

## Trading Stories, Working Lives

### Graham Barker glimpses into the life of his ancestor Naomi Cave – a Victorian purse maker, pub landlady and devoted mother

The working lives of our female ancestors can be tricky to pinpoint. “The census returns do not reveal the full story of female employment,” writes David Hey in *Journeys in Family History*. “The seasonal or part-time work of women was rarely recorded, especially as the home was the usual place of work, though in fact the earnings of the women... were essential to the well-being of working-class families.”

Keen to redress this skew in the historical record, I resolve to take a closer look at Naomi Cave (1830-1906), my 3 x great grandmother. At first glance, the details of her working life are scant; only her time working as a purse maker merits a mention in one census return. Yet some resourceful research helps broaden my picture of her working and domestic life.

#### A Purse Maker in Cripplegate (1849-52)

Naomi Clarke, now in her late teens, has arrived in London. It's an unfamiliar world to her – houses packed cheek-by-jowl, the streets bustling with carts – but she's gradually finding her feet. She's travelled down from Leicester with her sweetheart, James Cave, and they're lodging with James' eldest brother, William Freestone Cave and his wife Harriett at 8 Silk Street, in the parish of St Giles' Cripplegate.

Naomi and James are hoping that the prospects in London might be somewhat better than back home in Leicester. “One tragic aspect of Leicester during the 1830s and 1840s,” writes Siobhan Begley in *The Story of Leicester*, “was the decline of the hosiery industry on which the local economy was built. This stagnation blighted the town, as many framework knitters, or stockings as they were known, found themselves reduced to grinding poverty.” Naomi's father – William Clarke – works as a stockinger and as a youngster she's known an impoverished, hand-to-mouth existence when work has been scarce.

On Monday 9 April 1849 she and James get married in St Giles' Cripplegate. After the simple ceremony, she signs the certificate with an 'X' where the vicar indicates. Her husband's occupation is listed as a weaver but there's no mention that Naomi herself works too. It's not until the 1851 census that we get the first – and only – definitive reference to her working life as a 'Purse Maker'. By now, she and James have moved a mile or so from Silk Street to Upper John Street, Hoxton.

James Cave	Head	20	Loom Hand
Naomi do	Wife	21	Purse maker
William do	Son	1	
Elizabeth Clarke	Niece	10	Purse maker

There's a strong likelihood that Naomi works for John Rodgers & Sons of Chiswell Street: "manufacturers of girth, roller, belt and brace webs, India rubber webs, and every description of braces, belts, girths, silk purses, &c. adapted for the shipping and country trade." Indeed, her husband James might also work at the Rodgers' factory, operating the elastic web looms. The Cripplegate area was, to a large extent, occupied by the 'rag trade'.



After the birth of William in December 1849, and Ann in September 1851, Naomi takes to home-working. Each week, James brings a box of silk cut-outs home, and she sews the pieces neatly together, threads some purses with elastic, maybe adds a button or two, before returning the finished silk purses to Rodgers'. Her ten-year old niece Elizabeth Clarke helps out too. It's not a prosperous life – the streets of the City are not paved with gold – but they get by. Yet everything changes in 1852. The firm of John Rodgers closes following the death of the proprietor, and Naomi and James decide to move back to Leicester.

### **On Freeman's Common**

When James and Naomi Cave return from London, James swiftly gets sworn in as a Freeman of Leicester on 31 January 1853. He's continuing a long tradition – passed down through generations of Cave framework knitters, weavers and butchers – since his ancestor Thomas Cave (1722-1776) was first made a Freeman in 1754.

By 1859, they've moved to Freeman's Common and for the next five decades the Cave family life revolves around their home here. These days, there's no Common to see – it's occupied by a cinema, supermarket, college and assorted warehouses – but from 1804 when the South Field was enclosed until 1965 when the land was sold to the Council, Freeman's Common comprised a huge expanse of allotment gardens and pastures, interwoven with a few quiet lanes. Old Ordnance Survey maps give a sense of the lattice-like layout.



