

FORWARD SISTERS!

Local Women in Politics

Your Local Councillor

Women were first allowed to stand as town and county councillors in 1907 but although several women stood as candidates, it took a long time for the first women to appear in the council chambers...

Ellen Swainston MBE (1870-1955)

In 1922, The Leicester Mail noted that there was still no woman amongst the sixty four members of the Town Council:

‘For some reason which is impossible to explain, Leicester women are very shy in their attitude to municipal work...On a few occasions women have stood as candidates, but their women supporters have never been sufficiently enthusiastic to secure their elections...’



Women who were ratepayers had enjoyed a vote in municipal and county council elections since 1869 and 1888 respectively but they can hardly have formed an overwhelming majority amongst the male electors and it is surprising that the newspapers attributed the lack of women councillors to insufficient enthusiasm amongst women.

Ellen Swainston was born and educated in Leicester. She and her husband David Swainston had one son. As early as 1912 she was serving as a President of the Uppingham Road Infant Welfare Clinic but it was during the war that she rose to prominence as President of the War Widows Association. From 1920 to 1926 she also served as President of the West Leicester Women’s Conservative and Unionist Association.

In 1922 Ellen stood as an Independent candidate for the Belgrave Ward. She enjoyed the support of newspapers such as the Leicester Mail because she associated herself with the Parents’ Committee in a local dispute about Council plans to reorganise Junior Schools. She successfully styled herself an ‘Independent woman for Municipal Work’ but also declared herself proud to belong to the Unionist Party. The Leicester Mail was delighted that she was a person in whom ‘any trace of Socialism is conspicuous by its absence’ and rejoiced that the electorate had rejected ‘The Russian model’ when she won with a majority of 455 votes.

Ellen went on to chair the City Mental Deficiency Committee as well as serving on the Education, Health and Housing Standing Committees and received an MBE in 1944.

Elizabeth Frisby (1877-1946)

As the daughter of Joseph Frisby, a wealthy shoe manufacturer, Elizabeth enjoyed a privileged life style. She was educated at Wyggeston Girls’ School and then worked for eight years as a volunteer district visitor in one of the poorest areas of Leicester, under a scheme organised by the National Union of Women Workers. Her early activities as a Suffragette resulted in imprisonment in Holloway in 1911 and when she moved to London to study in 1913, it is likely that she continued to work for the cause there. It was, however, Elizabeth’s work during the war organising a Clothing Depot in Leicester and later with her family funding and equipping a YMCA hut at an Army Training Camp, which raised her profile and earned her an MBE after the War. Further rehabilitation followed when in 1921, she joined the Knighton Women’s Conservative Association and in 1927 stood successfully as the Conservative candidate for Knighton in the city council elections.

Her many other interests included serving as a Life Governor of the Leicester Royal Infirmary and the University College and as Chairman of the Governor’s of Newarke Girls’ School. In 1937, Elizabeth was appointed as the city’s first female High Bailiff and in 1941 was elected to become Leicester’s first woman Lord Mayor for the following year. Her sister Jessie acted as Mayoress.



Emily Comber Fortey (1866-1946)

Emily’s father, a Cambridge mathematician, served as Inspector of Schools, in Madras, India but after the early death of her mother, Emily returned to this country to be brought up by her Grandmother. At the age of eighteen, she joined the Catholic Church and left her school in Bristol to study for a science degree at University College, Bristol, graduating in 1895. In 1909, Emily was appointed as a teacher at Corpus Christi School, West Walk, Leicester. Here she was drawn towards the Labour Party and in 1911 was elected as a Poor Law Guardian.



Between 1916 and 1921, Emily worked in Le Havre in France, supervising a rescue home for prostitutes and their babies and it was here that she first adopted the distinctive claret coloured dress and nun-like head wear which she was to employ for the rest of her life.

When elected as a City Councillor in 1923, Emily was one of only two women. By the time of her death in 1946, there were ten women amongst the sixty four members. Her many achievements included pushing through a resolution that women teachers did not have to resign on marriage and ensuring the provision of a special school for maladjusted children under a trained psychologist. Her strong faith also led her into controversy when she vigorously opposed birth control clinics.

First Police Woman, 1929

In a published account of Emily’s life, it was recalled how Emily struggled to secure the appointment of women police officers in Leicester. Emily’s efforts eventually led to the appointment of Eileen St Claire Sloane as Leicester’s first police woman in 1929. Women police officers were not given the powers of arrest until after the Second World War.

