybe she wasn’t an innocent victim either. When trying to give a voice to the voiceless, how do we choose which voice to give them? We have no choice but to approach them as humans. Matilda was likely a flawed and complicated human being with some predictable and other unpredictable traits and feelings. If a diary in Matilda’s own hand surfaced, it may reveal a woman whose attitudes would make a twenty first century reader very uncomfortable. I see her as an exemplar of her time, gender, and class, but that doesn’t mean Matilda is a metonym for working class Victorian women. To try to create a “typical” woman, even out of typical experiences, is tempting but not useful.

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5.
My friends know what's in store
I won't be here anymore
I've packed my bags
I've cleaned the floor
Watch me walkin'
Walkin' out the door

“Would I Lie to You?” The Eurythmics

Although members of the community could take their disputes and grievances to the police courts, there was a healthy distrust of the judicial system in East End. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, working class communities still solved many problems without resorting to the law, particularly marital disputes. Although divorce was technically legal in England, it would not be widely accessible for women to pursue until after World War I. The 1895 Married Women’s Act greatly expanded women’s access to remunerative justice if their husbands had abandoned them and their children, but it did nothing to protect the wife’s right to custody of her children or property if she left her husband. In a working-class community like Bethnal Green, many couples chose to forgo access to the law altogether and made their own de facto separations or divorces that were recognized by their neighbors and often family.

Divorce, which until the mid-nineteenth century had required a literal act of parliament, was expensive and it would have been beyond the financial means and social milieu for most working-class women. Many married couples continued to live together, but some couples who could or would not live together most likely agreed to part ways. Surprisingly, bigamy cases of

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62 The Eurythmics, “Would I Lie to You?,” by Annie Lennox and David A. Stewart, RCA Records, track 1 on Be Yourself Tonight, 1985, vinyl LP.
65 Frost, Living in Sin, 80.
the period reveal the extent to which these unofficial divorces occurred and how communities viewed them. In the course of the second half on the nineteenth century, there were about 100 bigamy cases each year in England and Wales. The population grew from 27,386,800 people in 1851 to 41,154,600. That’s approximately 50 percent growth and the number of bigamy cases did not vary much.\textsuperscript{66} It seems that over the course of time, judges were less interested in prosecuting bigamy cases, not that the rate of bigamous marriages actually declined.\textsuperscript{67} Communities must have been more willing to turn a blind eye to de facto divorces as well as second marriages, regardless of their legal status.

In the working class community that Matilda lived in, neighbors were likely to treat these self-declared divorces and marriages as if they had been legally granted.\textsuperscript{68} Whether they harbored any religious or moral misgivings is difficult to pinpoint, but in many cases neighbors would not have been aware of a couple’s legal status. But simply cohabitating had ramifications beyond potential social stigma. Without a legal marriage, women could not sue for support if their “husband” abandoned them. The expanded protections of the Married Women’s Act of 1895 would not have applied to them. Beyond practical matters, though, some women and men desired the religious and moral sanctity of marriage. The fact that there may have been a living spouse from a previous marriage was a hurdle to jump, not a block to stop a second wedding.

I don’t know for sure what caused the Hardys marriage to end or when they finally separated, but I believe it was around 1905. Without any records of Matilda between 1903 and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[67] Frost, \textit{Living in Sin}, 72.
\item[68] Frost, \textit{Living in Sin}, 134. She hedges a bit on this statement, insisting that her research can only be based on news reports and court cases, the aberrations. I am prepared to accept it as fact. In the flurry of middle class concern after newspaper articles surrounding the famous Jack the Ripper case in nearby Whitechapel highlighted the precarity of poor women’s lives, many middle class writers observed these self-divorces and adulterous marriages as a fact unavoidable under the current legal system.
\end{footnotes}
1912, I base this on circumstantial evidence. Edward Percy died in 1904. I think Matilda’s father Thomas died soon after that. After appearing in electoral rolls pretty consistently since the 1870s, he doesn’t appear again after 1904. The other reason I claim 1905 as the dissolution of the Hardy marriage is that, according to the law, if someone had not heard from his or her spouse in seven years a second marriage was not illegal. It could turn out to be invalid, but no one could be prosecuted for bigamy. Do I think that Matilda was counting the days to seven years so that she could legally remarry? Not really. But enough had happened by the middle of that first decade of the new century that would test even the strongest of loves—the death of a child, the loss of a financially supporting parent, alcohol abuse and physical violence. Maybe the rape of Caroline Maud in early 1906 was the last straw in what had been a consistently growing pile of reasons to separate. Matilda had declared herself a widow when she remarried in 1912.  