A journalist later evokes the scene: “It was a world within a world. Seventy secluded acres of orchards, allotments and cottage gardens, with a history that stretched back to the days of the knights... Householders struggled without electricity or gas and drew water from a communal pump, and the roads were named alphabetically, like old-fashioned Tigers’ shirts: Road A, Road B, Road C...”

Naomi and James settle at 6 and 7 X Road, a short hop from Aylestone Road near the Raw Dykes. From the garden they can hear the hubbub of the Cattle Market and the hoot of Midland Railway trains as they dive into the tunnel under the Common. Six of the Cave children are born at Freeman’s Common, and the X Road kitchen becomes the hub for comings and goings amongst the extended family. Naomi helps tend a couple of allotments and rear the pigs, and she cooks family meals largely sourced from home-grown produce.

### Cave James, x Road Inn, Freeman’s common, Aylestone road

Their home is also a beerhouse: the X Road Inn. Initially, beerhouse proprietors such as the Caves simply had to buy a two-guinea licence, but following the introduction of the Wine and Beerhouse Act 1869 local magistrates had the authority to award and revoke licences. It isn’t a straightforward transition – initially, the Freeman’s Deputies objected to the X Road licence – but in due course the Caves are authorised to sell beer to be consumed off the premises. Naomi becomes a familiar figure among thirsty Commoners, pouring beer into their jugs and bottles before they head out to their allotments.

James becomes more closely involved with the management of Freeman’s Common when he is appointed Neatherd from 1868-1871. It’s a paid role for which the “duties on the Pasturage Lands will be to cut, trim, and repair hedges, scour the ditches, keep the manure gathered up, and spread the same at the proper season when required; to fetch up the cows for milking, and to manage the Land in a husband-like manner.”

## **FREEMEN'S LANDS.**

### **OVERSEER AND NEATHERD WANTED.**

**T**HE Freeman's Deputies will proceed on Wednesday Evening, the 3rd of May, at Seven o'clock, to Elect a Man competent to undertake the combined duties of OVERSEER of the Allotment Lands, and NEATHERD of the Pasturage Lands, to commence the same at the ensuing Tac Day. The Salary will be Fifteen Shillings per week, with House Rent Free. Candidates must be Freeman of the Borough.

The duties on the Allotment Land will comprise the repair of the roads and fencing, ditching, cutting and trimming hedges, and such other matters as may be determined by the stewards for the time being, from whom the person appointed will at all times receive orders.

The duties on the Pasturage Land will be to cut, trim, and repair hedges, scour the ditches, keep the manure gathered up, and spread the same at the proper season when required; to fetch up the cows for milking, and to manage the Land in a husband-like manner.

Candidates to send their applications and testimonials to the Clerk, on or before the 2nd day of May, and to attend the Meeting before mentioned.

By Order,

G. DANIELL, 26, King-street,  
Clerk to the Freeman's Deputies.

April 27, 1871.

From 1872, he's elected as a Freeman's Deputy, promising his fellow Freeman "if they did him the honour to elect him as a Deputy, it would be his study to do all he could for the welfare of the Freeman, and he could assure them that he should strive to ascertain if the estate could not be managed at a less rent that they were now paying."

### **Landlady at the Lord Clifden, Mill Lane (1872-75)**

"Leicester United Anglers' Association: The second supper of branch No 3 in connection with this association took place on Wednesday evening, the 7<sup>th</sup> inst, at the house of Mr Jas. Cave. The "Lord Clifden", Mill-lane, when upwards of sixty sat down to partake of the good things provided, the catering of which was excellent, and secured for the worthy host and hostess the entire approbation of the company."

