“WORTHY CITIZENS”
MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN
LEICESTER
c.1850 - 1900

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by
Sarah Elizabeth Francis BA(Hons) (London) MA(Open)
Department of Historical Studies
University of Leicester

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ABSTRACT

"Worthy Citizens"

Middle-Class Women and the Public Sphere in Leicester c. 1850-1900

By Sarah E. Francis

Although the political and economic history of Leicester during the nineteenth century has been well-documented, the current historiography focuses on the contribution made by Leicester’s men. Women are rarely mentioned. Yet while the male elite of the town sought to bring about civic improvements at a time of rapid industrial change, women also made a significant contribution to the improvement of late nineteenth-century Leicester. This thesis explores women’s contribution to the middle-class reforming culture in the town and places it within the broader national context of women’s activism. The study assesses the nature and extent of women’s contribution to public life through their involvement in philanthropy, local government, civic societies and the temperance and anti-Contagious Diseases Acts campaigns. It suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century, through their public work which was focused on social and moral reform, a small group of middle-class women had clearly emerged in Leicester, regarded by others as leading citizens and acutely aware of their own responsibilities and duties. The involvement of local women in the public sphere led to an increased feminist consciousness for some and calls for full citizenship during the second half of the nineteenth century. In Leicester the Victorian suffrage campaign laid the foundations upon which the Edwardian suffragettes built. As women increased their involvement in civic public life, often working alongside men within the same local organisations, by the end of century the urban middle-class public sphere should be seen as a whole within which women were working not only on a ‘gendered’ basis but also increasingly performing tasks which had formerly fallen within the ‘male sphere’.
Acknowledgements

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My ever-patient husband, Huw, deserves a huge acknowledgement for keeping me calm, driving me to various archives and libraries, for proof-reading drafts and even doing the ironing and shopping when all I could think about were Leicester’s late nineteenth-century women.

Lastly I would like to thank my mother, Mrs Marion Smith, for her strength of character and support of her children through good times and bad and I would like to dedicate this thesis to her.
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<tr>
<td>BHS</td>
<td>Belmont House Society</td>
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<td>BWTA</td>
<td>British Women’s Temperance Association</td>
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<td>COS</td>
<td>Charity Organisation Society</td>
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<td>ILP</td>
<td>Independent Labour Party</td>
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<td>LC</td>
<td>Leicester Chronicle</td>
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<td>LDMS</td>
<td>Leicester Domestic Mission Society</td>
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<td>LNA</td>
<td>Ladies National Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRO</td>
<td>Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>LWLA</td>
<td>Leicester Women’s Liberal Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSWS</td>
<td>National Society for Women’s Suffrage</td>
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<td>NUWSS</td>
<td>National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies</td>
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<td>NUWW</td>
<td>National Union of Women Workers</td>
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<td>SBC</td>
<td>School Board Chronicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFN</td>
<td>Summary of Federation News</td>
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<tr>
<td>WLF</td>
<td>Women’s Liberal Federation</td>
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<td>WSPU</td>
<td>Women’s Social and Political Union</td>
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Introduction

This study explores the nature and extent of women’s integration into public life in the second half of the nineteenth century through a focus on the Midlands town of Leicester. It argues that in Leicester women became an integral part of a middle-class and reforming urban public culture through their involvement in philanthropic, campaigning and local organisations. However their involvement was influenced by contemporary discourses of gender and class. Particularly after 1870 women became recognised as leading local citizens in their own right by their contemporaries and their self-perception as local citizens with duties and responsibilities to others grew stronger. As women’s public involvement increased, so did their awareness of women’s rights and many local middle-class women became politicised through their participation in party politics and through the Victorian suffrage campaign. This thesis argues therefore that during the second half of the nineteenth century a strong and important middle-class, woman-centred reforming public culture developed in Leicester which until now has not been identified.

In recent years there have been many studies of women and public life which have focused on prominent middle-class women or movements. However, as Hannam notes, there have been fewer studies of women’s participation in public life at a local level.\(^1\) It is important to establish how far national and London-based developments regarding women’s emergence into the public sphere were reflected in provincial towns and

cities and the extent to which local women were influenced by more famous women through family and friendship networks. This period has been chosen because Leicester was undergoing a time of economic and social change following the reform of the Corporation in 1835. Key characteristics of Leicester can be identified as it changed from a county town into a late Victorian industrial city. The first of these was political as Liberalism came to dominate the town for most of the century. As Rendall notes, when referring to the beginnings of the women’s suffrage movement, women’s activism ‘needs to be placed within the context of Liberal enthusiasm and reform countrywide which preceded the election of Gladstone’s Liberal Government in 1868.’ Following the transference of power to the Liberal Nonconformists in 1835 after the passage of the Municipal Corporations Act, the movement to reform the town regained impetus. After some disagreement over the extent of reform, Leicester’s Improvement Act was finally passed in 1846. This Act provided for a series of subsequent civic improvements.

