

Benjamin Newell

(b. 1879, d. 1953)

9th October, 2019

Helen Bainbridge

Living in the workhouse in 1881 with his unmarried mother and three of his four siblings (1), Benjamin Newell, born in 1879 (2), had a traumatic start to life. Not just because he was in the workhouse but because he had undergone a controversial surgical operation. At twelve weeks of age the Board of Guardians, with permission from his mother, wrote to the Poor Law Commissioners requesting permission for the Medical Officer to perform an operation on a hare lip (3, 4). The Commissioners replied, after much debate, that 'the cure of hare lips, although beneficial to personal appearance is not necessary for the preservation of life' (5). They also advised that the operation was never quite without risk to life, with a mortality rate of just under five percent (5). Professional opinion was divided as to the best age to undertake such an operation, with some advising aged 4 or 5 and some early infancy (4, 5). The Commissioners' reply arrived over two months after the original enquiry was made which meant the Medical Officer had already successfully performed the operation (6).

Benjamin may not have spent his whole childhood in the workhouse, but he can be found there in 1891 (7) whilst his mother and some other siblings are living in the nearby village of Great Dunham (8). At the age of fourteen, Benjamin, who would have learnt some shoemaking as part of his education in the workhouse (9), was sent as an apprentice to Mr Abraham Bacon Matthews of Wollaston, Northamptonshire (10). Mr Matthews had been taking one Mitford and Launditch Union workhouse boy a year since at least from 1891 until 1901, apprenticing them as boot finishers (11, 12, 13). Benjamin remained single, living in and around Wollaston and Northampton, working as a boot finisher except during the First World War where he served in the 6th Northants Regiment (14, 15, 16). Benjamin must have remained in contact with his family as his declared next-of-kin on his Short Service Testation was one of his siblings still residing in Norfolk (16). Benjamin was invalided out of the army with disabilities resulting from gunshot wounds to his left fore-arm and leg in October 1920 (17). With none of his own family alive, when Benjamin died aged 74, he left his effects valued at £682 2s. 2d. (equivalent to £16,278 today) to the Boddington family who he is found living with in the 1839 Register (18, 19, 20).

Reference List

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- (3) 'Benjamin Newell' (1879) Mitford and Launditch Workhouse Guardians Committee. Minutes of the Guardians of the Mitford and Launditch Union Workhouse 19 May 1879 NRO C/GP14/25. Norfolk Record Office.
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- (10) 'Benjamin Newell' (1893) Mitford and Launditch Workhouse Guardians Committee. Minutes of the Guardians of the Mitford and Launditch Union Workhouse 13 March 1893 NRO C/GP14/34. Norfolk Record Office.
- (11) 'Abraham B. Matthews' (1891) Turnpike Street, Wollaston, Earls Barton subdistrict, Northamptonshire. Public Record Office: PRO RG12/1209, folio 146, p. 19 (1891). Available at: <http://www.ancestry.co.uk> (accessed 07/10/2019).
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