(Leicester Guardian, 14 Oct 1874)

For a three-year period away from the Common, Naomi helps run the bar and kitchen at the Lord Clifden on Mill Lane, alongside her husband and their three eldest daughters. As well as serving beer and keeping the place spick and span, she finds herself catering for large gatherings of fishing enthusiasts. James was pivotal in establishing the Leicester United Anglers' Association in 1873: "A subscription of 2d per week was all that was asked from each member, a portion of which will be distributed in the shape of prizes to those who have been most successful, and the remainder expended in a dinner..."



upwards of forty members were enrolled the first night, which speaks well for the prosperity of the association.”

The society does indeed prosper, and Naomi organises refreshments for larger and larger events, culminating in a gathering for 95 members. In addition to the United Anglers’, the Caves host two other societies – the Angling Preservation Society and the Jolly Anglers’ Club – and “song and sentiment was the general order” of evenings at the Lord Clifden.

Perhaps the most memorable supper was in October 1873 when Naomi is asked to cook a giant pike. She rises to the challenge: “One of the finest specimens of the “Jack” or pike, caught in the midland counties for some time past... weighed 18lb 4oz... The skin has been placed in the hands of Mr Elkinton, naturalist, Church-gate... [and the flesh was] served up in the shape of a supper, and on Monday evening twenty-four members of the association met at the house of Mr Cave to partake of the repast, which was put on the table in first-class style.”

By January 1875, it’s time to move back to Freeman’s Common. The auction particulars of the Lord Clifden give us a sneaky peak inside at the “bar, two parlours, tap-room, large kitchen, extensive club room, 3 bed-rooms and water-closet on the landing, brewhouse, stable with loft over, piggeries, and large yard with gateway entrance.”



### **A devoted mother of troubled sons**

As her gravestone at Welford Road Cemetery recalls, Naomi was a “Devoted Mother”. Between 1849 and 1871 she bears eleven children – a large family by today’s standards, though not so unusual in a time of high infant mortality.

Her six daughters don’t fare well in terms of physical health. Two die as babes-in-arms, Ann and Mary Grace both die in their 20s, with only Bessie and Sarah surviving into middle age. Of her five sons, John Otway dies “after a long illness” aged only 15, and three struggle with their mental health.

In September 1872 Naomi is devastated when William – her eldest son – commits suicide by hanging himself from a tree near the Aylestone Road, aged 22. At the coroner's inquest, his brother-in-law James Bates explains, "He had been complaining of his head for some time, and he went to Dr Barclay for advice, and acting on it he went to Llandudno for eight or ten days, returning last Tuesday. He said he felt better for it, and went to work [at Luke Turner's elastic web factory] at six o'clock on Wednesday morning. He was a hard-working, sober, young man." His father adds that William "had never been strong; about eighteen months ago he had a dangerous fit, and it was thought he was dying."

Remarkably, some 35 years later, history repeats itself. George Hyde Cave – William's youngest brother – also takes his own life in similar circumstances. In his case, George was plagued by epileptic fits and "complained of pains in the head", with his condition exacerbated by depression and drinking bouts. Thankfully Naomi and James were spared witnessing his demise, as it occurred in 1907, just a few months after they themselves had died. Indeed, it's possible that the loss of his parents contributed to George's instability; latterly, he had been managing the X Road Inn, until it was sold as part of his father's estate and the proceeds divvied up amongst the Cave children.

