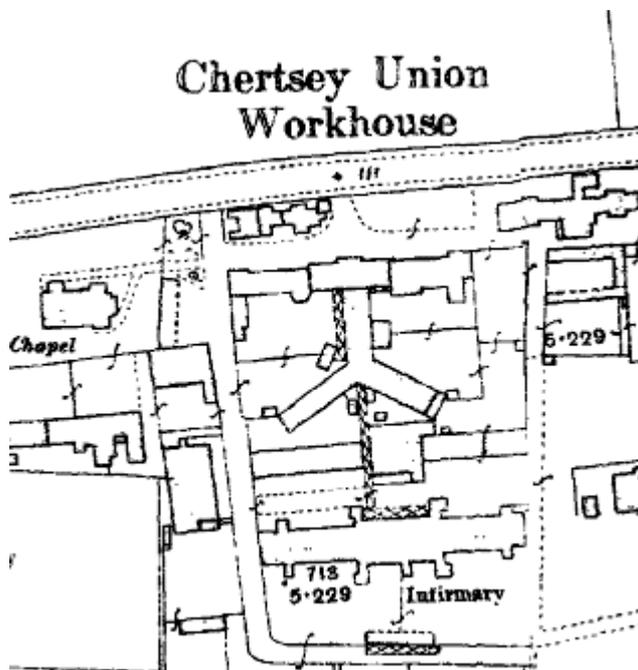


## Whatever happened to Julia Buss?

**An unusual entry in a book of dull workhouse committee minutes raises questions about the demise of Julia Buss, a 35 year old inmate. What happened to her, and where were her family?**

From official records we can sketch the last years of Julia's life. In September 1877, aged 27, she gave birth to her third child, Charles. He lived for just 36 hours, his short life recorded in Weybridge's parish records – baptism at home on the 18<sup>th</sup> and burial on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and death registration by his father, the distinctively named Albert Sweatman Buss. This is the last known official outing for Mr Buss, who disappears as the subject of English records. Did he go abroad? Did he abandon his family responsibilities – deeply frowned on by Victorian society – and lie low? The chances are we will never know.



His wife was not so elusive. A little over 3 years after this sad but not uncommon bereavement Julia was in the Chertsey Union Workhouse in Ottershaw, recorded in the April 1881 Census with her two surviving children, Clara and Alfred. Her status was still married. Although only 30 years old, the enumerator gave her 4 more years, and recorded her children by their middle names. Why was she there? Fast forward 4½ years and her death certificate may provide an answer: she had suffered from epilepsy for some years. Workhouses did act as a repository for those requiring medical treatment without the means to pay for it in the days before state health services.

Julia died on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1885 and Weybridge's parish register shows that her funeral was conducted by the curate three days later. Her death was not registered until the 15<sup>th</sup> (still as wife of Albert Buss, but no sign of him) but contains no reference to an inquest. This in itself raises questions.

Which brings us to the minutes held at Surrey History Centre. The survival of the Chertsey Union's records is patchy: there are no admission and discharge records before 1894 for example. Board minutes do survive as does the minute book of the House and Boarding Out Committee 1880-1885. At least this covers the period in question, but it was a long shot that it would contain anything useful. Indeed, the minutes are uniformly about housekeeping issues and contractors with only a few personal touches: arguments about paying for non-locals' funerals and referrals to Brookwood Asylum.

Then towards the end of the collection a minute jumps off the page: on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1885 "A report was received from the Medical Officer on the circumstances attending the death of

*Julia Buss, late an inmate of the Workhouse*". This special one-item meeting to consider the demise of an individual inmate is unique in the book, and would seem to signal something untoward. However, there is no reference to the death or any inquest in the local 1885 newspapers held at the History Centre, and the trail goes cold.

The other unanswered question that nags is what were the rest of the family doing whilst two children of primary school age lived in the workhouse? In addition to their father, wherever he was, both paternal grandparents were living in Weybridge, and Julia's father was alive in the county too. Both of the children had resettled in London by early adulthood.

Thanks to the cemeteries office staff at Elmbridge Council, Julia's burial location at Weybridge Cemetery can be identified: needless to say it is a common grave in a lawn section with no individual marker. Ironically her parents-in-law lie just across the path a few yards away – with a headstone. Like many other poor sick Victorians, Julia Buss may have been unremarkable in life and unmarked in death. But that one paragraph, almost lost amidst the workhouse's housekeeping records, calls out: whatever *did* happen to Julia Buss?