



Challenge and Change:

A Brief History of Women Councillors in Yorkshire & the Humber



Centre for Women & Democracy

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The Centre for Women & Democracy is a member of the *Counting Women In* Campaign, a group of civil society organisations who have come together to address the lack of women in politics.

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Contents

	Page
Foreword & Acknowledgements	7
In the beginning:	11
A Sense of Public Duty	11
The 1907 Legislation	13
Suffragists and Suffragettes	13
Trade Unions	15
The 1914 Legislation	16
Political Families	16
The First World War	19
Between the Wars	21
Organised Women	24
Young Women	25
Poor Law Reorganisation	26
The Second World War	27
The Post War Years	30
The New Generation	31
The 1980s and Onwards	33
Making It Work	37
Committee Work	33
Juggling Commitments	41
Women in a Man's World	43
The Future	46
List of Interviewees	49
Sources	52

Foreword & Acknowledgements

The history of women in Parliament is reasonably well known, at least in its outline, but that of women in local government is in danger of being forgotten at best and in places entirely lost. The project which this book reflects was the product of an increasing realisation that this should not be allowed to happen, and that the struggles and achievements of generations of political and municipal women should be recorded and preserved.

Accordingly, in September 2010, and with generous funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, we set about exploring both the past and the present of women councillors in Yorkshire. Over the last year we have interviewed councillors past and present and explored archives. Everywhere we found women whose contribution to their communities, towns and cities was inestimable, women who led campaigns and took on unpopular causes and vested interests, women who supported their communities through crises and great events, and women who worked quietly and with dedication (and hardly any recognition) for the communities they served.

With the indispensable help of volunteers, archives and archivists across the region, and scores of current and immediate past councillors we have put together a mass of material of which this little book is just a sample. This material will itself be archived where it can be accessible to future generations, but some of it, including a catalogue, will also be made available online. There is an exhibition which can be used in libraries, schools and town halls, and

a short film of interviews with women of all parties. We hope that, taken together, this project will have produced something of interest which is worth preserving, because, as one of our interviewees, Winifred Wheable-Archer, says:

“I am a great advocate of people knowing their history because if you know the history it informs what you ought to be doing and what you ought to be understanding.”

There are a lot of people to be thanked for the success of this project. Our understanding could not have been achieved without the help of many people across the region, and, in particular, without our volunteers – Henrietta Phillips, Katrin McClure, Henry Robertson, Olivia Szostak, Jane Walton, Daisy Payne, Rachel Moreton, Sue Loy, Abi Bell, Sally Cooper and Alison Smith – whose enthusiasm and hard work were fantastic. We are also indebted to Michelle Winslow of the Oral History Society for providing training and advice, Jessica Thomas for allowing us to make use of her experience on the ‘Women of Steel’ project, Genevieve Say and Worldshed for the film that accompanies this project, and Alison Costigan and her colleagues at the Heritage Lottery Fund in the region for their help and support. Sylvia Dunkley allowed us to make use of her published and unpublished researches, and other women gave us leaflets and memoirs to include in the archive.

Then there are all the archivists and librarians whose patience, help and interest made much of the historical part of the project possible, and, in particular, the West Yorkshire Archive Service, North Yorkshire County Records office, Hull History Centre, and

the staff in the archives and local studies libraries in Sheffield, Barnsley, and Doncaster for all of their advice and support. The Dorman Museum in Middlesbrough was particularly helpful in supplying us with information on Alice Schofield Coates and Marion Coates Hansen, Marion Shaw kindly allowed us access to Winifred Holtby's papers, and Pennine Heritage Ltd allowed us to listen to their interview with Jessie Smith.

Our thanks also go to all the women councillors (listed at the end of this book) who allowed us to interview them, who were interested and engaged with the project, and who demonstrated to us both the commonality of their experience and its wide diversity.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the perseverance, patience and enthusiasm of Laura Wigan, who pulled it all together and made it the success it is.

We believe that this project has only scraped the surface of women's experience of local government in Yorkshire & the Humber, but we know also that involvement with it has inspired other women to start collecting histories from women in their own areas, so that the archive we have started is one which will grow.

Nan Sloane
Director
Centre for Women & Democracy

October 2011

In the beginning ...

Women's involvement in local government in Yorkshire and the Humber has a long history. Charitable work was always seen as an appropriate outlet for Victorian middle and upper class wives and their daughters; women were often involved in moral welfare work and assistance for the disabled, the sick and the elderly. For women belonging to families of wealthy manufacturers in the cities and the landed gentry in rural areas philanthropic responsibility was passed down from mother to daughter and was often associated with a religious duty¹. At a time when only propertied women (or the wives of propertied men) could participate in public life in any way, charity, community and a sense of social responsibility were the principal ways in which women could influence the nature of the society in which they lived.

A Sense of Public Duty

In the second half of the 19th century, women began to be admitted onto Poor Law and School Boards which were seen as an appropriate extension of the roles women were already fulfilling in communities. In 1869, rate paying women were first allowed to become Poor Law Guardians², contributing to a service which provided "a welfare state in miniature, relieving the elderly, widows, children, the sick, the disabled, and the unemployed and

¹ Dunkley, Sylvia Jane. (1991) "Women Magistrates, Ministers and Municipal Councillors in the West-Riding of Yorkshire, 1918 – 1939" p10. Department of History, University of Sheffield.

² Game, Chris.(April 2008) "29% Women Councillors After a Mere 100 Years: Can the Councillors Commission Increase Councillor Diversity Where 'modernisation' failed?" 58th Political Studies Association Annual Conference: Swansea University

underemployed³". Women's membership on these boards increased further in 1894 when a property qualification was removed.

School Boards were introduced in 1870, and from the beginning, women could stand for election regardless of whether they paid rates or were married. School Boards examined the provision of education in their district and if voluntary organisations were unable to provide sufficient school places, school boards could use Council rates to build and maintain more schools.

In 1902, school boards were abolished and the responsibility for education moved into local authorities. Under considerable pressure from the Women's Local Government Society, local authorities were required to co-opt women onto the newly formed education committees, but these women had lost their electoral standing, so their influence was considerably curbed.