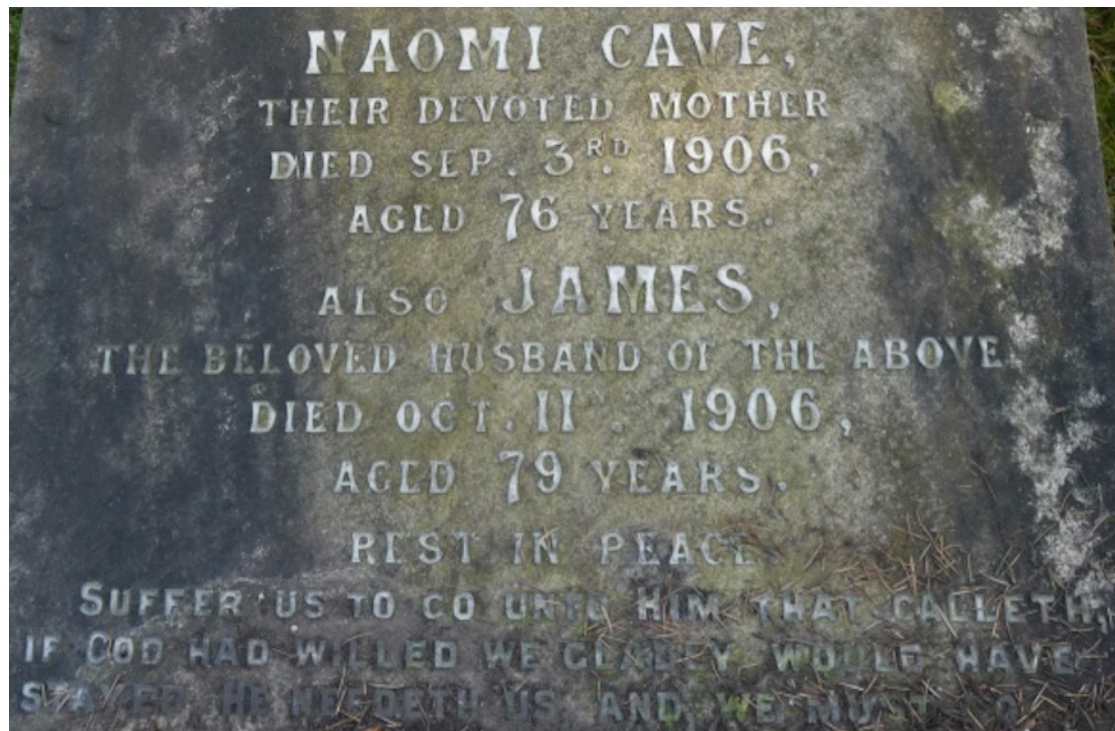
There's a telling line in William Cave's inquest report: "An uncle on the mother's side had been in the idiot ward at the workhouse, and the family were subject to pains in the head". Certain types of epilepsy and seizures do run in families, though it's relatively rare. Perhaps Naomi's two sons had inherited "head pains" through the Clarke family line?

It's certainly a connection that stirs dreadful memories for Naomi. Back in 1864, her brother William Clarke was imprisoned for 15 months for stabbing their father (not fatally) with a kitchen knife after an altercation at home. There had long been unhappiness in the Clarke family, it seems; John Clarke, Naomi's father, "had deserted his family twice or thrice, and been brought back by the police [though] had never assaulted his family."

I come away from the newspaper snippets with a sense of chaos, a family in crisis. Naomi's mettle is tested once again in 1900, when her son James Cave junior is found guilty of wife beating and neglect. At the court hearing, Lizzie Throne Cave "said she had been married to defendant 19 years and he had assaulted her repeatedly for the last 17 years." James is ordered to contribute 8s a week towards his wife's maintenance, and Lizzie is granted a separation order, though by the time of the 1911 census they're living together once again on Freeman's Common.

Throughout the turmoil, Naomi seems to be a lynchpin, presumably trying her best to hold the family together, in body and soul. She must have been remarkably resilient to withstand this rollercoaster of desertion, violence, and mental health difficulties amongst the men in her life. Fortunately, her own marriage with James appears to have been rock solid.

And so it is that we leave Naomi and James living and labouring at Freeman's Common. The public record places Naomi's working life somewhat in the shadows – crediting her with only one brief stint as a purse maker – but now a fuller picture has emerged. Through the years, we find her serving beer at the X Road Inn, cooking suppers for sixty guests at the Lord Clifden, tending vegetable allotments on Freeman's Common, and supporting her children in times of trouble. Like many of our female ancestors, Naomi's unceasing work and motherly love helped keep the family afloat. Shining a light on her has helped me appreciate how remarkably resilient she must have been.



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