So much had changed in Matilda’s life between her two marriages. Not only in her own life, but in Bethnal Green itself. Over her lifetime some of the worst slums of Bethnal Green had

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69 Frost, *Living in Sin*, 73. This did cause a few problems for some when the first spouse surfaced again, but it would not turn out to be an issue for Matilda.

70 Robert, of course was alive and well and living seven miles away in Walthamstow with his brother’s family, see the census record in n35. With him was his and Matilda’s son, Robert.

71 “Home Sweet Home” is a good example of the sentimentality surrounding the home that would be seen in much of later Victorian entertainment, Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Battle*, 90.
been razed and rebuilt. Streets had been replotted and communities entirely rearranged. This campaign would continue well into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{72} By the time of her second wedding at St. Stephen’s Haggerston, the church where she and her surviving three children had been baptized, the neighborhood she had lived, left, and returned to her entire life had changed. While the changes to the neighborhood may seem cosmetic, it would have necessarily have changed the soul of the neighborhood, too. Some families would have been forced out of the area when fewer rooms were available after rebuilding.

\textsuperscript{72}“Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1876 to 1914”.

Fig. 4 Compare this 1908 map to Fig. 1. Streets have been shortened or extended. Some streets have been eliminated, particularly north of Whiston Street where 2 Nelson Place had been. Moye Street is erroneously labeled as Moyle on this map. Detail from "Bartholomew's Handy Reference Atlas Of London & Suburbs 1908," MAPCO : Map And Plan Collection Online, last modified October 2, 2022, https://mapco.net/bart1908/bart25.htm.
Many, like Robert, went north to Walthamstow. It was a short train ride even then. Mother Kate Warburton, an Anglican nun who lived in Haggerston her entire adult life, wrote about the journey from London Fields in 1906 as “not a long journey—Hackney Downs, Clapton, and then S. James Street.” The journey itself—at least the station names!—has not changed today, mere minutes on the London Overground. But even a short journey reflects an upheaval for those who found themselves moving to the new suburb in the early 1900s.

Matilda stayed in Haggerston. By 1912 she was living in a boarding house, presumably alone. In 1911 young Matilda Beatrice was a patient in a National Children’s Home in Alverstoke. Her son was living with his father in Walthamstow. Caroline Maud was likely also in Walthamstow. On Monday the seventeenth of June, “widow” Matilda Hardy married Alfred Turner. He was the twenty-nine-year old son of her landlord.


74 A video is available of the contemporary journey here, although the video creator boards at Bethnal Green and not London Fields. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Lk-huVFIM&ab_channel=CustomTransport277


76 See n77.


class practicality, and couples that were intending to marry began cohabiting before their weddings were officially performed. Only six of the forty-four weddings that year occurred on a Monday—a far cry from the twenty to thirty on a single bank holiday Monday that Helen Bosanquet wrote about in 1895. The habits of the neighborhood were changing along with its buildings and street patterns.

If Matilda had exaggerated her age at her first wedding to appear older, at this wedding she shaved a few years off, stating her age as thirty-three. Maybe she didn’t know her true age, but she did write she was twenty-five on the 1901 census. Maybe she bristled at being six years older than her new husband, after all this was his first marriage and maybe he didn’t want to marry someone old enough to have two adult children. Or perhaps this was her second chance at creating a life that she felt she deserved. If she and Alfred did have children, I was unable to find them. In fact, this parish register is the last evidence I have of Matilda and Alfred. In a perfect world, I’d like to imagine they just disappeared into the sunset, but I have a hard time accepting that in reality. There are a few hard truths about Matilda that I have to face.

Matilda’s relationship with her children is one that eludes me, and it may be the key to understanding her. Why did young Robert choose to go to Walthamstow with his father instead of staying in Haggerston to support his mother? Many young men had done so for their widowed mothers, including the older Robert and her new husband Alfred when they were in their teens. Robert made the choice to stay with his father. Maybe it was for work. Maybe he couldn’t stand his mother. Maybe Matilda had deserted her husband and their children. Why was Matilda

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80 Looking through the register for that year, the most weddings in one day that year, eight, were performed on a Wednesday, Christmas Day. Other than that the vast majority were on Sundays.
81 Earlier cited census records (n41 for Robert and n74 for Alfred) show both men at age 18 living with their mothers, each the only household member with a job.
Beatrice in a children’s home? The home she was in was founded for “delicate or convalescent” children. Located on the south coast near Southampton, Alverstoke is 90 miles from London, even today a three and a half- or four-hour train journey. Was this why Matilda emphasized her daughter’s age in the 1901 census? Had she been ill all her life? Young Matilda being in a children’s home could be anywhere from the greatest sacrifice her mother could commit by sending her to a place that could help her or it could be the easiest way to get a difficult child off of her hands and her purse. If she had deserted her family, maybe Robert chose to let Matilda Beatrice go to Alverstoke. A photograph exists that might include her. It’s thrilling to imagine that I might see her face. If I knew which one was Matilda, could I see something of her mother in her face? The set of her jaw, the turn of her nose, the shape of her eyes? This is the closest I can get to either Matilda; I lose track of both Matildas after 1912.