In 1894, the Parish and District Councils Act allowed rate paying women to both vote and stand in elections in urban and rural district councils. The number of women serving nationally on Urban District Councils did not exceed 4 serving at the same time before 1914⁴.

This political work served as an intermediary step between the work women had long performed in their communities and becoming Councillors, particularly after the First World War. In Leeds, 8 of the 19 women Councillors in the inter-war period had been poor law guardians and in Sheffield, 5 out of 20 had been. Mary Dennis, the first woman to be elected to Barnsley Council in 1930,

³ Blaug, Mark. "The Poor Law Report Re-examined." *Journal of Economic History* (1964) 24: 229-45

⁴ Game

was both a member of the Board of Guardians and a co-opted member of the Education Committee⁵.

The 1907 legislation

In 1907, the Qualification of Women Act allowed rate paying women to stand for the first time in County and County Borough Councils. Outside Yorkshire women were being elected in increasing numbers; across the Pennines, Mrs Lees was elected in an Aldermanic by-election in Oldham in 1907, followed by Miss Margaret Ashton who was elected as a Councillor in Manchester in 1908, Eleanor Rathbone in Liverpool in 1909 and Mrs Summers in Stalybridge in 1912.

Despite the strong culture of women's community work in Yorkshire no women were elected. Women's organisations struggled to find suitable women to stand as candidates in industrial towns. In 1910, a retired headmistress, Miss Wilson, stood in the aldermanic by-elections in Bradford but she came third. The Liberals also put women up in Huddersfield, Mrs Julia Glaisyer in 1910 and 1912, and in Sheffield, Miss Maud Maxfield in 1912; these women also all failed to get elected⁶. In other areas, such as Leeds, there do not seem to have been any women candidates at all⁷.

Suffragists and Suffragettes

Perhaps surprisingly, only a handful of women who were directly involved in the suffrage movement, actually became local politicians. However there were some; Alice Schofield Coates, her sister in law

⁵ Dunkley, p137

⁶ Dunkley, pp 115/116

⁷ Hollis, Patricia. (1989) "Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914" Oxford: Clarendon.

Marion Coates Hanson, Bertha Quinn, Ada Cumming and Gertrude Wilkinson had all honed their skills campaigning for the vote and then applied their talents to formal politics.

Described as an “indefatigable worker for the liberation of women”⁸, Alice Schofield Coates was a suffragette and Labour activist who in 1919 was the first woman Councillor to serve on Middlesbrough County Borough Council.

Having grown up in Manchester, she followed an early career path common amongst suffragettes and became a teacher. In 1903/04, she joined Mrs Pankhurst’s Women’s Social and Political Union and it was at around this time, that she told a Liberal candidate, Winston Churchill, to “shut up and sit down” when he failed to stick to the point in a meeting over which she was presiding⁹. In 1907, she left the WSPU and joined the fledgling Women’s Freedom League. In 1909 she became the WFL organiser for Middlesbrough, got arrested whilst attempting to present a petition to Parliament, served a month in Holloway prison – later describing the experience as “dreary”¹⁰ - and was rescued from a pelting of rotten eggs and ripe tomatoes in Guisborough by her friend and comrade, Charles Coates. The couple were married the following year and were described as, “generous in their gifts and public services”¹¹.

Alice was elected in 1919, using the slogans, “Healthy Homes and Clean Administration” and Public Health is Public Wealth”. Her sister in law, Marion Coates Hanson, was elected a week later. Alice remained a member of Middlesbrough Council until 1935.

⁸ Evening Gazette, 29.04.58

⁹ Evening Gazette, 13.06.58

¹⁰ Crawford, Elizabeth. (2001) “The women's suffrage movement: a reference guide, 1866-1928” p130. Routledge.

¹¹ The Northern Echo, 16.05.1939

She continued to campaign to improve the lot of women and workers throughout her life. She remained involved in the WFL, she was associated with the National Council of Women – attending international conferences in Rome and Geneva as a delegate -, and was still distributing leaflets in the 1950s advocating equal pay for equal work¹². She was widely regarded as a pioneer within the Labour movement, involving herself in health (serving as the vice Chair of the Middlesbrough National Health Insurance Committee and vice-Chair of the Middlesbrough Branch of the Social Hygiene Council), education and sanitation work, housing, and pioneering welfare work during the First World War. She sat on the magistrates' bench for 35 years.

Trade Unions

A smaller proportion of women got involved in local politics through their unions; in Sheffield Gertrude Wilkinson, Helena Mitchell and Edith Birch and in Leeds Jeannie Arnott were all members of the National Federation of Women Workers which campaigned for women workers' rights during the First World War. However after the NFWW was amalgamated with the National Union of General Workers, women's issues were sidelined.

Considering the high proportion of women who worked in cloth production in Yorkshire, it is perhaps surprising that more women did not become officials in the textile unions. Bertha Quinn from Leeds was one of the few; she became a local organiser for the Tailors and Garment Workers' Union in 1914 after many years of working in clothing factories. She had also been a militant suffragette and a member of the Women's Social and Political Union.¹³

¹² Evening Gazette, 23.10.1951

¹³ Dunkley, p 137

Trade unions continued to be a path for women into politics, although never to the same extent as for their male colleagues. Trade unions continue to provide a route for women into local politics to this day.

The 1914 Legislation

Although women had been eligible to stand for election in County and Borough elections since 1907, the lack of women, not just in Yorkshire but nationally too, was in no small part due to restrictions which excluded the majority of women from standing. In 1914, the property qualification was removed, allowing any rate-paying woman to stand for election to her local Council; however, the First World War suspended elections until 1919. At the outset of the First World War, there were around 50 women Councillors serving on Borough and County Councils nationally; none of these were in Yorkshire¹⁴. The removal of the property qualification made a huge difference, allowing many more women to stand; in the inter-war period, for instance, only 9 of the 87 women Councillors in the West Riding were unmarried¹⁵.

Political families

Family tradition has an important role in political life. Many of the early women Councillors, as well as those who came later, were from political families and followed in the footsteps of parents or spouses. As we have already seen, there was always a strong tradition of women taking up philanthropic work amongst wealthier families.

