



FORWARD SISTERS!

Local Women in Politics

The Campaigners

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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

It was 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)

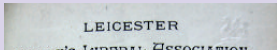
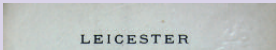
The daughter of Edward Gittins, a corn and flour dealer, Edith was the third of five children. Like many of the women featured in this exhibition, she was an active member of the Unitarian Chapel known as the Great Meeting, serving as a Sunday School teacher for over forty years. As a landscape artist, 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'.



Leicester's Women's Liberal Association

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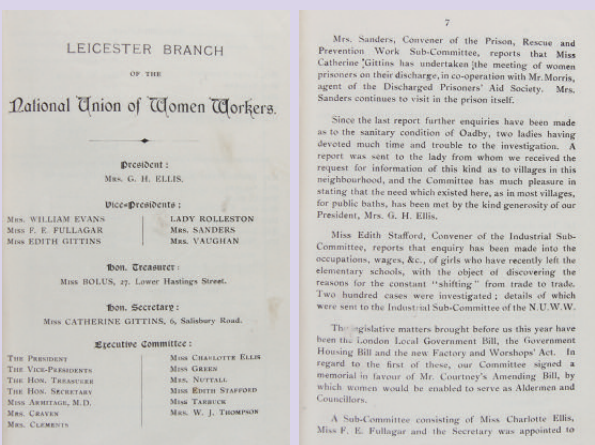
They chose as their motto: 'I have invaded no man's liberty and I have kept mine own'. The broad field of their interests is clear from the programme of speakers at their first conference for members in 1891: 'Trades Unions for Women' by Miss Pegg; 'The Parliamentary Control of Women's Trades' by Isobel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

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 .

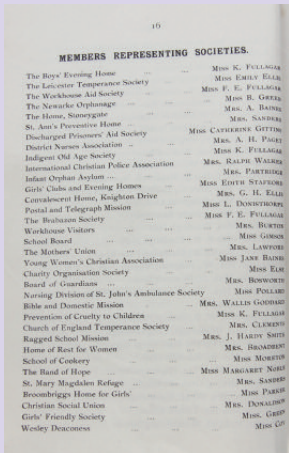
At her crowded funeral service, the Reverend Edgar Fripp declared as part of a long eulogy:

'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.'

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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.



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