

# FORWARD SISTERS!

## Local Women in Politics

### Overstepping the Boundaries

Since local women have long been active in the work place – in a tradition founded on the early origins of the hosiery trade in the home - it was perhaps inevitable that women should seek to influence politics long before they were judged worthy of sharing the franchise. This is not the story of those who fought to secure votes for women. It is an account of just a few of the brave women who were active in politics long before equality at the ballot box was achieved in 1928 and some of those who were lucky enough to follow in their footsteps.

#### Elizabeth Heyrick (1769-1831)

As the beautiful daughter of a Leicester hosiery manufacturer, Elizabeth Coltman was destined for early marriage and motherhood and probably entertained no other ambition. However, when her husband, John Heyrick died in 1797, Elizabeth faced the challenge of a childless widowhood with characteristic determination, founding a school in her former home at Bow Bridge.

Later, as she became more deeply involved in Quaker activities she published a series of pamphlets on topics as diverse as animal cruelty, corporal punishment and most significantly of all – the abolition of slavery.

In April 1825, Elizabeth Heyrick was appointed Treasurer at the inaugural meeting of the Birmingham Female Society for the Relief of British Slaves. No doubt under her influence, a Leicester branch was formed a month later. It was in her relentless campaign for the immediate abolition of slavery - as opposed to the gradual abolition favoured by most male abolitionists - that she was to exert most influence. Her pamphlet advocating immediate abolition in 1824 was eagerly distributed in this country and America and even quoted in Parliament as ‘the work of some gentleman’.

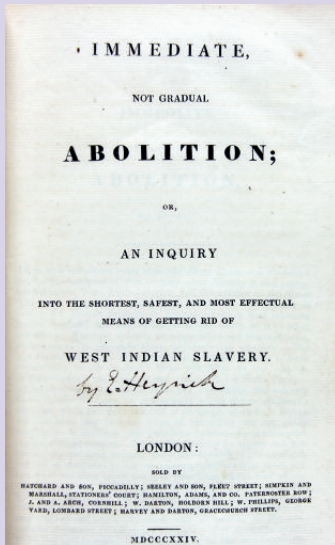
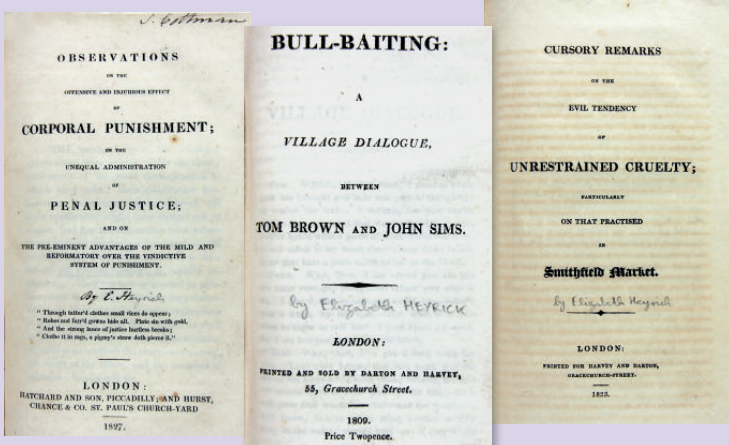
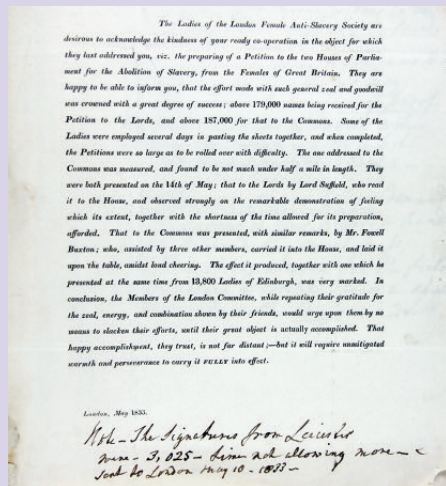
Sadly, Elizabeth did not live to see the abolition of slavery in 1834. However, her role was not forgotten by women or men... The American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison gave a public speech in Glasgow in 1833 in which he singled out her contribution for especial praise:

*‘Who first gave the world the doctrine of immediate emancipation? It was a woman of England – Elizabeth Heyrick... Mrs Heyrick was the highly respected, talented and uncompromising friend of liberty...’*

#### Susannah Watts (1768-1842)

When her father died in 1769, Susannah and her mother were forced to leave their family home at Danetts Hall. A gifted linguist, Susannah relied upon her earnings from writing and translation work in order to supplement her family’s income. Many of her poems appeared in local newspapers and her publication ‘A Walk through Leicester’ in 1804 is now recognised as the first guide book to the town. She also taught French in Elizabeth Heyrick’s School and the two women were close friends, working together to campaign against slavery. In 1824, the pair joined forces to go from door to door in Leicester urging the populace to stop buying sugar produced by the slave plantations of the West Indies and buy instead sugar from the East Indies, in what must have been one of the first ‘fair trade’ campaigns. By June 1825, they proudly declared the results of their campaign:

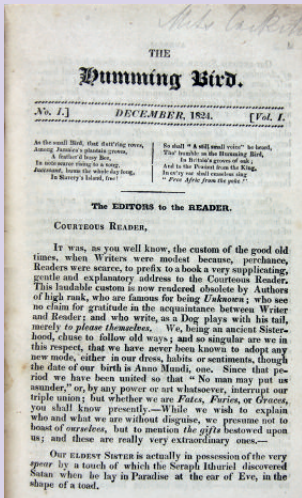
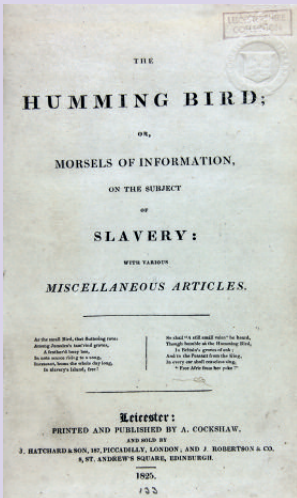
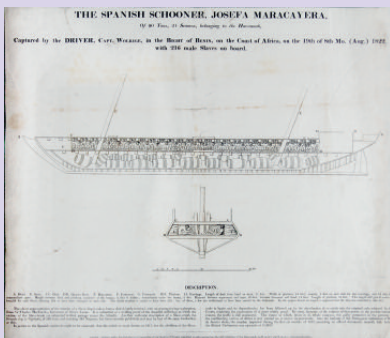
*‘In the Town of Leicester, by the zeal and activity of a very few individuals alone, nearly one fourth of the population viz 1500 families have been so impressed by the subject, as to engage themselves to abstain from the use of West - Indian sugar’*



This is the only image of Elizabeth Heyrick to have survived



A self portrait of Susannah Watts



In 1824, Elizabeth Heyrick, her sister Mary Ann Coltman and Susannah Watts launched a monthly periodical concerning the fight to abolish slavery.

#### Anti-Slavery Petition

Even after her friend’s death in 1831, Susannah Watts campaigned steadfastly against slavery. Just before the Emancipation Act in 1833 finally abolished slavery throughout the British Colonies from 1st August 1834, she was involved in collecting local signatures for the London Female Anti-Slavery Society’s national petition. Later, she proudly compiled a scrapbook which recalled these momentous events.