¹⁴ Hollis p400

¹⁵ Dunkley P126

During the inter-war period, 4 of the 19 women Councillors in Leeds sat in the Council chamber alongside their husbands, and there were also husband and wife teams serving in Wakefield, Bradford, York and Barnsley.¹⁶ Clementina Sarah Turton, the first woman to sit on the North Riding of Yorkshire County Council in 1919, was the wife of the Conservative politician, Edward Turton, who had served on the Speaker's Commission for Parliamentary Reform during the war. Much later, both Enid Hattersley and her husband served on Sheffield Council (although in that case it was Enid rather than her husband who had the most prominent role).

Siblings have also entered Council life together; again, in Sheffield, Gertrude Wilkinson, one of the first women elected onto the Council, was described as being, "one of two brilliant sisters." Unfortunately her sister died shortly after being elected in 1927.

The First World War

Many of the women who would go on to be women Councillors after the war were mirroring the activities of those who were already Councillors in other areas of the Country; they were finding homes for refugees, forming sewing committees, finding women work, organising municipal kitchens, administering Red Cross enquiry offices, setting up convalescence homes and widows' pensions, war savings schemes and women police.¹⁷ In Halifax, Miriam Lightowler (elected in 1924) became the Treasurer of a sewing committee of thirty women who repaired clothes for the poor law union hospital, whilst in Middlesbrough, Alice Schofield Coates was pioneering welfare work for women and children, setting up a maternal home and maternal and infant welfare centres.

¹⁶ Dunkley, p131

¹⁷ Dunkley, p116 and Hollis, p 398

As Winifred Wheable-Archer observed, “The home help service originally started off in the First World War when everybody was out at war and making munitions. The concern was for mothers and babies and the original home help service was part of maternity services looking after women and childbirth.”

Women were invited to sit on distress and Food Control Committees as well as Munitions Tribunals, and often served in roles their husbands and brothers would have occupied had it not been for the War.

If a Council seat was vacated during this period, the political party of the previous Councillor would find someone of the same party to fill the vacancy. It was in a situation like this that Annie Arnold came to serve on Bradford County Borough Council; the death of her husband – a worsted spinner and former Lord Mayor of Bradford - in 1918 left a space and Annie was persuaded to take his seat; she was probably the first woman to serve on any of the larger authorities in Yorkshire.

Between the Wars

After the First World War, “women's experience, political standing and self esteem had changed radically. Women themselves had greater confidence”¹⁸. In 1919, there were 23 women candidates in West Yorkshire alone; 1 standing in Morley, and Huddersfield, 2 in Ripon, 3 in each of Sheffield, Halifax, Leeds and York and 5 in Bradford.¹⁹ In 1920, 3% of Sheffield's Councillors were women.²⁰

In those early years, as now, many resisted the encroachment of politics into local government. Often women candidates shunned party politics as they thought that parties would prevent them pursuing the best interests of their wards or would get in the way of campaigning for the issues affecting women.

“I did not go into politics for politics. I went in as a means of helping people. I found you had to get inside to do things” (Lizzie Naylor).²¹

“My years of experience of public life have convinced me that the introduction of party politics into the government of municipality is detrimental to best interests of the community...” (Beatrice Kitson, 1920)²².

The Women's Citizenship League supported women like Beatrice Kitson who campaigned on a women's platform with no party to help them.

¹⁸ Dunkley p116

¹⁹ Ibid p121

²⁰ Ibid p121

²¹ cited by Dunkley, p158-159

²² cited in Dunkley, p149

The industrial mining and steel areas of South Yorkshire suffered greatly in the inter-war depression and Labour Councillors mobilised to assist workers and their families. In the General Strike of 1926, Jessie Smith took signatures of unemployed women after the strike. 58 years later, Winifred Wheable-Archer's mother, who had spent these years in Manchester, would:

“...despair when she used to read these condescending articles about the 1984 strike and young journalists writing how wonderful the women were doing. My mother just said ‘what do they think we did in 1926?’

Many women were also involved in schemes for the relief of the rural poor and increasingly came to see being a Councillor as one of the ways in which they could alleviate the conditions in deprived communities, e.g., through slum clearance or clean air schemes. Others took an interest in health issues, often challenging received wisdoms and fighting for unpopular causes.

An example of this is Mary Hatfield, the first woman elected onto Hull County Borough Council in 1919. Institutional visiting had long been considered a suitable occupation for women and she was placed on the Asylum Committee straight away. Mary was particularly concerned with women's welfare; following the First World War she had put forward a motion to Council concerning civilian widows' pensions²³, and following an inspection of Hull Asylum in January 1923, she refused to sign the committee's report describing the institution s being in “usual good order” due to the inadequate bathing arrangements for women patients²⁴.

²³ Minutes of Proceedings of the Council 1919-1920, Special Meeting of Council 19 January 1920

²⁴ Minutes of Proceedings of Hull City Council 1922-1923 Asylum Committee 20 January 1923 p31

In March 1923, the committee again visited the asylum hoping to clear up the issues which Mary Hatfield had raised, all of the other members of the committee were content with what they saw but Mary again refused to sign the report and this time wrote her own. She made complaints about the bathrooms and bathing arrangements, dirty crockery, lavatories and bathroom, cookhouse and scullery overcrowded dormitories, a patient confined in a dark room, inadequate laundry, and cruelty by the nurses²⁵.