Secondly, following the end of the old Tory Corporation, Nonconformists such as the Biggs and Ellis families became Leicester’s most influential citizens. In particular Unitarianism was a powerful force in the town, the first Mayor of the reformed corporation being a member of the Great Meeting as well as his next six successors. Although, as Simmons notes, this was ‘an ascendancy of intelligence, not of numbers,’ nonetheless the Nonconformist chapels were where Leicester’s most

\[\text{Footnotes:}\]

influential male and female citizens could be found and Nonconformity is thus an important element in this study. Thirdly the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a change in Leicester’s economy. Until the 1850s, Leicester was almost entirely dependent on the woollen hosiery industry which had suffered fluctuations in fortune in the previous three decades. After the 1850s the advent of the boot and shoe industry and light engineering in the town led to a rapid increase in population. In the 1860s, Simmons notes that Leicester’s population grew by almost 40 per cent from 68,000 to 95,000, faster than at any time before or since. By 1901 the population had reached 211,579. This period of rapid urban change presented the town’s leading citizens with many challenges.

The contribution of Leicester’s most influential male citizens to the development and improvement of the town has been well-documented. Perhaps most famously, Temple-Patterson covers in detail the political and economic history of Leicester in the years immediately preceding this study from 1780-1850. He sees the years around 1850 as something of a turning point for the town as it began to ‘turn the corner towards more prosperous times.’ However, there is no mention of any contribution made to the life of the town during this early period by women. The role of prominent Victorian men such as Joseph Whetstone and the Biggs brothers, John and William, in beginning the civic transformation and improvement of Leicester has also been described by Jack Simmons.

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7 Ibid., p.151.
9 Simmons, *Leicester – vol. one*, chapter V; Simmons, *Leicester - vol. two*, chapter I.
However, Simmons only briefly mentions a handful of women in the context of education.\textsuperscript{10} Malcolm Elliott has also discussed in depth the improvements made to the town following the passing of the Improvement Act in 1846 in the areas of housing, the water and sewerage system and public health in Victorian Leicester.\textsuperscript{11} He notes that in spite of some disagreement between the Improvers (led by John Biggs) and the more cautious Economists (led by Joseph Whetstone) over where civic improvements needed to be made, there was a general agreement that action must be taken. In his introduction he states that

\begin{quote}
The men who served Leicester…invariably recognised the problems of the town and sought to tackle them with energy and determination…It was, above all, in responding to the problems of health and housing that the local authorities in Leicester displayed imagination and initiative.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Elliott stresses that local supporters of civic improvement were keen to carry out reform without waiting for instructions from London but ignores women’s contribution to reforming the town. Dinah Freer discusses the ‘dynasty-builders’ of Victorian Leicester and investigates how the dominance of a relatively small and elite group of male Liberal Nonconformists was maintained throughout the nineteenth century. However again it is only male networks which are investigated.\textsuperscript{13}

The contribution which women made to Leicester’s civic culture in the second half of the nineteenth century remains under-researched.

There have been some short biographical accounts written about

\textsuperscript{11} Elliott, \textit{Victorian Leicester}.
\textsuperscript{12}ibid., p. 21.
Leicester’s more active women during this period. Aucott provides useful background biographical details and often notes the activism of individual women.\textsuperscript{14} However there is no in-depth analysis of their involvement in the public life of Leicester in the context of wider local, national and feminist developments. Isabel Ellis has left us an interesting and useful ‘rag-bag’ of material entitled \textit{Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester} from someone who was much closer in time to the period and knew either as relatives or friends many of those referred to in this thesis.\textsuperscript{15} There have also been some notable essays on the well-known Leicester anti-slavery campaigner Elizabeth Heyrick who lived in Leicester in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{16} For the purposes of this study she was significant as a forerunner of local women’s later activism as will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter One. No-one, however, has researched the women of late nineteenth century Leicester and identified their significance as a whole within the wider context of local or national social and political developments.

The relationship of women to the public sphere has been the subject of considerable debate. In recent years much of the discussion has focused on the ideology of ‘separate spheres’. One of the most influential books has been Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s study, \textit{Family Fortunes}.\textsuperscript{17} Focusing on the town of Birmingham and the rural

\textsuperscript{15} I. C. Ellis, \textit{Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester} (Leicester, 1935).
\textsuperscript{17} L. Davidoff and C. Hall, \textit{Family fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850} (London, 1987).
counties of Essex and Suffolk, Davidoff and Hall demonstrated the importance of ‘separate spheres’ ideology and gender relations in the making of the English middle-class for the period from 1780-1850. In particular they argued that the male public sphere was organised in ‘gendered ways’ with little space for women who occupied the domestic sphere.\(^1^8\)

In recent years, however, the validity of the ‘separate spheres’ ideology as an analytical tool to describe the lives of men and women and the making of the middle class in the period from 1780-1850 has been frequently questioned. There have been many studies which have shown that women were engaged with the public sphere in this earlier period.\(^1^9\) As Gleadle and Richardson noted, the ‘boundaries between public and private worlds merged and overlapped.’\(^2^0\) Simon Morgan agrees with this analysis, arguing that it is more accurate to see the public sphere as ‘an organic entity that was continually growing, changing and reordering itself.’\(^2^1\) Women, rather than being excluded, were very much a part of this growth. Focusing on the city of Leeds in the mid-nineteenth century and in particular the life of Frances Heaton, he argues for a more inclusive definition of citizenship and demonstrates that the foundations of the later nineteenth century feminist movement can be found in the period from 1830-1860. Morgan notes the contemporary celebration of a masculine public sphere and argues that this is highly misleading and based on a

\(^{18}\) Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 416.


