

FORWARD SISTERS!

Local Women in Politics

The Torchbearers

In 1870 legislation finally provided compulsory elementary education for all children, introducing school boards where no church or charity school already existed. It was a year later that Joseph Dare, who ran the Leicester Unitarian Domestic Mission, shocked many in declaring that the education of girls was even more important than boys since the influence of wives and mothers was so all pervasive. Accordingly, he urged local women to stand for election on the newly established School Boards.



Isabella Evans (1836-1894)

In 1879, Isabella Evans, the eldest daughter of Joseph Dare became the first woman to be elected to a public body in Leicester when she was elected to the Leicester School Board. Isabella had left school at fifteen to earn her living as a private teacher. However, her life and prospects had been transformed when she married William Evans, a wealthy corn miller in Belgrave. Despite her marriage and the birth of her six children, Isabella retained her interest in education and no doubt under the influence of her father, had in 1875 delivered a highly successful series of lectures on hygiene and health to women in the poorer areas of Leicester. It was the minister of Wycliffe Chapel, the Reverend Joseph Wood, who as Chairman of the Leicester School Board and himself a keen supporter of women's suffrage, secured the nomination of Isabella amongst the Liberal members.

Administration County of Leicester				The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the						
Civil Parish		Municipal Borough		Municipal Ward		Urban Sanitary District		Town or Village or Hamlet		Rural Sanitary District
of		of		of		of		of		of
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
No. of Schedule	ROAD, STREET, &c. and No. or NAME of HOUSE	No. of Tenement	Number of Houses in the Ward	NAME and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	CON-DITION as to Marriage	AGE last Birthday of	Male	Female	PROFESSION or OCCUPATION
49	Ashted Road, The Hall	1		William Evans	Head	M	60			Mill & Corn Merchant
				Isabella do	Wife	M	26			
				Isabel Clara do	Daughter	S	26			
				William do	Son	S	25			Miller
				Mary do	Daughter	S	25			
				Edward do	Son	S	15			School Teacher
				Robert do	Son	S	14			
				Emily do	Daughter	S	23			Domestic Servant
				Emily do	Servant	S	26			
				Matilda do	Servant	S	26			

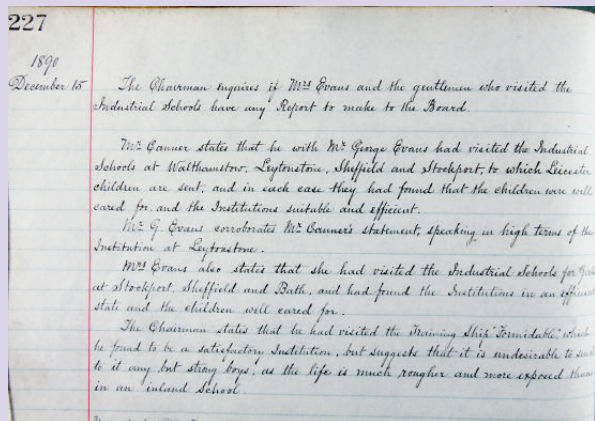
Census return for 1891 showing Isabella living with her family in 'The Hall', New Parks

Isabella's daughter, Isabel Ellis later recalled that her mother loved attending the School Board:

'Mrs Evans loved School Board Meetings as other women love hunting or bridge. There was an exhilaration about the meetings of those early years, for principles had to be discovered and methods worked out. Nothing was cut and dried...'

She was remembered principally for pressing successfully for the introduction of the kindergarten system into elementary schools. When in 1892, ill health forced Isabella to retire from the Board, she was presented with an illuminated address:

'The teachers of the Leicester School Board desire by the presentation of this Address to express to you their great appreciation of your uniform kindness and sympathy with them during the years you have been associated with the work of the Board. They sincerely regret that you have felt compelled to resign a post for which you are so admirably fitted. They feel that the town as well as themselves is deeply indebted to you for the time expended on, and the constant interest taken in, the work of education.'



The minutes of Leicester School Board in 1890 record that Isabella Evans visited female industrial schools all over the country.

Annie Clephan (1854-1930)

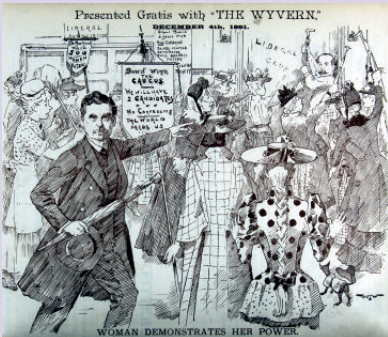
Annie, the daughter of Edwin Clephan, a partner in Paget and Kirby's Bank, was born in Leicester but after her mother's early death was sent away to school, first in Cossington and later in Cheshire. She was a stalwart member of the Leicester Ladies' Reading Society almost from its foundation in 1869 until her death, often delighting audiences with accounts of her travels to India and elsewhere. As well as being a keen member of the National Union of Women's Workers, Annie was a founding member of the Leicester Women's Liberal Association. It was as a Liberal candidate that she was elected to the Leicester School Board in 1891, a body which she would serve for the remaining nine years of its existence. Her philosophy is well illustrated by the words she wrote in the School Board Chronicle in October 1900:



'...the awakening of intelligence and training of the faculties of sight and touch were more lasting than mere book learning'

'Oh man, man, how can you be so cruel?'

Despite the success of Isabella Evans, the ladies of the Women's Liberal Association were greatly disappointed in December 1891 to have only one woman chosen amongst the nine Liberal candidates for the School Board. Charlotte Ellis was rejected apparently on the grounds of being a woman and the Wyvern was quick to express its disgust.



The Wyvern speaks.

OH man, man, how can you be so cruel. The dear ladies had set their heart on having two members of the School Board, and you have plinked down your great heavy hob-nailed blucher and rejected their modest request, and you have done it with true masculine bluntness, forsooth, as is your wont, alleging no other reason for spurning Miss Charlotte Ellis than that she is a woman. Really, if I were a member of the ladies' association, I would propose that the candidature of Miss Clephan should be withdrawn also, and these self-opinionated men should be left to wallow in darkness unilluminated by a single ray of feminine iridescence.

Seriously though, seeing that half the race is of the gentle sex, that half the children in the schools of the Board are of the feminine persuasion, and that vastly more than half of the teachers in the employ of our educational authorities are of the same gender as their mother Eve, it is not a very avacious demand on the part of the ladies, to ask for two out of nine selected candidates. We represent the temperance interest, the working man interest, the anti-vaccination interest, the Roman Catholic, Church and Dissent interest, but all these are of immensely less importance than the feminine interest; yet there is hesitation about giving to the latter its just dues.

A lot of rubbish has been talked upon this as upon every other political question. Mr. J. Page Hopps attributes the loss of the Liberal seats at the recent elections to this cause, while another correspondent in our morning contemporary says the reason why the Liberal ladies only get one representative among the Liberal nine is, that they did not canvas so well as the Primrose dames at the late contests. Poor ladies and poor girls. Verily, the sins of the elder generation shall be visited upon the children. Because Liberal ladies did not care to flaunt themselves in ostentatious green rosettes, and take their share in badgering reluctant voters to give their crosses to good, bad, or indifferent candidates, the interests of the feminine side of the education of the community shall not have proper representation. This is funny, very.

Mary A Saunderson

Mary was the wife of the Vicar of St Martins and served first as a member of the School Board in Hull before moving to Leicester. She was elected to the Leicester School Board in 1894, becoming the first Labour woman to be elected to public office. She resigned in December 1895 and unwittingly caused a great controversy when the alternative nomination by the Independent Labour Party was rejected.