Not surprisingly, relationships between Mary Hatfield and the other members of the committee quickly deteriorated. In an Asylum Committee meeting in April 1923, Mr B Pearlman accused Mary of making grave charges without good foundation, in particular citing her report of a female patient's arm being fractured by two nurses. Mrs Hatfield retorted by stating that she was used to Mr Pearlman's bullying and Mr Pearlman then commented that he was, "used to [her] silly childishness" and that if she didn't want to listen she could, "go and have a cup of tea." The Hull Times reported that the other members of the committee tried to be as impartial as possible but that Mary Hatfield continued to "throw insults at them across the table".²⁶

On the 22 September 1923, the Board of Control submitted a letter stating that they did not think that any useful purpose would be served by their holding a further enquiry but that two commissioners would visit Hull. They concluded that administration of some of the women's side had been in some measure at fault and that these matters had been rectified but that stock-taking was still at fault. They said that in general the asylum was administered in a good way and that their confidence in Dr Meeson remained

²⁵ Asylum Committee 21 June 1923 p86

²⁶ Hull Times April 14 1923 p6 Mrs Hatfield's Allegations on asylum

unshaken. Mary Hatfield was minuted as dissenting from the positive reports of the visiting committee.²⁷

Things did seem to improve at the asylum, and in July 1924, Mrs Hatfield reported that she was, “pleased to see that much improvement has taken place” but she was, “still of the opinion that the entire institution requires to be thoroughly re-organised.”²⁸

Organised Women

In the inter-war period, effort was put in by the main political parties to mobilise the newly enfranchised women voters. Women’s Labour and Conservative organisations acted as a further training ground for some women who had already been involved in community work and for others it was the starting point. Other ‘semi-recreational’ groups such as the Women’s Co-operative Guild, Women’s Citizens’ Association and National Council of Women served a similar purpose.

Although these groups often reinforced the ‘separate spheres’ view of men and women’s political participation, the value of these organisations in acting as training grounds was considerable. Their focus often differed, not just between the organisations, but also from area to area. For example, the Conservative Women’s Associations were established in 1918 to organise the work of women members in the Conservative Party amongst newly enfranchised women voters. In Sheffield, the Association existed largely to support male activism; however, in Leeds, it was dominated by the wives of local politicians who used the Committee’s considerable campaigning expertise as leverage to gain

²⁷ Asylum Committee 22 September 1923 p117

²⁸ Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council 1923-1924 Asylum Committee
19 June 1924 p71

council seats for senior members of the Association;²⁹ Gertrude Dennison, its Treasurer, was elected in 1921 in West ward and Gertrude Halpot, the Secretary, in 1930 in North ward.

There was a real push towards education, and study groups, classes, debates and lectures were organised. Women were not only encouraged to improve their knowledge of current affairs; they were also encouraged to develop their confidence and their skills in public speaking. Women's groups were able to pick out and develop promising women who aspired to be on the selection panels and they often provided financial assistance to women candidates.

In the Labour Party 13 women were recruited nationally to work as women's organisers; these included Margaret Gibb, who gave up her seat on Sheffield Council to take up her role as the organiser for the North East, and one of the first women elected on York Council, Harriet Fawcett, who gave up her seat in August 1921 to go and work as the organiser in the West Midlands. These women were often self-educated and working class; Harriet Fawcett claimed that she could, "knit, tend cows and read books at the same time."³⁰

Young Women

Youth groups fulfilled a similar role to women's organisations; they fostered a sense of camaraderie amongst their members, both developing their skills and knowledge and fulfilling a social function. Political youth organisations were also very successful. From 1906 until 1945, the Junior Imperial and Constitutional League served to foster political interest and further the Conservative and Unionist

²⁹ Dunkley, p 99

³⁰ Hannon, June: Gendered Activism and the Politics of Women's Work: Women as Paid Organizers and Propagandists for the British Labour Party Between the Wars" [International Labor and Working-Class History](#) (2010), 77: p69-88

cause³¹, becoming the Young Conservatives in 1945, and changing again to Conservative Future in 1998.

The Labour League of Youth served a similar function within the Labour movement. It was established during the early 1920s and continued through to late 1950s. Winifred Wheable Archer was a member of the Labour League of Youth before the Second World War, and she recollects, “A lot of it was very intense but there was always a lightness and people falling in love with each other.” In 1960, the Young Socialists was set up as a national Labour Youth organisation, and in 1965, this changed its name to the Labour Party Young Socialists. becoming Young Labour in 1993.

Young people’s organisations flourished between the wars; the Young Men and Women’s Christian Associations, and the Scouts and Guides did especially well along with the Young Farmers and the Woodcraft Folk. Mary Blamires, the first woman Councillor in Huddersfield, was involved in running her local YWCA and a generation of politically active women would emerge from these organisations.

Poor Law Reorganisation

By 1926 it was clear that the existing poor law system was unable to cope with the effects of mass unemployment. In the resulting reorganisation the work of poor law boards was brought within the Council and only Council members were allowed to have voting rights on the new committees. However, in Sheffield in 1929 and in Leeds in 1930, there was also a re-organisation of the electoral ward boundaries, and this gave women who had been members of these boards the opportunity to get elected onto their Councils. In

³¹ Conservative Party Archive Youth Organisations, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Sheffield, those who had been unsuccessful were co-opted onto the Public Assistance Committee and then found places in the Council in the following years; these women successfully demonstrated that their experience of overseeing children cared for by the guardians and poor law infirmaries should not be lost and would be invaluable in health and children's committees. Ada Moore in Sheffield observed that Council work was "child's play compared with what we have to do in Poor-Law administration."³² In 1929 the number of women elected onto the council in her city jumped from 2 to 12; in Leeds in 1930, it rose from 7 to 14.

The successes of women in Sheffield and Leeds were not however reflected elsewhere in the region. Bradford Board of Guardians was considered to be one of the most progressive in the country and in 1914 20 of the guardians were women. Yet between the wars, of the 9 women elected onto Bradford County Borough Council, only one, Hannah Drake, had served as a Poor Law Guardian. The total number of women elected onto Bradford Council was much smaller than in Leeds and Sheffield during this period, with Leeds electing 19 women and Sheffield 20. It was not however, for the want of trying, and there were several years in the inter-war period when more women stood in municipal election in Bradford than did in Leeds or Sheffield, yet it seems that they were only selected as candidates in unwinnable seats.³³

The Second World War

The Second World War again saw a prolonged period of hardship for many families, particularly where husbands, fathers and sons had gone to fight.

³² Dunkley, p 137

³³ Dunkley, p146

As Winifred Wheable-Archer recalled;

“The story that people sometimes tell you – that we were healthy during the war - absolute rubbish! I can remember being hungry, being without food. It was alright if you were in the country, but if you were leading an urban life as a young mother, you weren’t, you just got your rations and that was it.”

