A *Redditch Local History Society* Recorded Memory

Marion Palmann Remembers.....

Hard Times in Old Redditch

Red Lion Street

Image: 10027.jpg from the RLHS archives.

My great grandfather was Frederick Abraham Snape, an actor with the family travelling theatre begun by his father in about 1830. My great-grandmother used the name Marie Wells in her marriage certificate. At various times in her life she was called Marie Brookfield, Mary C Brookfield, Marie Wells, Bella Snape, Isabella Brookfield, Fanny Snape, and other combinations of these, and with quite widely differing ages as the mood took her. This was probably theatrical whimsy.

The couple did not have an easy life. There was scarcely a year in which she did not give birth or bury a child, or both, in the first seventeen years of their marriage. Marie gave birth to fourteen children between 1882 and 1897.

They had three sons named Frederick, Frederick William born in 1883, Frederick Shakespeare (poignantly so-called in honour of their line of business) in 1889 and simply "Frederick" in 1899.

Their first child, Mary, died of pneumonia at the age of ten, during a working tour of Derbyshire. She died in the horse-drawn living wagon in which the ever-growing family lived.

A son, Frank, born in 1887 in Wolstanton, died there of marasmus within a month of his birth. A daughter, Edna, born in 1893 died of marasmus within a month of her birth in Staffordshire. Another daughter, Adelaide, born in 1896 died of asthenia within six weeks of her birth in Cannock. A son, Edward, was born and died in Cannock in 1897 within a few weeks of his birth.

In 1889, their son Frederick William died in Bilston hospital at the age of 5, of a particularly gruesome form of smallpox, variola confluens. It is difficult to imagine the horror of this disease and the trauma for his parents who would initially have been taking care of him in the living wagon with all the other children crowded about them.

There had been a sudden spike in the number of cases of smallpox that year, with a severe epidemic starting towards the end of 1887 in Sheffield, which quickly exceeded the ability of the authorities to cope. They had to completely clear the borough hospital of all other patients, and allocate every bed to smallpox. Temporary buildings were put up to house the increasing number of victims, but in the end new cases could not be admitted to hospital at all, and had to be treated in their own homes. Inevitably, the disease spread to other towns and cities. The death rate amongst vaccinated victims was just five per cent; amongst the unvaccinated, it was as high as forty-eight per cent. It would seem likely, therefore, that Frederick had not been vaccinated. Perhaps it was difficult to attend to such matters when constantly on the move in horse-drawn wagons.

The final blow for Marie came only a few months later on Sunday 10 June 1900, when her husband Frederick died of consumption. He had contracted inflammation of the lungs and had been treated in Smallwood Hospital in Redditch. He had thought he was better, and had returned home to his family, but had suddenly become ill again. He had been readmitted to Smallwood and had succumbed. He left Marie and their six surviving children totally unprovided for, and with no resources other than the wagon and their wits.

At the time of the census in April 1901, she was still in Redditch and had returned to the only work she knew - acting. Rather bizarrely, even for an actress, she seems to have given her age as thirty-seven, whereas she was actually forty-two.