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82 Peter Higginbotham, "Stokesmead, Alverstoke, Hampshire," The Children's Homes Website by Peter Higginbotham, last modified 2022, https://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/AlverstokeNCH/.
Fig. 5 Could one of the bigger girls in the back be a ten-year-old Matilda Beatrice? The thought is so tantalizing. Peter Higginbotham, "Children at Chadwick House, Stokesmeade, Alverstoke, c. 1910," Childrenshomes.org.uk, n.d., http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/AlverstokeNCH/.

And then there’s Caroline Maud. When I imagine her life, it’s nothing like her mother’s. Matilda was raised in a large and stable household. Everything about Caroline Maud Hardy’s upbringing seems precarious. Of her life after 1906 I have the barest outline of facts, but each is significant. Three months after her mother’s second wedding, on Sunday September 1st, 1912 Caroline Maud Hardy also lied about her age in the parish register when she declared her age as twenty-one upon marrying Henry Williams at St. Mary the Virgin parish church in Walthamstow.83 The final unanswerable question about this family is why did Caroline Maud lie about her age? One of the witnesses was a Jessie Hardy, probably a cousin named after her paternal grandmother. The address they gave was 42 Northbank Road, the home of her uncle and the place her father made his home for the rest of his life. If she lived in the same house as her father, why would she have eliminated the need for parental consent? The curate of St. Mary the Virgin who married them may have seen the irony in the bride being six months pregnant at the time. Their son Henry Albert Williams was born on November 19th.84 Caroline Maud died in 1980 and her son died in 2001.85 They both had lived in the county of Hampshire, voted one of

83 Essex Archives Online, Original register held by Waltham Forest Archives; transferred temporarily to the Essex Record Office for digitisation (TA4257). Service of Church: Registers of Marriage, July 1911-February 1913, Walthamstow, St Mary the Virgin, WF/W83/1 RM 17 https://www.essexarchivesonline.co.uk/ancestry.aspx?id=1570623. The image is available for purchase, but a partial transcript can be found at https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=GBPRS%2FESSEX-MAR%2F0647220%2F2.
84 Essex Record Office; Chelmsford, Essex, England; Essex Church of England Parish Registers. Baptism Register; Service of Church: Registers of Baptisms; Registers; Walthamstow, St Mary the Virgin (Digital Images Only); Waltham Forest Archives (Digital Images Only);1904-1913, ancestry.com https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?viewrecord=1&r=5542&db=EssexBaptisms&indiv=try&h=4868202.
I did not buy the image to see the information on Henry’s baptismal record. However, if I were to continue research into Caroline Maud’s life, this would possibly give me an address beyond her uncle’s house.
85 While these Civil Registration Death index results do not contain much information, the birth dates in the records exactly match those of the Caroline Maud Williams and Henry Williams I have been researching,. Additionally, in the 1939 England and Wales Register, Henry was living in Eastleigh, a suburb of Winchester. Caroline Maud Williams: General Register Office; United Kingdom, Registration Date: Jan 1980, Registration District: Winchester, Inferred County: Hampshire, Volume 20, Page 2033. Ancestry.com. England & Wales, Civil Registration Death
the top ten most desirable places to live in the England in 2016. How different Caroline Maud’s life in the twentieth century must have been to her mother’s. Whatever kept Matilda in Haggerston seems to have led to the loss of her family. If she were alive, she would have been in her fifties by the time women had some say in the laws that surrounded them. Caroline Maud would have been fully enfranchised into political life, knowing in her twenties that she would soon be eligible to vote, and she witnessed changes in women’s status that led to a female prime minister by the time she died. She left urban London behind her and with it a childhood marked by trauma. At least in a story with so many beginnings and so few known endings, there is the possibility that some endings may have been happy.

Fig. 6, A map showing the area in Fig. 1 as it appears today. "Google Maps," Google Maps, accessed December 7, 2022, https://www.google.com/maps/@51.5325247,-0.0665875,15.86z.

Index, 1916-2007, https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=7579&h=46558804&tid=&&queryId=3e18c32ba2a87fbb0b57be7209d4104&usePUB=true&phsrc=v:U715&start=successSource&gl=1*1v7ah*ga*NzAwNzQzNDUuMTY2MDYwNjcxNw.*_ga_4Q18FME30*MTY2NDcxNzUXMS4sMC4xLjE2NjQ3MTg1MzguMC4wMC4wLjA