As in the First World War, those women ran Home Help services, served on Soldiers and Sailors Committees, Interned Prisoner of War Committees and Belgian Relief Committees. Other women enrolled for war work; Audrey Firth, and Mrs Graham both joined the Women’s Voluntary Service and Felicity Lane Fox worked as a billeting officer.

Much of the work described above was in the philanthropic tradition and, as Winifred Wheable-Archer remembered (in relation to the Home Help service), it was conducted, “very often by the aristocratic ladies who had come up through doing voluntary work.” The Women’s Voluntary Service was also very much run upon hierarchical lines and many women took their experiences back into the Conservative Party (predominantly) after the war³⁴.

Some women were able to serve by giving up all or part of their homes as hospitals or offices. Now in County Durham, Lartington Hall, near Barnard Castle, used to be in the old North Riding of Yorkshire was the home of Mrs Olive Field and her husband, Norman. During the Second World War, the Hall became a Red Cross convalescent home and the ballroom was converted into a military ward.

³⁴ Hinton, James (1998) “Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State. Women’s Voluntary Services in the 1940s”
Twentieth Century British History (1998) 9 (2): 274-305.

The son of a patient at the home many years later recalled a Christmas visit he and his mother made:

“The first thing I saw as he [the butler] showed us into the entrance hall was the biggest Christmas tree I had yet seen...fully decorated. We took our seats in the ballroom and were entertained by an ENSA troop. At the end of the show the seats were rearranged for dancing. I sat and watched because I had never danced before. Without warning, Mrs Fields came to our table, got me up on my feet, clasped me to her (ample) bosom – and waltzed me around the room! It constituted the only time I ever danced with a millionaire’s wife.”³⁵

This wasn’t the first time that Mrs Field had given up her home to assist other people; in 1918, she and her family donated Morris Grange, near Scotch Corner, to be used as a hospital for Middlesbrough’s tubercular children. In 1952, Mrs Field was elected to North Riding of Yorkshire County Council, representing Startforth, and in 1964 she became an Alderman.

As well as being well known throughout the Dales for her kindness and generosity, Mrs Field developed a reputation for eccentricity; she had a fondness for enormous cars in which she was driven by her butler, Lancaster. On seeing Mrs Field riding on a bicycle during the War, a local child commented, “Come here quick, Mum. See what Hitler’s done to Mrs Field.”³⁶ She served on the Council right up until her death in a car crash in 1973.

³⁵ Joseph Norman Kidd interview with the BBC 9 November 2005

³⁶ North, John “Success by the seat of his pants”, *The Northern Echo*, Thursday 5 September 2002

The Post War Years

The tradition of women coming into politics through charity and community work continued through the first half of the 20th century. In 1949, Felicity Lane Fox was elected onto the West Riding County Council; her mother before her had earned an MBE for her work in hospitals and in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Everilda Gertrude Scrope served on the County Council from 1946-1950, following in the footsteps of her mother who had been a co-opted member of the education committee and a school Governor, and her father who had been a Councillor.

However, the aftermath of the Second World War also brought a whole new crop of problems with which women could engage.

Mrs Marie Middlebrook Haigh, or “Madge” to her Council colleagues, helped to set up the Huddersfield Citizens’ Advice Bureau during the Second World War and for many years she served as its Secretary³⁷. After the War, when service men in Huddersfield started to return to their families after years of separation, many couples experienced difficulties. She set up a counselling service to help these couples and it was reported that she was a, “woman of sympathy and understanding who has a genius for getting straight to the root of the trouble.”³⁸

Most of disputes between couples were due to an increase in independence of either husband or wife or both during the War years. Mrs Middlebrook Haigh described women who had become

³⁷ Huddersfield Examiner “Death of Mrs M L Middlebrook Haigh 19/12/1978

³⁸ Huddersfield Examiner “Woman who mends broken marriages. Indifferent Husbands: Independent Wives”
19/03/1946

more self-reliant as having “grown out of themselves” and as being “out of tune” with their husbands. She also dealt with cases where couples had “erred” and sometimes arranged for children born out of wedlock to be adopted.

In 1947, she was elected onto Huddersfield Council and declared: “So far as our town is concerned, it is high time there were more women on the Council.” She served as the Secretary to the Cinderella Society and as the Chair of the Old Peoples’ Welfare Committee, in 1958 she received an MBE for her public work and in 1960 she became an Alderman. In 1972, Mrs Middlebrook Haigh was forced to retire after an age limit was introduced for Aldermen.

The New Generation

During the 1960s, young people began to take a much greater interest in national and international issues. Several women interviewed commented on the influence that American politics had on them when John F Kennedy was elected;

“I think John F. Kennedy started my interest in politics... He was charismatic and he made people listen. So I’ve been, as I said, interested in politics a long time.” (Christine Iredale, Kirklees)

“I was growing up [and] became interested in politics in the mid-sixties and that was the time, of course, of the race riots and the bussing, etc, in America. So that was a really big learning experience for me. But before that I remember the assassination of JFK. For me, I was very into his brother and of course he was killed also in ’68, just when I was taking my A Levels. That was a real introduction to politics for me.” (Val Slater, Bradford)

A number had been involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and other groups:

“Of course I did actually go on all the marches... that was before I got to university; anti-Vietnam demos, going up to the American Embassy in London and protesting; CND, I can't remember them all now but certainly the anti-Vietnam and CND were the two I know I went on.” (Carole Pattison, Kirkcaldy)

Whilst some women were getting caught up in the excitement of demonstrations and pressure politics, others were getting angry at the injustices, they and those around them were experiencing in their day to day lives:

“I got really, really angry about a number of things that were happening then in the early seventies. I was working and earning a lot more money than him, I'd given up my job in Sheffield, we'd moved on, and yet I wanted a twin tub washing machine, of all things, on extended credit, and I couldn't have it without my husband's signature, and that made me angry, very angry. Then I started looking around me a bit more at what I could do and what my husband could do, and the fact that this impacted quite badly on me as an army wife... I wasn't in those days expected to sign various documents. It was him or my father, which I found even more strange!” (Penny Baker, Sheffield)

Many Labour Party women got involved in politics during the industrial and social unrest during the 1970s:

“...so I would have been in my teens in the 1970s with the Heath Government, the miners' strikes... that's when I first got active, sort of stuffing envelopes for the Labour Party in the 1974 election.” (Helen Rivron, Halifax)

“I was politicised in the late seventies when things were sort of kicking off within the steel industry in Rotherham and Sheffield, and I searched really for a party to belong to... I have a lot of friends who were in the Communist Party and they had an excellent education programme, but none of them seemed right for me. I ended up joining the Labour Party I think in 1981, round about the time of the first steel strike.” (Maggi Clark, Rotherham)

Conservative women were still more likely to take the more traditional routes, engaging in voluntary and community work, joining the Young Conservatives (described by some as a ‘marriage bureau’) and following parents or husbands into political activity.