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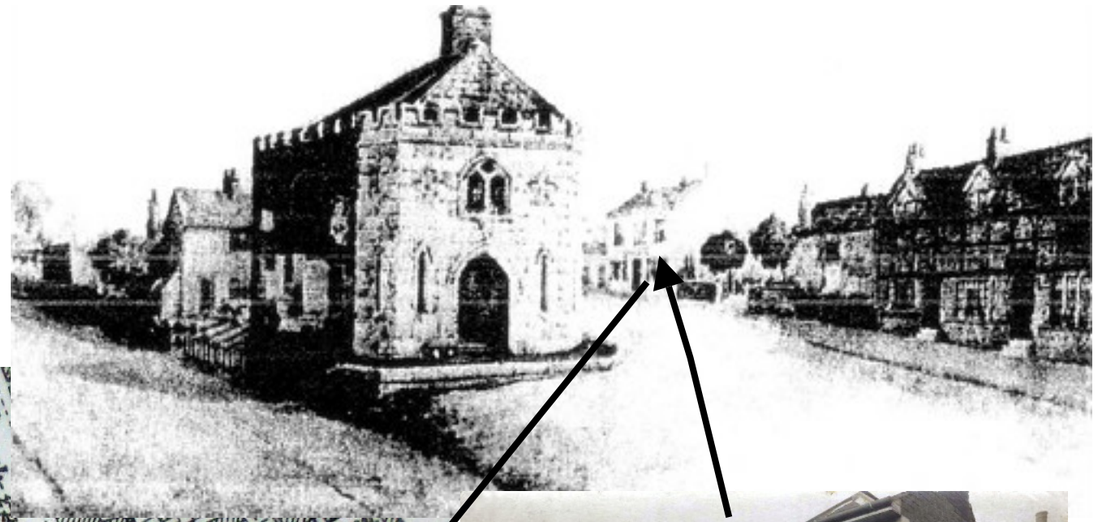
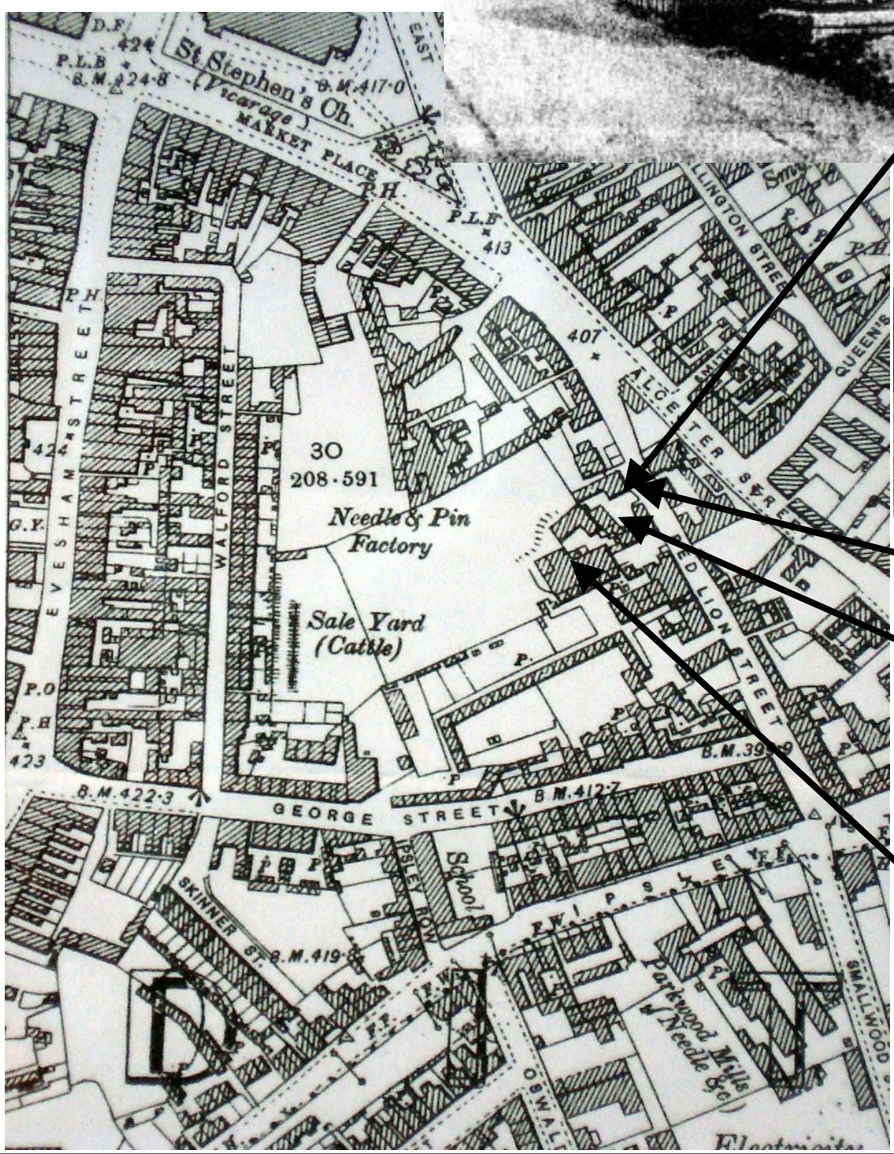
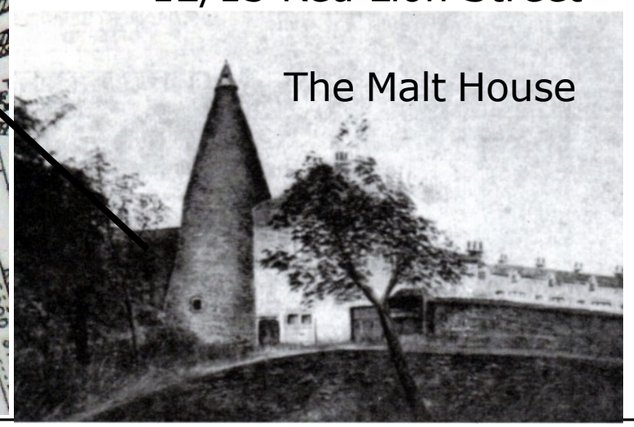
Where was 43/45 Red Lion Street?

We know where the Red Lion, White Lion and Malthouse were but not Nos. 43 & 45 between which the Snape family lived.





White Lion Inn
8/10 Red Lion Street
Red Lion Inn
12/13 Red Lion Street



If she was able to pass for five years younger than she was after all that she had been through, then she was doing very well. She must have been living in the wagon, because the census-taker records her as being between two dwellings, numbers 45 and 43 Red Lion Street. She had the smaller children with her but had sent her youngest son, Arthur (aged 9), to live with her sister-in-law in Stafford where he remained till adulthood.

There was a public house nearby called The Red Lion (no longer in existence) which (like many inns at that time) had a room in it where theatrical performances could take place. There is no actual evidence that she was working there, but it would be comforting to think that she had work close by given that she was looking after five children at the same time as trying to earn enough to support them all. At least one of the older children was also acting by that date and it is likely that they all got pulled in to help earn their crust. They all but one later made the stage their living.

Marie died of breast cancer and "exhaustion" three years later in Normanton, Derbyshire. Before she died, she was able to throw herself on the mercy of the Actors' Orphans Fund and to arrange for two of her daughters to be taken into a Roman Catholic orphanage in London and her eldest son to be taken into a Roman Catholic priory school in Sussex. Strangely, of all the lines of the family that had derived from the original theatrical enterprise, this destitute and troubled line was the one that managed to produce two Hollywood actresses and an international ballet star, but of course neither Marie nor Fred were to know about it.

Marion Palmann