‘very narrow definition of citizenship.’\textsuperscript{22} Morgan takes issue with present-day historians such as Simon Gunn pointing out that although Gunn agrees that ‘women’s presence or absence in the public sphere significantly affected how a context…was viewed’, he nonetheless argues for an essentially masculine identity in nineteenth century public culture.\textsuperscript{23} Amanda Vickery meanwhile has claimed that the language of separate spheres was used by contemporaries as ‘prescriptive rhetoric’ in the face of an expansion of activities for women during this period.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed Davidoff and Hall themselves agree that the divisions between men and women were ‘open to contestation and negotiation’ particularly within the field of philanthropy.\textsuperscript{25}

This thesis indicates that from the evidence in Leicester, whilst ‘separate spheres’ was a persistent undercurrent in women’s lives throughout the nineteenth century, the separation of private and public was not distinct. Paradoxically, the ideology could have an empowering effect on women, enabling them to justify an increased public presence in urban, public life. In the second half of the nineteenth century local women were increasingly blurring the line between the two spheres, particularly in their campaigning, philanthropic and local government work. Many present-day historians have ignored women’s role in the building of a middle-class civic identity in the towns. Gunn stresses the essentially

\textsuperscript{22} Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, p. 189.
\textsuperscript{23} S. Morgan, ‘“A sort of land debatable”: female influence, civic virtue and middle-class identity, c. 1830-1860’, \textit{Women’s History Review}, 13, no. 2 (2004), pp.183-208; S. Gunn, \textit{The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class} (Manchester, 2000), p. 188.
masculine nature of public culture by arguing that because women were absent from the rites of civic culture they were effectively denied recognition within the public life of the city.\textsuperscript{26} However this thesis argues that in Leicester, particularly after 1870, a tightly-knit group of women emerged who did contribute to the building of a middle-class civic identity and were recognised by others as leading citizens in the public life of the town.

Through their involvement in campaigns, philanthropic organisations, civic societies and local government in Leicester during this period, women developed a strong sense of social responsibility which was the essence of their understanding of female citizenship. Although they had yet to achieve the Parliamentary franchise, by the end of the century they had made a significant contribution to middle-class civic life in Leicester through their involvement in what has been termed the ‘feminine public sphere’.\textsuperscript{27} This was the distinctly feminine contribution to public life which emphasised women’s nurturing qualities. Women’s concept of citizenship was defined through the ‘feminine public sphere’. Moreover through their involvement in local public life, these prominent middle-class female citizens found themselves drawn together for the purpose of further political campaigning in the Leicester Women’s Liberal Association and the local branch of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies as they pressed for the right to be recognised as full citizens.

Although most historians of nineteenth century women’s activism have looked at the national picture, there have been fewer locally-based

\textsuperscript{26} Gunn, \textit{The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle-Class}, p 182.
\textsuperscript{27} M. Smitley, \textit{The Feminine Public Sphere} (Manchester, 2009).
studies. Yet such studies are of value because women’s initial engagement with public life usually began at a local level and was influenced by local concerns. As well as Morgan’s study of Leeds, other exceptions include Steven King’s study of women activists in the town of Bolton which focuses on the female poor law guardian Mary Haslam. King argues that women made a substantial and positive contribution in the field of welfare policy.\footnote{S. King, \textit{Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920} (Brighton, 2006).} Moira Martin highlights the philanthropic and local government work of single women in Bristol between 1880 and 1914.\footnote{M. Martin, ‘Single Women and Philanthropy: a case study of women’s associational life in Bristol, 1880-1914’, \textit{Women’s History Review}, 17, no. 3 (2008).} She argues that local women saw themselves as members of a civic society, their path into public life being eased through their participation in a variety of social work projects. June Hannam has also focused on the Bristol Women’s Movement. She points out that although many historians have seen the Edwardian period as the ‘high point for the women’s movement’, Victorian feminists believed that women must discard the idea that politics was ‘unwomanly’. Women had public as well as private responsibilities and ‘must take a full part as citizens in all areas of public life.’\footnote{Hannam, ‘“An Enlarged Sphere of Usefulness”: The Bristol Women’s Movement, c. 1860-1914’, p. 203.} Arguably women’s visibility as citizens is more obvious at a local level.

In his preface to \textit{Radical Leicester}, Temple-Patterson notes that Leicester’s ‘vigorous blend of Nonconformity and Radicalism in early Victorian days anticipated…much that was later to be characteristic of Joseph Chamberlain’s Birmingham.’\footnote{Temple-Patterson, \textit{Radical Leicester}, Preface, pp. vii-viii.} As is well-known, Birmingham in the
mid to late nineteenth century was renowned for its achievements in bringing about civic improvements. Until recently, however, when Paula Bartley investigated women’s contribution to what has been termed the ‘civic gospel’ in Birmingham their role in that city had not been researched. Yet Bartley has argued that women played a valuable role, although their involvement was of a different, ‘gendered’ nature. While men were tackling disease and dirt, women concentrated on ‘moral decay.’