However, young women on the left generally seemed increasingly less likely to regard local politics as an adequate outlet for their activism, and in the 1970s and early 1980s the numbers of women councillors fell in Labour areas. Sheffield, which had had a long history of electing women, elected none in 1975, whilst in 1978 Leeds elected only 3 and by 1982 York also had no women Councillors. Councils with high numbers of Conservative or Independent Councillors were more likely to number women amongst their members; this is probably because in these areas women were likely still to be maintaining their focus on local community and charity work.

The 1980s and Onwards

This pattern was changed by the next wave of industrial unrest in the 1980s, which made many women in South and West Yorkshire much more aware of the importance of local activism and brought women back into touch with their local political parties, with Councils, and with other women from across the region.

Women Councillors in the areas affected by strikes worked hard to collect money and set up soup kitchens, and they joined strikers on the picket line, took part in demonstrations and marches, and tried to improve things from within the Council Chamber.

“I remember driving round with a great deal of money in the boot of Marina's car, which was a clapped out old car, dishing it out to various miners' women's groups through the coalfield to help them keep going. In Upton they got their meat from the Printers' Union and they got their vegetables from us. So twice a week I would fill the back of the car with cauliflowers and God knows what I could buy in the market – and the market were good, the market traders; they didn't give it to me, but they were not taking any profit from it.” (Jill Page, Leeds)

Several of the women we interviewed recalled that although this period of time was extremely difficult, the strikes helped to unify the communities affected and in the more traditional areas, in particular, women became more active in their communities:

“...it was just one of those powerful times where you think that all these women, and it was women, coming together and supporting other women who were wives of striking miners; and my mum was one.” (Maureen Cummings, Wakefield)

“It brought the best out of the ladies in South Kirkby and Moorthorpe, it brought out people who had only been an ordinary housewife; it brought them all together. They were all determined they weren't going to starve their men.” (Mollie Wright, Wakefield)

Elsewhere in the 1980s the emergence of local authority Women's Committees was beginning to change the way in which Councils

worked. These Committees, often pioneering the involvement of women from community groups, took on issues which had previously been either neglected or not considered important. Domestic violence, policing, careers advice, and many other municipal responsibilities were now subjected to what would now be called 'gender audits', and this was a time of considerable progress on some areas.

"I remember a senior police officer explaining to me that 'domestic violence is not an issue which the man in the street is interested in prosecuting', and feeling that if that was the case it was time something was done about it. I was furious!" (Nan Sloane, Leeds)

By the end of the 1980s the numbers of women on Councils such as Leeds and Sheffield was growing again, with both Labour and the Conservatives increasing the number of women candidates they stood in winnable seats.

In North and East Yorkshire the numbers of women councillors had remained steady, and for women in these areas, defining events came later and were more likely to be crises such as foot and mouth outbreaks, which were devastating for the communities involved and, like the miners' strike, elsewhere in the region brought women of necessity into new ways of life.

"I think what happened was that wives started to go out to work because the income wasn't there. You see the problem you had was, if you were culled, you actually got money, but if you weren't culled, you couldn't move your stock, so you got no money. ... so it was at that time wives went out to work, they had to bring in some income ... and I think they've continued so I think you do find now that probably what has left it is that there are very few

farmers wives that don't have some sort of income, are still out working. So, I think that's probably what's been the legacy from it." (Yvonne Peacock, Richmondshire)

During the 1990s the level of women councillors continued to rise slowly, arriving at the 30% mark in 2001. In 2003 the Labour Party introduced positive action measures to increase the number of their women councillors, and the level has now reached 31%. If that rate of progress is maintained it will take another 190 years for there to be equal numbers of women and men on the region's local authorities.

Making It Work

Many women councillors remain rooted in their communities and feel strongly that community service is a key element of what they aspire to do. This is true regardless of party or the type of community represented, as is the need to balance all the demands on time, attention and energy. In addition, women are less likely to be council Leaders (currently just 2 of the region's 21 local authorities are led by women – Sheffield and Calderdale).

Committee Work

They are also still more likely to find themselves on committees dealing with traditional 'women's issues' than on those dealing with finance or planning. Originally the term 'women's issue' implied something rather different from now, and was taken to mean education, family and welfare rather than matters such as domestic or sexual violence. Many women felt that:

“...you would find that the women councillors were agreed on what we'd call, not women's issues, but the family issues, the people's issues. It's a bit condescending to say 'the women's issues'. They're not; they are people's issues.” (Winifred Wheable-Archer, Kirklees)

The first women councillors had been elected on issues such as housing, education and health, and had regarded them as having significance for everyone; Alice Schofield Coates' election address in 1919 included the slogan, “Public Health is Public Wealth.”

In 1934, in her inaugural speech as Mayor of Halifax, Miriam Lightowler commented that; “The real purpose of life is not the

accumulation of wealth, nor the gaining of power, but service to the community.” And it was within the community that the focus of much of the work of women councillors remained.

Moreover, the welfare aspect of their work meant that many women often got involved housing and public health. Edna Crichton served as the Chairman of York’s Housing Committee for 15 years and she oversaw much of the slum clearance in her city. Likewise, Alice Schofield Coates and her sister-in-law Marion Coates Hanson in Middlesbrough, and Mary Sykes in Huddersfield were involved in similar activities in their towns.

