

The Dolling Sisters Buried in C14-9-1/2

Hidden beneath a formerly overgrown section of the cemetery, lay the graves of four elderly sisters, described in the burial records as 'spinsters'. Had it not been for the receipt of an email from a journalist, who was conducting research for a book*, their stories, long forgotten, may well have remained buried with them.

The Dolling sisters, Elise, Adelaide, Geraldine and Josephine, came from a prominent and devout Anglican Irish family, and were four of the seven daughters and two sons of Robert Holbeche Dolling and his wife, Eliza. Their father, a landowner in Co. Down and Londonderry, was once High Sheriff of Londonderry, while their mother was a daughter of Josias Du Pré Alexander, MP, and great niece of the first Earl of Caledon. The sisters and their siblings were all born and lived at the Rectory in Magheralin, Co. Derry, until, in 1859, their father was appointed Land Agent for the Mercers' Company and the family moved to the Manor House, Kilrea. Here the siblings were to spend a number of happy years with their close and loving family, until the death of their mother in 1870. Their father then moved the family to Dublin, where they remained for some years after his death in 1878.

Only two of the siblings were to marry; the eldest daughter, Mary Emma, and the younger son, Caledon Josias. The youngest daughter, Ulrica, had sadly died in 1872. Of the remaining five daughters, little is known of Nina Caroline. She appears to have moved around England to stay with various elderly relatives, until later in life when she came to live with Geraldine at 10 Pavilion Road, Worthing. However, her death in 1931 was registered in Bournemouth.

It was through Elise and Geraldine's close connection with the work of their elder brother, Robert William Radclyffe Dolling, an Anglican priest and social reformer, that the sisters were to come to Worthing. Robert had appeared destined for the church since early childhood. Along with his love of the theatre and interest in politics, he had long shown a desire to work with the poor and disadvantaged. In 1882 he decided to take orders and was ordained as deacon at Salisbury Cathedral the following year. He moved to Stepney, a poor area in the East End of London, to run the St. Martin's Mission, while three of his sisters left their

comfortable home to live in very poor and cramped conditions in order to take over the care of the women of the district.

The Mission was a great success, and in 1885, the sisters took some of the mothers to St. Paul's Cathedral, to witness Robert's ordination as priest. Perhaps influenced by the Orange Order, for whom the sisters had sewn sashes and banners, and later by the Oxford Movement of Anglo-Catholicism, Robert, known as Father Dolling, insisted on the use of rituals when preaching to the poor. This did not go down well with some of his superiors and when the Bishop refused to grant him a licence to preach in the way he wished, his uncompromising stance led to his resignation from his post. When Robert left Stepney on 1 July 1885, his sisters had to leave with him.

However, Robert was soon offered the running of St. Agatha's Mission in Landport, Portsmouth, where he arrived in November 1885, accompanied by Elise and Geraldine. They were to remain there for the next ten, very successful years, during which time money was raised to build a Mission House, Gymnasium and numerous other buildings, culminating in the construction of a new St. Agatha's Church. Once again, Father Dolling's methods upset the new Bishop. The required licence for the new church was not forthcoming and so he was forced to resign, leaving with his sisters on 10th January 1896.

Father Dolling's final posting was St. Saviour's Mission in Poplar, which was fraught with difficulties. By this time, his health was failing and he moved to Josephine's home in London, where he died on 15th May 1902, surrounded by his sisters and close friends.

Since Elise and Geraldine had been dependant on their brother, a Government Annuity was purchased in Father Dolling's name for a respite home for women and girls from Landport and Poplar, which they would run. A suitable property was found in Teville Road, Worthing, and the Dolling Memorial Home was opened in 1903, running costs being covered by subscriptions and donations. There were a few strict rules, as visitors were expected to attend church on Sundays, and no alcohol was allowed, but otherwise, this was intended to be a comfortable and homely environment.

When the Titanic sank in 1912, 549 of the crew who perished were from the same small district in Southampton. In June 1912, a successful sale of work was held on the lawns of the Dolling Home to raise funds. A number of the widows and other dependants of the crew were offered a month of respite care at the Home, where they would have been treated with the greatest kindness and compassion throughout their stay. The Home closed in 1926, although the building still stands, partially hidden behind a small parade of shops.