In a similar way I will argue in this thesis that in Leicester in the second half of the nineteenth century, while the elite men were busy reforming the town in response to the pressing need for improvement, concentrating on civic improvements such as housing, clean water and the sewerage system, their wives, mothers and daughters were making a substantial and important contribution to the social and moral reform of Leicester and at the same time carving out a space for themselves as public citizens. It was through their reforming mission that women contributed to the building of a middle-class civic identity. Aware that they had a worthwhile contribution to make, these women also desired to claim the ‘higher responsibilities of citizenship.’ Moreover, this middle-class reforming ethos was two-pronged. Women aimed not only to civilize society and reform the less fortunate, but were also anxious to improve themselves. Rendall argues that for advanced Liberal women ‘education

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34 Rendall, ‘Citizenship, Culture and Civilisation’, p. 136.
and cultivation were... the key to citizenship. Through education women claimed full citizenship as a ‘responsibility’ rather than as a right. Women thus played a significant but ‘gendered’ role in Leicester’s ‘civilizing mission’ to the poor and at the same time were highly motivated to improve their own education and broaden their own experience.

However, it cannot be denied that women’s public involvement with the poor was complicated as will be discussed throughout this thesis. Middle-class women frequently spoke from a social height in their dealings with the less fortunate in society. The origins of nineteenth century middle-class identity can be found in the political reforms of the 1830s and the rapid social and economic changes of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most particularly, as Morgan notes, urbanization was crucial to a developing class-awareness because civic and cultural associations were concentrated within the towns and because there was an increasing separation between the poor and rich districts within a town. As Liberals believing firmly in relentless progress, the middle-class of Leicester were convinced that they were the ones to bring about necessary urban reforms. Furthermore the strength of forms of Nonconformity in Leicester strengthened this sense of middle-class identity and belonging. It is particularly striking how many of the women in this study were Unitarians influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. In addition through the growth of evangelicalism, men and women from the Quaker and Congregationalist communities were committed to saving souls and to social reform.

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36 Morgan, A Victorian Woman’s Place, p.13.
It is perhaps surprising that the role of women in Leicester’s middle-class public culture has been ignored. Leicester displayed similar characteristics to other towns and cities where there was a high level of female activism. In particular the importance of dissent and especially Quakerism and Unitarianism to female activism has long been acknowledged. Members of these religious communities were influential citizens in cities and towns such as Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds and Manchester where women were particularly active in the nineteenth century and I will argue that Leicester provides another example of this phenomenon.

Chapter one discusses Nonconformist women and by focusing on particular women, examines how religious faith could empower them to become agents for change within the local community. As well as discussing personal faith, the chapter also highlights the importance of education and of family and friendship networks both locally and on the wider stage for the development of local women’s increased participation in the public sphere.

By focusing on issues and organisations which were of particular concern to Leicester, the following chapters demonstrate how local women became more politicised through their increased involvement in the public life of the town. Chapter two discusses the campaigns with which women became particularly identified in the second half of the nineteenth century in Leicester. It begins by examining the earlier campaigns against the Corn Laws and slavery. Both of these provided local active women such

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as Matilda Biggs, Priscilla Ellis, Elizabeth Heyrick and Susannah Watts with an opportunity to take part in public life and these women became influential figures for the generation of women who succeeded them and with whom this thesis is primarily concerned. The chapter then discusses the Leicester women who were at the heart of the temperance movement in Leicester. Leicester was at the centre of much temperance activity and although the contribution of Thomas Cook is well-known, the involvement of local women has not been recognised. The temperance campaign was important firstly because it provided women with a moral platform from which they could take a greater part in public life and secondly because women realised that temperance was a feminist issue. Early on women were linking the ‘drink question’ with that of ‘women’s rights’. Chapter two continues by discussing the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts and argues that while for some this was purely a moral and religious crusade, for other more radical local women it further encouraged a developing feminist consciousness.

Chapter three focuses on philanthropy in the town. There has been a long-standing acceptance of the importance of philanthropy for the development of women’s activism. The chapter discusses methods of fund-raising used by women, concentrating on the widespread popularity of the charity bazaar. It then examines the role which middle-class women played in the reform of prostitutes through the Home for Penitent Females and also women’s participation in the Unitarian Leicester Domestic Mission. The thesis will argue that issues of class and gender defined their involvement, but women were not just confined to a fund-raising role,
nor were they always subordinate to men. Women themselves were instrumental in initiating several schemes to help the poor. The chapter continues by investigating the Charity Organisation Society and the National Union of Women Workers and argues that it can be said that as the nineteenth century advanced a tightly-knit group of leading female citizens emerged.

Chapter four analyses the nature and extent of women’s participation in civic life through their membership of local civic societies. The extent of female involvement in civic societies was dependent on the culture within the organisation and comparisons are particularly drawn between the male-dominated Literary and Philosophical Society and the Secular Society on the one hand and the more female-orientated Kyrle Society, Leicester Ladies’ Reading Society and Belmont House Society on the other. This thesis argues that where the opportunities existed for women to develop their traditional ‘feminine’ skills within civic life, they made a valuable and substantial contribution to nineteenth century Leicester. Moreover these women were highly motivated to improve their own education and set themselves rigorous learning programmes within the local Reading Society. Self-improvement was an essential ingredient in their claim to be responsible citizens. At the same time, as with philanthropic work, one can identify the clear development of a female elite whose interests and concerns overlapped in several areas of urban life.