In Leeds, Jeannie Arnott was on the Public Health Committee and successfully campaigned for a public wash house to be built in Holbeck in 1928.³⁹

This trend continued with the major building and clean air schemes of the post-war years, but changed as time went on. Women remain unlikely to lead on finance, regeneration or economic strategy, but are also less likely to hold the housing or environment portfolios. and women still feel excluded or in a minority in some key portfolio areas.

“... there are even fewer women that do waste, and I've always been a champion of recycling. We went down to Norfolk to a processing plant... I was there with a very much older colleague who was my advisor when I was the Cabinet member. And we spent the entire morning with the people in Norfolk talking to this rather more elderly person and not a word to me... we were having a working lunch, and it was the first time that we'd actually gone round the table and introduced ourselves. And I saw the

³⁹ Dunkley, p194

light going on as they realised that all morning they'd been talking, in their eyes, to the wrong politician, because the politician that was going to make the decision was me. And things changed absolutely from the morning to the afternoon, because in the afternoon, I always had one of the guys who was selling the plant to us on my shoulder all the time.” (Sue Ellis, Rotherham)

“I didn't know anything about Social Services... but because I was female I got bunged into the Social Services.” (Caroline Patmore, North Yorkshire County Council)

Juggling Commitments

Balancing the demands of Council duties with family, work, educational and social commitments has been a challenge for many women councillors and continues to be today; one of issues raised time and again in studies and inquiries such as the Councillors' Commission of 2007 are the problems of long hours and family unfriendly meeting times.

Mary Sykes a Huddersfield councillor between 1935 and 1949 (who had, in 1917, been one of the first women to qualify as a solicitor) described her life as “one long rush.” Others agree.

“I plan all my time, from the moment I get out of bed... Then when I'm driving home at night I think, well thank goodness the potatoes are scrubbed and the salad is soaking.” (Audrey Firth, Bradford, served 1953-1977 [West Yorkshire Archives])

“I said, 'don't anybody start because I've had two grumpy kids to get to school and I've already kicked the rabbit by mistake on the way out, so don't you lot start anything!’” (Sue Ellis, Rotherham)

“It’s just madness, really. It doesn’t work at all. The more senior you are... you can control your own diary and the more you can do it. If I’d have been a backbencher I think it would have been completely impossible. But because I was quite senior, I could say, “Well, no, I can’t do that. I need to do it at this point.” (Ruth Redfern, Bradford)

“...basically I learnt pretty quickly that I wouldn’t be able to manage my job. The pressures of work and the hunger really to want to do more for the community was starting to take its toll... you realise that you can’t do two things. You can do one thing good, or do two things half-heartedly and badly and not get any results.” (Kim Groves, Leeds)

“I can remember at one stage I was 14 essays behind, but I thought, I’ll catch up. I didn’t find it difficult; it was just the time...” (Molly Walton, Kirklees)

“I had both my children when I was a councillor, and although there was no maternity leave then it was actually quite easy when they were babies because I just took them with me if I needed to. But when they got older and started school it was much more difficult, for them as well as for me.” (Nan Sloane, Leeds)

But Council work can also offer a flexibility which would not have been available in a more traditional working environment:

“I have found it quite easy to be very flexible as a mother, and flexible as Leader...So I actually find the flexibility of being a councillor extremely good for fitting in around school holidays. If I can’t attend a meeting I just don’t attend.” (Fleur Butler, Richmondshire)

“I worked full time and I gave it up and went to work part-time... Clearly there's some discipline around coming to Council meetings, but other than that you're free to work and to do as little or as much as possible.” (Jeanette Sunderland, Bradford)

“I've always been lucky in my employment. When I was first elected I was in the Civil Service... our contract of employment said that we're entitled to... up to 24 days special leave for public duty. So that was tremendous, that really helped me... Of course I had no children so I wasn't having to balance all that kind of thing, but you do have to be very good I think at time management.” (Val Slater, Bradford)

Women in a Man's World

Women's experience of the culture of local government differs from Council to Council, between political parties, between the periods of time that women have served on the same Council, and between individual women who have served on the same authority during similar periods of time.

In 1930 a prominent Huddersfield politician said that in his opinion a "brilliant woman" stood about the same chance of being selected as an "exceptionally poor man." In Leeds, Alderman Fred Walter expressed a similar sentiment and admitted that "generally a good man was preferred to a good woman."⁴⁰

In 1920, Kathleen Chambers was elected in Bradford; it was reported in the local paper that she was shouted down for 7 of the allotted 10 minutes of her maiden speech.

⁴⁰ Dunkley, p347

On the other hand, Mary Sykes in Huddersfield found that “My professional brethren have always been very nice to me.” (West Yorkshire Archives)

Audrey Firth, who was a Bradford councillor more than thirty years after Kathleen Chambers, observed that: “There’s still some prejudice, but I think I’ve lived it down. I’m treated like a man in committee-but there’s still someone there to hold open a door.” (West Yorkshire Archives)

More recent councillors also have mixed views.

“I think men have altered over the years I’ve been on. They’ve accepted that women have a right to be there as well as them and they shouldn’t be at home sweeping the floor, etc, but when I first got on the atmosphere wasn’t like that.” (Mollie Wright, Wakefield)

“To be honest I didn’t get any stress for being black. I got lots of stress for being young. Lots of stress for being young. Lot of older women, particularly, were horrible.” (Alison Lowe, Leeds)

“...when you’re a senior female politician, people hate you for it, particularly men in your own party... A lot of the animosity from a lot of my Labour colleagues was profound; they called me ‘The Black Widow.’” (Ruth Redfern, Bradford)

“I think people are more accepting of young male Councillors or politicians than young female politicians... I think people really struggle to understand a young woman in a more senior position.” (Lucinda Yeadon, Leeds)

“I think you experience different things as a woman in your 50s to a woman in your 30s. Probably less blatant sexism but there’s often this thing said by older women that you become invisible” (Helen Rivron, Calderdale)

On the other hand many women have commented on how they have found discrimination to be absent or unproblematic in their Councils and many interviewees commented on the friendships and the support that they have received from colleagues:

“I was asked whether I found it a sexist environment and apart from the political floor, where everybody hates everybody. And I don’t think being female is any better, or any worse than anybody else. You still get verbally abused, harassed, but there is never any directly sexist comments. I actually found working at the council one of the least sexist environments I have ever worked at in my life.” (Fleur Butler, Richmondshire)

“It’s not all serious endeavour for women councillors. Most of them have managed to have a good deal of fun, because they have had fellowship where they have been.” (Winifred Wheable-Archer, Kirklees)

The Future

Currently (2011) 30% of councillors nationally are women, and 31% of councillors in Yorkshire & the Humber. These figures have been static for a number of years and show little sign of improvement.

