# FORWARD SISTERS! Local Women in Politics

## The Campaigners

All the women who served as Guardians and Councillors or on School Boards had expressed their politics in the most obvious form, but what of the campaigners behind them? They too were active politically and deserve to be remembered even if they did not achieve the privilege of holding office. Theirs was the less glamorous path but without their work, little would have been achieved by any of the women...

## Women's Voice on Women's Rights

In April 1856, the women of Leicester made news at home and abroad when they organised a meeting in the Guildhall, Leicester. This most unusual gathering was summoned to consider a bill before Parliament which proposed to impose flogging as a punishment for men who beat their wives. The women, however, thought this would be 'going back to the Dark Ages'. Instead they asked for the Government to give women more protection and prevent husbands turning their wives out of the family home.

Such was the success of this meeting, that another one was summoned in July 1857 and on this occasion the women were particularly exercised about a bill before Parliament which proposed to make it easier for a man to obtain a divorce than for a woman. It is remarkable that the voice of working women in Leicester was heard at such an early date.

## Fanny Bolus (1841-1930)

Although born in Nottingham, Fanny's family had moved first to Hinckley and then Leicester where her father worked as a Bank Agent. Until 1889, Fanny's chief role was to nurse her elderly mother and during this time her main involvement was in chapel life at first with the Reverend Wood at Wycliffe Chapel and later at the Great Meeting. The Unitarians seem to have been particularly successful in encouraging the female members of the congregation to participate in social and political affairs and it comes as little surprise to encounter Fanny's name first as the secretary of the local suffrage society in 1881. Later she would serve as the secretary of the newly founded local branch of the Women's Liberal Association. It was probably natural for her to assume the role of secretary and treasurer in the new branch of the National Union of Women's Workers when it was formed in Leicester in 1897.

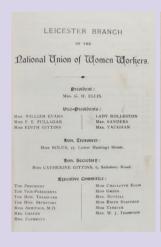
#### Isabel Ellis recalled:

'She was an ideal secretary of many committees, and for many years she never made a speech or a mistake; she never took the chair or failed to produce an agenda, and to her self effacing wise guidance, much of the steady development in the position of women was due.'

At her death in Hampstead in 1930, the Leicester Mail commented:

'She was a pioneer of the Women's Movement, though personally quite retiring. Although never seen on platforms, she became secretary of the Women's Liberal Association, the Women's Suffrage Society and the National Union of Women's Workers. Her good judgement, tact and unerring accuracy contributed more to the success of these causes than the efforts of many more conspicuous partisans...'

## Edith Gittins (1845-1910)



Mrs. Sanders, Convener of the Prison, Rescue and trevention. Work: Sub-Committee, reports that Miss alterine' Gittins has undertaken (he meeting of women risoners on their discharge, in co-operation with Mr. Morris, grent of the Discharged Prisoners' Ald Society. Mrs. anders continues to visit in the prison itself.

Since the last report further enquiries have been made to the sanitary condition of Oakly, two ladies having severed much time and trouble to the investigation. A performance of the lady from whom we received the replacements of the lady from whom we received the replacements of the lady from whom we received the replacements of the lady from the lady for the lady replacement of the lady from the lady for the lady replacement of the lady from the lady for the lady replacement of the lady for the lady generosity of our resident, Mrs. G. H. Ellis.

Miss Edith Stafford, Convener of the Industrial Sub-Committee, reports that enquiry has been made into the occupations, wages, &c., of girls who have recently left the elementary schools, with the object of discovering the reasons for the constant "shifting" from trude to trade. Two hundred cases were investigated; details of which were sent to the Industant Sub-Committee of the NU WAV.

The inglialative matters brought before us this year have been the London Local Government Bill, the Governmen Housing Bill and the new Factory and Worshops' Act. It regard to the first of these, our committee signed a memorial in favour of Mr. Courtney's Amending Bill, by which women would be enabled to serve as Aldermen and

A Sub-Committee consisting of Miss Charlotte Ellis fiss F. E. Fullazar and the Secretary was appointed to

## 'Union is Strength'

The Leicester National Union of Women Workers [later known as the Council of Women] was formed in 1897 with the aim of promoting women's issues and forming pressure groups. Under their motto 'Union is Strength' the organisation campaigned successfully in many areas. Most conspicuous was its

success in helping to bring about the state registration of midwives with the passing of the Midwives Act in 1902 and the establishment of Leicester's first maternity hospital in Bond Street in 1905.

The daughter of Edward Gittins, a corn and flour dealer, Edith was the third of five children. Like many of the women featured in this exhibition, she was an active member of the Unitarian Chapel known as the Great Meeting, serving as a Sunday School teacher for over forty years. As a landscape artist, Edith was sufficiently successful to exhibit at the Royal Academy on several occasions. It was her love of



beauty which motivated her in helping to found the local branch of the Kyrle Society, which strove 'to bring beauty in every form to humble streets and homes'. Gifted with much personal charm, she was said to be an unusual combination of artist and social reformer: a born leader who all the time 'organised and led her fellows, expending a wealth of emotion on the causes she took up, and upholding them with remarkable tenacity'.

Edith was recalled by Isobel Ellis to be 'the life of the Leicester Women's Suffrage Society, through times of much discouragement'. She disapproved thoroughly of the militant suffragettes, asserting that now women would just be associated with 'feeble violence and hysteria'. She was a prominent member of the Women's Liberal Association and National Union of Women Workers .

At her crowded funeral service, the Reverend Edgar Fripp declared as part of a long eulogy:

'As Leicester people they were proud of her. She was a Leicester woman born and bred, and she gave of her best to her native town.'

### Leicester's Women's Liberal Association

The first annual report of the Association, published in 1892, recorded that the women had applied to the National Women's Liberal Association for affiliation but also sought to stress their independence reserving: 'the liberty to select its own aims and methods, independently of that and every other Association...'

They chose as their motto: 'I have invaded no man's liberty and I have kept mine own'. The broad field of their interests is clear from the programme of speakers at their first conference for members in 1891:'Trades Unions for Women' by Miss Pegg; 'The Parliamentary Control of Women's Trades' by Isobel Ellis [mother of Isabella]; 'Women Guardians' by Charlotte Ellis; 'Technical Education' by Mrs Thomas Windley and 'Women's Suffrage' by Edith Gittins.

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THE COUNTESS OF CARLISLE	MISS MUNDELLA
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MISS CHARLOTTE ELLIS	LADY TREVELYAN
MRS. MCARTHUR	LADY IKEVELIAN
Commi	tter :
MISS EDITH GITTE	xs (Chairwoman)
MISS ADDERLY	MISS KATE ELLIS
MRS. BOSWORTH	MRS. I. W. GODDARD
MISS CLEPHAN	MISS HELEN JOHNSON
MISS COLLET	MRS. A. H. PAGET
MRS. BERNARD ELLIS	MRS. PATEY
MRS. G. H. ELLIS	MISS PEGG
MRS. T. B. ELLIS	MRS. WILLIAM STANYON
The MISSES ELLIS	MRS. J. L. WARD
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Dr. MARY	ROYCE.
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Party. It will impress on vomen-voters the day of voting with care and independence. Unless undereseen circumstances should arise it will aim at keeping loof from the actual work of elections, municipal and parliamentary; and it will not be responsible for the actuar of individual members who may think it idvisible to give help in election contests."

A Provisional Executive Committee was appointed, and shortly afterwards the office of President for 1891 was accepted by the Countess of Carlisle.