In chapter five the thesis explores the beginnings of women’s involvement in local government through their election to the Leicester
School Board and as Poor Law guardians. As previous studies have shown for other towns and cities, women in Leicester grasped the new opportunities presented to them in local government to build on their own previous experiences in philanthropy and widen their sphere of influence. Women largely worked within prevailing ideas of femininity and domesticity and although the reality of the relationship between themselves and the poor was often complicated by class, these female pioneers were successful in many of their policies. Through their local government work, as with philanthropy, women found the space to express ideals of female citizenship and duty. Moreover their involvement in this aspect of public life made many more aware that in order to have true influence on social policy they needed to acquire the vote. Their involvement in local government was thus important for the development of the women’s movement in Leicester in the late nineteenth century.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century women became increasingly drawn into party politics. Chapter six investigates the particular characteristics of the local Women’s Liberal Association, the Primrose League and women’s place in the fledgling Independent Labour Party in Leicester and the importance of women’s party political engagement for their claim to full citizenship. This thesis argues that the Leicester WLA was independent and feminist in its stance from the outset, clearly concerned to pursue questions which affected the community as a whole, but more particularly issues which mattered to women. However, more surprisingly, the chapter also notes the powerful influence which strong women could have on the fortunes of the Conservative Party even
in a town such as Leicester which had long been renowned for being Radical in outlook.

Finally chapter seven discusses the suffrage campaign in late nineteenth century Leicester. As women developed a political awareness at a local level, many of those discussed in previous chapters were drawn into the nineteenth century suffrage movement. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century a female civic elite had emerged who led the way in pressing for the franchise in Leicester. Moreover some of the women were also beginning to become well-known outside their local community and this thesis suggests the importance of national contacts for the encouragement and development of the local suffrage campaign. From the example of Leicester, the support of male supporters to the movement, particularly in the early stages, must also be acknowledged. From the time of the 1866 Petition to Parliament to the end of the century, the suffrage campaign had clearly made substantial progress in Leicester before the advent of the twentieth century campaign and the Women’s Social and Political Union.  

Through their negotiation of contemporary gender ideology which stressed women’s moral superiority, women were empowered to press for a greater role in public life by arguing for the necessity of feminine influence. This study demonstrates that the women of late nineteenth century Leicester were increasingly involved in public life as they desired to become full citizens not only as their democratic right, but so they could

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38 R. Whitmore, Alice Hawkins and the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Leicester (Derby, 2007).
fulfil their duties as ‘Worthy Citizens’. As they grew in confidence, so they believed that women had a particular and valuable influence to bring to the local community. Women in Leicester claimed a connection between civic worth, the public sphere and femininity, as men had done with masculinity.

The thesis therefore concludes by arguing that Leicester provides an interesting and important case study of a Victorian town in which women played a significant contribution to local public life. Women largely worked within the accepted contemporary ideology of ‘separate spheres’, but pushed the boundaries of the domestic sphere to justify their increased involvement in public life by claiming the necessity of female influence. They aimed to improve both themselves and others and as they did so the line between public and private became increasingly blurred. Within Victorian middle-class urban public culture a strong and influential female element developed which was involved in a range of local reforming, philanthropic and local government organisations. This was women’s contribution to the building of a local middle-class identity and women became increasingly accepted by male contemporaries as citizens in their own right. Some local women became involved in the early suffrage campaign as they realised that in order to influence policy further they needed to have the Parliamentary vote. However this thesis emphasises that the evidence in Leicester demonstrates that for women, who often

39 LRO: 18D57/1, Records of the Belmont House Society Minute Book 1886-1903, Miss Beale’s letter to the Belmont House Society.
40 Morgan, A Victorian Woman’s Place, p. 189.
possessed a strong religious commitment, citizenship meant responsibility and duty as well as voting rights. Through their involvement in the public sphere they aspired to prove that they were indeed ‘Worthy Citizens’. 
Chapter 1  The Religious Impulse

1.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between dissent, gender and women’s engagement with public life during this period. It makes particular use of the writings and obituaries of local women including the Unitarian Edith Gittins, the Quaker Eliza Ellis and the Congregationalist Dr Mary Royce. In nineteenth century Leicester Nonconformity was strong. At the time of the new reformed Town Council in 1836, out of fifty-six men, there were three Quakers, sixteen Churchmen, twelve Baptists, ten Independents (Congregationalists), twelve Unitarians, two Wesleyans and one Huntingtonian.¹ Even before this date from the late eighteenth century, Temple-Patterson commented that within Leicester the Unitarian Great Meeting, in particular, was the ‘head and centre of nonconformity’, renowned for its ‘intellectual elements’ and ‘broadmindedness’. To them ‘civil and religious liberty…was the basic necessity and very breath of public life.’² However, it was the increase in the political and economic influence and power of middle-class dissenters following the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1832 and the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 which was the catalyst for change and reform in many industrial towns and cities and Leicester was no exception.³

¹ A. Temple-Patterson, Radical Leicester (Leicester, 1954), pp. 214-215.
² Ibid., pp.16-17.
Within Nonconformity there were important theological differences. The Evangelical Revival of the late eighteenth-century had given rise not only to Methodism, but had also influenced both the Congregationalists and the Baptists. For evangelicals conversion was the key to Salvation since a person was justified by their faith. Great emphasis was placed on the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the source of spiritual truth and the doctrine of the Cross was central to their faith.\textsuperscript{4} During the nineteenth century the Quakers also gradually became more influenced by evangelicalism. The Unitarians, however, were distinct from other Nonconformist denominations, in rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. In addition they had been particularly influenced by the Enlightenment and were not caught up by the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival. Their numbers had declined, but they were disproportionately influential in urban areas during the nineteenth century.