Similarly, very few women either lead or have led local authorities. Currently 13% of council leaders nationally are women and 14% in Yorkshire. Women remain less likely to hold the finance or economic strategy portfolios and most likely to find themselves – willingly or otherwise – in education or social services, and whilst many people take the view that these are at least as important as the corporate portfolios, it remains true that community-orientated portfolios are the least likely to feature in the most common routes to leadership.

Many of the women we interviewed expressed concern in the lack of diversity of all kinds amongst Council members.

“Now, I reckon I could do a pretty good job of representing people like me...it's about experience in life, so we need more mums, we need more dads, we need grandparents, we need single parents, we need people without children at all, we need people under the age of 20, 21, it's just that whole... Everybody brings a different perspective on life, and those perspectives need to be reflected” (Jeanette Sunderland, Bradford)

“There are younger members... in the Liberal Democrat group and actually in the Conservative group... but not Labour. And that's really worrying because it means that, either people just don't see local government as important and if they are politically active, they just want to be involved in national politics and local

politics really doesn't interest them, or people just don't believe in politics at all and have become so disillusioned that they don't want to be actively involved, and that is really worrying if they have." (Lucinda Yeadon, Leeds)

There are several ways in which Councillors think that this should be tackled:

"I think that we should encourage more young women to start at an early age to be Councillors. I think that's a barrier that we have to break as a party. I think it's important that we get women into political positions from all backgrounds." (Kim Groves, Leeds)

"I think the only way you will ever get more women involved in politics is by starting at school level, and also getting rid of the perception that politics is a dirty thing or a dirty matter; it isn't. It is a complicated one and you need a particular kind of mind to be able to do it... I think you have to go into schools and make it a more interesting subject for girls, and we need to stop putting them off with this mistrust of politicians." (Caroline Patmore, North Yorkshire County Council)

"I would encourage people to take this up, it is fascinating, and it is fun. And the one other thing I would say is that I do believe in politics, and we should bring the fun back. It is a wholly serious matter, because it's for the country, it's for the people. But in delivering it, if we also see the lighter side, I think we will deliver it better." (Caroline Patmore, North Yorkshire County Council)

If things remain as they are, women will have to wait nearly two hundred years until they are represented in equal numbers with men on Councils in the region. Local government today is less a

man's world than it was when the first women were elected to it nearly a hundred years ago, but it is still very much male-dominated. And as Lucinda Yeadon says:

“... it can only be changed if we challenge it, and that will only be challenged if more women put themselves forward.”

Interviewees

Below is a full list of the women interviewed from this project, together with the Councils upon which they served.

Name	Council
Sylvia Anginotti	Sheffield
Penny Baker	Sheffield
Muriel Barker	North Lincolnshire
Janet Battye	Calderdale
Caroline Bayliss	Harrogate
Abi Bell	Hull
Ruth Billheimer	Bradford
Judith Blake	Leeds
Isobel Bowler	Sheffield
Frances Brady	Hull
Rita Briggs	Kirklees
Margaret Bruff	Barnsley
Linda Burgess	Barnsley
Josephine Burton	Rotherham
Fleur Butler	Richmondshire
Jean Butterfield	Harrogate and Bradford
Maggi Clark	Rotherham
Gill Cookson	Iredale
Jillian Creasey	Sheffield
Sonja Crisp	York
Maureen Cummings	Wakefield
Sylvia Dunkley	Sheffield
Rita Ellis	North East Lincolnshire
Sue Ellis	Rotherham
Diane Fairfax	Bradford

Name	Council
Bridget Fortune	Hambleton
Michelle Foster	Calderdale
Mary Glew	Hull
Monica Graham	Wakefield
Kim Groves	Leeds
Mary-Rose Hardy	East Riding
Sandra Holland	Doncaster
Janet Holmes	Wakefield
Christine Iredale	Kirklees
Hilda Jack	Rotherham
Ros Jump	East Riding
Val Kendall	Leeds
Sheila Kettlewell	Scarborough
Jane Kidd	Doncaster
Diane Leek	Sheffield
Norma Lincoln	North Lincolnshire
Alison Lowe	Leeds
Hazel Lynskey	Scarborough
Pat Marsh	Harrogate
Shelagh Marshall	Craven and North Yorkshire
Katrin McClure	East Riding
Pauline Nash	Calderdale
May Noble	Barnsley
Gill Page	Leeds
Caroline Patmore	North Yorkshire
Carole Pattison	Kirklees
Yvonne Peacock	Richmondshire
Kath Pinnock	Kirklees
Ruth Potter	York
Ruth Redfern	Bradford

Name	Council
Helen Rivron	Calderdale
Olivia Rowley	Wakefield
Margaret Sheard	Barnsley
Elizabeth Shields	Ryedale
Tracey Simpson-Laing	York
Val Slater	Bradford
Nan Sloane	Leeds
Angela Smith MP	Sheffield
Melva Steckles	Richmondshire
Jeanette Sunderland	Bradford
Molly Walton	Kirklees
Kay West	East Riding
Winifred Wheable-Archer	Kirklees
Peggy White	Leeds
Jane Wilford	Ryedale
Roni Wilson	North East Lincolnshire
Molly Wright	Wakefield
Lucinda Yeadon	Leeds

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The principal sources for both this book and the project were the women we interviewed and the archives we visited, but we also consulted a number of written works, and these are listed below.

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