Adelaide Harriet Radclyffe Dolling

The first of the sisters to be buried in Broadwater Cemetery was Adelaide, the third of the nine siblings, who was born on 3rd May 1846, and baptised on 7th June. She was to follow a different path from her sisters, pursuing a career in nursing at a time when few nurses had any formal qualifications. She began her training at St. John's House, King's College Hospital, London in 1880, where she gained a certificate in 1881, before spending much of the following year as a Sister at Guy's Hospital. In January 1886 she gained a Midwifery certificate at the British Lying-in Hospital, after which she spent several years as a Private Nurse in France and Italy. On 7th March 1890, she became a Registered Nurse, No. 351, and a Member of the Royal British Nurses' Association (MRBNA), on whose register she is recorded in a list of 'Notable Nurses'. Adelaide next appears in the 1911 census at the home of her sister, Josephine, at 88 Philbeach Gardens, Kensington, but she was to spend her final days at the Dolling Memorial Home in Worthing, where she died on 11th September 1917, aged 71. She was buried on 13th September 1917 in C14-9-1.

Elise Anne Radclyffe Dolling

Eliza, also known as Elise or Miss Dolling, was the second of the Dolling siblings, and was baptised on 25th August 1844. As soon as her brother, Robert, moved to Stepney to run the Mission, she and her sisters joined him to assist with the care of the women. From then on, she would devote her life to working alongside him. She followed him to Landport, where in 1891, she was recorded as Superintendant of the Mission House. Here she oversaw the training of young girls in domestic service. Elise was loved and respected for her firmness but kindness towards the working girls, and she and Robert would supervise the dances held regularly in

the Gymnasium, where the boys and girls would learn to dance and intermix in a civilised way. Following their departure from Landport, she joined Robert at the St. Saviour's Mission in Poplar. While there, Elise ran a summer camp for girls on Hayling Island, a disused vessel moored in the creek having been chartered for the purpose. In 1903, Elise moved to Worthing to run the Dolling Memorial Home, where she died on 3rd November 1917 at the age of 73, just weeks after the death of her sister, Adelaide. She was buried next to her in C14-9-2.

Josephine Maud Radclyffe Dolling

Josephine was the seventh of the nine siblings and was baptised on 13th June 1852. She shared her brother Robert's love of the theatre, and although she worked alongside him in Stepney, most of her life was spent among her friends from the theatre. In 1881, she is recorded as a visitor at the London home of the celebrated American actress, Isabel Bateman, one of four actress sisters, who were to become good friends of the Dollings. Also in the household were two of Isabel's sisters, Kate Crowe, and Ellen Greppo, along with Kate's husband, George Crowe. In 1891, while Geraldine was away, Josephine was staying at the Ladies' House in Conway Street, Landport, with just three servants and a blind organ blower for company. The following year, Kate Crowe opened a theatre school in London, and by 1901 Josephine was living with her, now employed as her secretary. It was to Josephine's home in Kensington that Father Dolling went whenever he was in London, and where he later died. In 1911, Josephine's sister Adelaide and Kate Crowe were living with her, along with several servants and six young female students. Josephine remained in London until towards the end of her life, when she came to Worthing to spend her final days at the Home of the Holy Rood in Stoke Abbott Road. She died there, aged 76, and was buried with her sisters in C14-9-2 on 24th September 1927.

Geraldine Bouverie Radclyffe Dolling

Geraldine, the fourth of the siblings, was born in 1847. Being the shortest, she was, according to her brother, the bravest of them all, apparently having gained access into a home in one of the roughest districts, where others had failed. Along with Elise, she devoted her life to assisting her brother, first at Stepney, then at

Landport and Poplar. She had a talent for organisation, and was known for her unfailing cheerfulness and sense of humour. She had a special rapport with the mothers, and her large mothers' meetings at St Agatha's were a great success in bringing together women of different backgrounds. While the women were sewing, Josephine's friend, Kate Crowe, would give readings, often from Dickens, and this would be followed by a cup of tea and a chat. On moving to Worthing, she assisted her sister with the running of the Dolling Memorial Home. Following the closure of the Home, she retired nearby to 10 Pavilion Road, where she lived with her sister, Nina. She died there on 23rd August 1929 at the age of 81, and was buried with Elise in C14-9-2.

The work of the sisters was considered by some to have been as great as or even to have surpassed that of their brother. Certainly, he would not have achieved as much, had it not been for their support and devotion. The sisters were, according to their friend, the Reverend Desmond Morse-Boycott, the sweetest women he had ever met.

* *The Titanic and the City of Widows It Left Behind* by Julie Cook.