It has long been acknowledged that many of the most active women from this period were drawn from dissenting congregations. Leicester provides a valuable case study of a phenomenon commented upon by other historians. Philippa Levine has noted the disproportionate numbers of Unitarians and Quakers amongst nineteenth century feminists.\textsuperscript{5} Both, as she points out, were ‘spawning grounds for feminism’.\textsuperscript{6} As Levine notes both groups were known for their radical, forward looking views and

\textsuperscript{4} D. W. Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain – A History from the 1730s to the 1980s} (London, 1989), chapter one.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 60.
interest in social reform.\textsuperscript{7} Many were relatives of the most influential men in local politics and business during the nineteenth century. Bebbington notes the higher percentage of professionals and employers amongst the Unitarians and Quakers.\textsuperscript{8} It is thus unsurprising that in a town such as Leicester we frequently find that many of the women who were prepared to take part in public life came from these communities. Even if the number of families was relatively few, as was the case with the Quakers, their influence was disproportionately strong. A brief examination of female Quaker names which featured prominently in the public life of Leicester include those of the Ellis (of whom there were several), Burgess and Hutchinson families; influential Unitarian women included those from the Biggs, Gittins, Clephan, Fielding-Johnson, Paget, Fullagar, Dare, Collett, and Bolus families. The work of Congregationalist women in public life has been less extensively researched. However three of the women in this study were Congregationalists (Mary Ewing, Dr Mary Royce and Mary Livens). It is clear that a strong religious conviction also motivated these women to become engaged with the public life of Leicester and therefore their contribution will be discussed.

1.2 Unitarian Women

An unusually high number of women who were active in the community attended the Unitarian Great Meeting in Leicester in the nineteenth century. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that when the

\textsuperscript{7}Levine, \textit{Feminist Lives}, p. 60.
Unitarian Mary Catherine Gittins of Leicester died in 1930 she was recognised by the Unitarian newspaper *The Inquirer* as ‘a very wonderful woman’ and moreover this was ‘even in Leicester and at the Great Meeting, where wonderful women were more numerous than I have known elsewhere.’"9 As well as being influenced by their religious faith to take part in the public life of the town, some Unitarian women also embraced feminism and became active in the women’s rights movement. However, they were still restrained by existing attitudes towards gender roles.

The link between Unitarianism and feminism at a national level has been recognised by several historians.10 As active campaigning women, their numbers were disproportionate. This is particularly noticeable when one considers that, in the 1851 census returns for England, Unitarians only comprised 2% of the population, whereas in Levine’s sample of leading activists 11% had links with Unitarianism. The reasons for this are complex and it would be simplistic to identify a single factor uniting all of these women which led them directly to an interest in public affairs and for some to become active in the feminist movement of the nineteenth century. However, one can perhaps identify certain characteristics which were unique to Unitarianism and which nurtured this activism in women.

Ruth Watts has emphasised the importance which Unitarians attached to education since women’s intellectual capacities were valued.

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9 *The Inquirer*, 10 January 1931, p. 19.
Unitarianism was characterised by a strong commitment to individual, civil and religious liberty as well as to social justice. They increasingly emphasised good works rather than mere faith in their religion. This of course opened the way for women to take part in public life. A combination of these factors encouraged those who adhered to the religion to question traditional gender ideology. Nonetheless she also points out that Unitarian women were not exempt from the ideology of separate spheres and in practice their public involvement was often compromised by ‘separate spheres’. Women in public life still had to work largely within the dominant gender ideology. Kathryn Gleadle argues that it was this contradiction which encouraged Unitarian women to adopt a more radical feminism since their expectations of personal fulfilment were not being met. Unitarian men and women still existed within the dominant ‘separate spheres’ ideology and men were often patriarchal in their attitudes. This point is also made by John Seed who notes that while the Unitarians were exceptional in the degree to which they educated their daughters, this was often motivated by the desire to make sure that future generations were encouraged in their learning by their mothers within the home. For Unitarians the family was a ‘sacred institution’ and the dominant role within the family was still taken by the father.

The Unitarians were an important force in the political life of Leicester in the nineteenth century. The Great Meeting House in Leicester was established in 1708 by the Presbyterians and Independents but the congregation had been organised at least fifty years earlier.\footnote{A.H. Thomas, A History of the Great Meeting, Leicester and its Congregation (Leicester, 1908), p. 9.} The chapel had been Presbyterian for most of the eighteenth century but towards the end of the eighteenth century was influenced by Joseph Priestley. Priestley himself had been influenced by John Locke who argued that since man had been given the power of reason, this should be used to arrive at one’s own conclusions. Hence Unitarianism became a very individualistic faith, not held together by any particular creed. In Leicester, as elsewhere, it became the spiritual home of many of the ‘most intelligent, active and liberal citizens of the town.’\footnote{Temple Patterson, Radical Leicester, p. 16.}

The Unitarians felt themselves to be somewhat apart from the other Nonconformist chapels. It was a religion for intellectuals and they developed an acute sense of social responsibility and duty as well as an awareness of the importance of education. Priestley had been deeply affected by David Hartley’s Observations on Man which he developed to become the basis of Unitarian educational thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Priestley believed it was the environment which made people what they were, rather than physiological factors. Careful education from birth was essential for children to be formed as adults pleased. It was even possible to achieve perfection through ‘reflection, experience and extensive intellectual education, and not
through innate cause or divine intervention." As Watts says the inference of this philosophy for education was egalitarian. Since it was education which formed people, women were not inferior intellectually simply by virtue of their sex.

