

# FORWARD SISTERS!

## Local Women in Politics

### The Labour League and Trade Unions

At the dawn of the twentieth century women of all political persuasions found increasing benefits in acting collectively.

#### Ruth Banton (1870-1952)

Ruth was born in Cambridgeshire, the daughter of a farm labourer, George Elbourn. She came first to Nottinghamshire and then to Leicester through her work with the Salvation Army. It was here that she met her husband George Banton, a leading member of the Leicester Independent Labour Party. Ruth was at his side as George rose from Town Councillor and Alderman to Mayor of Leicester in 1925. He also served as Labour MP for the Eastern Division of the town from 1922 to 1927.



Like her husband, Ruth was a committed Socialist. Along with Margaret MacDonald, the wife of Labour's first MP in Leicester, she was a founder member of the local Women's Labour League in 1906 and instrumental in arranging for the League's inaugural conference to be held in Leicester in June that year. Ruth served as President in 1915.

After the war, Ruth continued her work with the League, now known as the Labour Party's Women's Section, serving as secretary until 1920. She remained longer on the Executive Committee becoming Treasurer in 1921. In 1924, Ruth became the first woman to be elected as Vice-President of the Leicester Independent Labour Party.

In addition to her Labour activism, Ruth was heavily involved as Secretary in the Leicester Women's Insurance Advisory Board which helped to explain the 1911 National Insurance Act. As a keen member of the National Union of Women Workers, she served on numerous committees concerning infant welfare and maternity issues. She was also elected as a Poor Law Guardian in 1913, 1919, 1925 and 1928.

#### Annie Stretton (1858-1931)

Annie came from Shropshire and was the daughter of a lead miner. Whilst working as a lady's maid in Tutbury, she met her husband Harry Stretton. Newly married in 1884, they moved to Leicester so that Harry could take up work with the Midland Railway. Of their six children, only three were to survive to adulthood.



Both Annie and Harry joined the Independent Labour Party and Harry became a member of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Workers, serving as their representative on the Leicester Trades Council. When the Railway Women's Guild was formed in 1895 to provide support amongst the wives and daughters of railway workers, Annie played a prominent role. Becoming President, she travelled widely around the country speaking at annual conferences including that held at Leicester in 1906. As such she was closely involved in the formation of the Leicester branch of the Women's Labour League as the Leicester Pioneer reported:

*'A well attended meeting was held at Mrs Banton's home ...on Wednesday evening 14 March to hear a report from Mrs Barnes, Mrs Cox and Mrs J R MacDonald of a meeting of women members of the Labour party, held in London the previous Friday. This meeting had been summoned by the executive of the Railway Women's Guild to consider the better organisation of the women who are sympathetic with Labour politics and it had been decided to form a Women's Labour League in connection with the Labour Party.'*

At the annual conference of the Women's Labour League in Hull in 1908, Mrs Cox spoke of local work petitioning the town council in favour of feeding necessitous school children at the public expense whilst Annie urged the importance of taking an active part in the Labour Party.

Annie was elected as a Guardian for the Abbey ward in 1913 and served until 1922 when she stood as a Labour candidate in the town councillor elections for the same ward. She lost by a narrow margin and it was left to her grand daughter Janet Setchfield to be the first woman in the family to become a town councillor when she was elected in 1970.

#### Margaret MacDonald (1870-1911)

As the wife of the Leicester MP Ramsay MacDonald, Margaret took a great interest in the working women of Leicester.



#### Lizzie Willson (1875-1926)

Elizabeth Rebecca Willson, known always as Lizzie, was born in Islington, the daughter of Levi Willson, a railway porter originally from Mowsley. The family settled eventually in Leicester where her mother, Rebecca had been born. At an early age, Lizzie became a heel builder in the boot and shoe industry and in 1904, she was elected secretary of the women's section of the National Union of the Boot and Shoe Operatives - a section still staffed entirely by men. In 1910, with her colleague Alice Hawkins - better known for her Suffragette activities - Lizzie won a place on the Leicester Trades Council.

At this stage, men in the industry were earning an average of 15 shillings a week more than women. However, Lizzie's efforts to the highlight the disparity were resented by the employers - and the men. Male trade Unionists argued that the Union should concentrate on securing higher wages for men so that they could keep their families. No thought was given to single women or widows.

Declaring that 'A man is not fit to arbitrate in a woman's cause', Lizzie and Alice formed a breakaway Union for women in the industry in 1911 which existed until around 1930. The historian of the men's Union was scathing:

*'It is highly probable that the wider sex war aroused by the suffragette movement affected also the responses of the men, though it would probably not have done so but for the personality of Lizzie Willson herself.'*

It is a pity that so little survives to tell us the story from Lizzie's point of view...

