

# FORWARD SISTERS!

## Local Women in Politics

### The Lady Guardians

Under the Poor Law Act of 1834 a new system was set up for looking after the poor which established workhouses across the country. Responsibility for administering these workhouses and other forms of poor relief was given to officers known as Poor Law Guardians who were elected by local rate payers. Women were first permitted to stand for election as Guardians in 1875 but eligible candidates were slow to emerge...

#### Fanny Fullagar (1847-1918)

It was not until 1889 that Leicester elected its first female Poor Law Guardian when Miss Fanny Fullagar successfully stood as the Charity Organisation Society candidate in St Martins Ward.

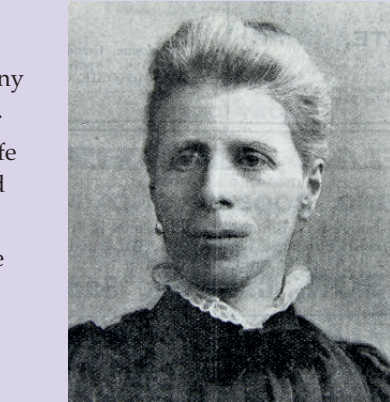
Fanny was the daughter of a surgeon at the Eye Infirmary and had spent much of her early life visiting the poor with her father. She was also a devoted member of the Unitarian Chapel and prominent in the Leicester Liberal Association for Women.

Although at first timid and reluctant to speak in public, Fanny soon proved herself a valuable member of Committees concerned with the Cottage Homes and Outdoor Relief, and an able advocate for the special needs of women .

At the end of her first term, a crowd of supporters presented her with an illuminated address which congratulated her as the first woman Guardian:

*‘You have proved by an experiment what was advocated as a theory, and Leicester now knows what work there is for women on the Board of Guardians and how fitting some women are to do it...’*

Fanny remained a Guardian until 1904 when she was defeated by one vote.



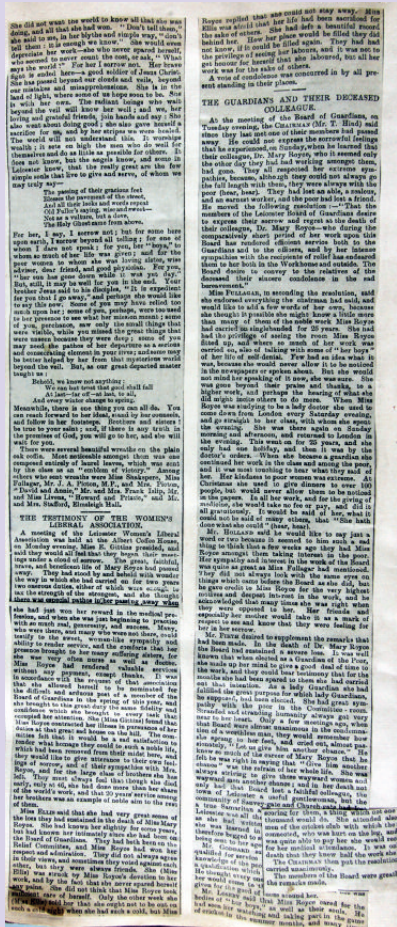
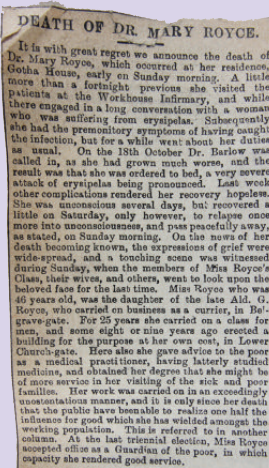
#### Mary Royce (1845-1892)

The only surviving child of Alderman George Royce, Mary qualified as Leicester’s first female doctor in 1890 at the age of forty. Despite the evident difficulties in studying medicine (she had first commenced her studies in 1879), Mary had travelled home to Leicester from London every weekend to teach Sunday classes at Gallowtree Gate Chapel.

In April 1892, Mary was persuaded to stand for election as Poor Law Guardian in St Margaret’s Ward by fellow members of the Women’s Liberal Association. She was elected unopposed and proved a conscientious member of the Board, attending every meeting. Sadly, her career was cut short in October 1892, when she died after contracting an infection whilst visiting a patient in the Workhouse. As a result of her death, Guardians were no longer permitted to visit the Workhouse or Cottage Homes during outbreaks of infectious diseases in the town.

Large numbers attended Mary’s funeral at Gallowtree Gate Chapel. Her fellow Guardian, Charlotte Ellis pointed out that her friend had sacrificed her life for others whilst Fanny Fullagar explained:

*‘Few had an idea what her work was, because she would never allow it to be noticed in the newspaper, or spoken about...’*



#### Emily Bosworth (1847-1929)

Although born in Rotherhithe in Surrey, Emily moved to Leicester with her family whilst still young. She married Francis Bosworth, a shoe operative, at the age of nineteen and the couple had one daughter. She was a founding member of the Leicester Women’s Liberal Association and it must have been due to this interest that she was persuaded to stand for election as a Poor Law Guardian. Her election in April 1894 was doubly significant because she was the first married woman and the first from a working class background.



Although she also served on the workhouse committee, most of her time was spent on the Countesthorpe Cottage Homes Committee. She served on a committee of twelve with two other women: Marianne Willder and Helena Ellis. The latter gave a good description of their duties:

*‘The meetings were once a fortnight. We went in a waggonette with a pair of horses, starting from the Poor Law Offices, Pocklington Walk, at 2 o’clock... Our first duty on arriving was to inspect the schools, laundry and the various ‘Homes’ and get the reports from the Foster Mothers and Fathers. Then we went to the Superintendent’s house for tea, provided by the Matron, and afterwards we met in Committee to discuss the business.’*



In 1892, the Leicester Guardian rejoiced in the election of four lady Guardians.