The important role which the Unitarians played in the public life of Leicester was especially felt in the years after the demise of the Old Corporation in 1836. The first mayor of the reformed Leicester was Thomas Paget, a member of the Great Meeting as was the solicitor Samuel Stone who was elected as Town Clerk. Not only this, but the next six mayors were also members of the same chapel. The congregation of the Great Meeting as a result became known as ‘the Mayors’ Nest’. By 1851 the Great Meeting at Leicester was one of the places in the country identified by John Seed as having a Unitarian membership of over two hundred and fifty. Given this background of a powerful, wealthy and influential Unitarian congregation in Leicester, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the most influential local women at this time also had links with the chapel. Women from the Biggs, Gittins, Clephan, Dare and Fullagar families all had connections with the Great Meeting and all made their mark on the public life of nineteenth-century Leicester.

It has been pointed out by other historians that the Unitarians, like the Quakers, had a history of strong kinship ties and networking. Women played a crucial role in the spread of ideas by networking. Their

17 Watts, Gender, power and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860, p. 36.
18 Temple-Patterson, Radical Leicester, p. 214.
20 Watts, Gender, power and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860, p. 91.
exclusion from positions of power and influence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and their separateness from other orthodox Christians encouraged the formation of local and national Unitarian networks. 21 This can be seen in Leicester through the marriage of Matilda Ashurst and Joseph Biggs. The Biggs family were almost certainly introduced to a wider, more cosmopolitan circle through this marriage.

Matilda Biggs had been born Matilda Ashurst in about 1817, the second daughter of W.H. Ashurst, an eminent radical London lawyer. W. H. Ashurst himself held strong beliefs in favour of women’s rights and raised his four daughters to be independent-minded and liberal. 22 Matilda’s father was at the centre of a group whom Kathryn Gleadle has identified as the ‘radical Unitarians’ from the late 1830s to the late 1840s. Their meeting place was the South Place Chapel in Finsbury and they took their inspiration from the Unitarian preacher who ministered there, William Johnson Fox.

In 1837 Matilda Ashurst married the Leicester Unitarian Joseph Biggs. Joseph was the younger brother of John and William Biggs, hosiery manufacturers and prominent Liberal politicians within the town. R. H. Evans noted that it was probably through his marriage to Matilda that Joseph was brought into contact with foreign exiles like Mazzini. In April 1852 he wrote a powerful letter to the Leicestershire Mercury on the Italian Question after a visit to Italy. 23 Matilda herself had developed a long

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friendship with Mazzini after he had been introduced to the Ashurst family. She was described by Mazzini as possessing a ‘rare intellect’. Matilda became involved in clandestine activity in the south of France in order to fund republican ventures and raised funds on behalf of Orsini after his arrest and in 1851 was among the original seventy-five women who joined the council of the Society of Friends of Italy.

Matilda Biggs was not only concerned with international politics, however, but campaigned to bring radical issues to the attention of the people of Leicester. In 1847 she distributed one of the first printed leaflets in favour of female suffrage sent to her by fellow anti-slavery campaigner, the Quaker Anne Knight. It was Matilda’s father who organised the campaign against the exclusion of the American female delegation from the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention. Both Matilda and her sister Elizabeth had attended the convention. According to her daughter, Caroline Ashurst Biggs, Matilda’s support for women’s rights was fuelled by the exclusion of women at the convention.

Her support for female suffrage was evident in February 1859 when she wrote to the *Newcastle Chronicle* complaining about the failure of the newly-formed Northern Reform Society to support universal suffrage.

> I feel it an injustice that I, who am equally taxed with men, should be denied a voice in making the laws which affect and dispose of my property, and made to support a State, where I am not recognised as a citizen…the Northern Reform

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25 Ibid., p. 23.
27 Ibid.
Society, which takes its stand upon ‘justice’, should claim for us at least that we be exempted from the duties, if we are to be denied the rights belonging to citizens. 

The maternal influence which Matilda Biggs bore on her daughters is evident. One in particular, Caroline Ashurst Biggs (1840-1889) became a leading feminist in the 1870s and 1880s. In 1867 Caroline was elected onto the executive committee of the London National Society for Women’s Suffrage and in 1872 was the first secretary of the Central Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage when it was established in 1872. In 1871 she became editor of the *Englishwomen’s Review* and held this position until her death. 

Mother-daughter relationships have been acknowledged as significant for the future development of the women’s movement. Caroline Ashurst Biggs as well as being influenced by her mother could also look to the example set by her maternal aunts, Emilie Venturi and Caroline Stansfeld, who were likewise active in the radical causes of their day.

Nonetheless although the ties which the Biggs family made with the Ashursts were important, there are indications that even before this marriage the Leicester Unitarian chapel had been in contact with radical and progressive ideas. Edith Gittins noted that between 1830 and 1840 two of the most eminent of the divines preached at the Great Meeting. 

The Revd. W. J. Fox preached the Sunday School Sermons in 1831 and the Revd. James Martineau, brother of Harriet Martineau, preached in

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29 E. Cady Stanton, *History of Women’s Suffrage online*, p. 837
1835. As mentioned earlier Fox was the minister of the Unitarian congregation at South Place Chapel which was at the heart of a new reformist agenda during the 1830s and 1840s. A distinguishing feature of the ‘radical Unitarians’ as opposed to those in the mainstream was their feminism. Fox’s periodical the *Monthly Repository*, which he bought in 1831, mounted a relentless campaign on behalf of women’s rights.\(^{33}\)

Martineau, whilst not being as radical as Fox, the latter having scandalised some by the breakdown of his marriage and the setting up home with his mistress, was also encouraging Unitarians towards basing their religion on reason and conscience rather than the Bible.

The importance of Unitarian networks such as those which Matilda Biggs enjoyed was evident later in the nineteenth century through the life and works of other Leicester Unitarian women such as the Gittins sisters. Edith Gittins (1845-1910) a water-colour artist and teacher of drawing, was the third of five children of Edward and Mary Gittins. Her father was active within the Unitarian church and served on the Vestry committee for several years.\(^{34}\) The three daughters (Edith, Mary Catherine and Elizabeth Ann) were educated by Louisa Drayton, a woman of Unitarian connections whose pupils, according to Isabel Ellis, became the leading women of Leicester during the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^{35}\) The whole family worshipped at the Great Meeting and although Edith never left Leicester, she led a very fulfilling life within the town in the second half of

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\(^{34}\) LRO: N/U/179/39-41 *Minute Books of the Great Meeting Vestry*

the nineteenth century as will be shown in subsequent chapters. What is clear from the tributes paid to her after her death was that her social and political activism was informed by her strong Unitarian faith. In a memorial written to celebrate the lives of Edith and her sister, Catharine, Isabel Ellis wrote of Edith that

the whole of her life was spent in Leicester, and centred round the Great Meeting Chapel... Edith was a born leader, and all her life organised and led her fellows, expending a wealth of emotion on the causes she took up, and upholding them with remarkable tenacity.

Isabel Ellis also noted that

she was peculiarly a child of the Great Meeting. None understood better its principles. She laid hold of the broad and deep religious teaching associated with the names of Channing, Park and Martineau. She saw the trend and significance of the ‘Higher Criticism’. She loved and taught the Bible as few knew how. Her activities in connection with the Chapel were wide and deep; she taught in the Sunday School for forty years, the same scholars remaining with her from girlhood to middle-age. She filled the Chapel one night a week with a Women’s Friendly Meeting, where she arranged a service by women, for women, of music, prayers, reading and an address. She served on the Chapel Vestry and the Domestic Mission Committee.

Edith Gittins was a woman whose life was underpinned by Unitarian philosophy and religion and she embraced her religion through her public life. It is significant that she was influenced by the likes of W. E. Channing, an American divine who placed his faith not in Biblical authority, but in the

essential goodness of human nature and a deeper faith in God.\textsuperscript{39} Edith Gittins also saw the importance of the ‘higher criticism’ whereby philological methods were used to place doubt on the historical accuracy of biblical records.\textsuperscript{40} As a Unitarian she saw no conflict between science and religion arguing that ‘Science is the discovery of the thoughts of God – of the ways by which He works. We ought to welcome its teachings, to shape our conduct by them, and not go blindly on as we did in the days of our ignorance.’\textsuperscript{41}

Her faith is revealed through her own hymns. A verse of her own hymn for New Year’s Day, 1888 demonstrates where she found her strength.

May grace be ours as now we build
Our soul’s immortal dwelling.
So base it on the Eternal Rock,
Then, when the floods are swelling,
When rains descend and tempests beat,
We still may bide securely,
Our God, our Guest, our heart at rest,
His promise trusting surely.\textsuperscript{42}

Although she spent her life in Leicester, Edith Gittins came into contact with women from a wider social background. For some of her life, Edith was in close contact with Clara Collet, the daughter of Collet Dobson

\textsuperscript{39} Gleadle, The Early Feminists, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{41} LRO: In Memory of Edith Gittins 1845-1910 – A selection of her short poems, hymns and writings collected by M.C. Gittins, (Leicester, 1921), p. 24-5.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 5.
Collet and Jane Collet and niece of the feminist Sophia Dobson Collet. Clara Collet became one of the first women to graduate from University College, London and is chiefly remembered for her writings including *The Economic Position of Working Women* followed by other publications concerning women’s employment. She was later employed in the Home Office as correspondent to the Labour Department.\(^43\) In 1878 she became a mistress at Wyggeston Girls’ School in Leicester and remained there for seven years. As a Unitarian she attended the Great Meeting and became friendly with Edith Gittins. Indeed Clara Collet expressed her own admiration for Edith when she wrote that ‘I think that Miss Gittins is a splendid woman.’\(^44\) Such contacts show how women’s Unitarian networks affected not only prominent women, but were significant and influential for women at a local level.

As well as the societies with which she was involved, Edith particularly valued her role as an educator and urged others to respect their responsibilities also. In this concern for education she was typical of Unitarian women such as Elizabeth Rathbone and Kitty Wilkinson.\(^45\) Later in 1907, when writing a New Year’s letter as the President of the Sunday School Association, she revealed her own commitment and enthusiasm.

My thoughts naturally dwell on the chance you will have, the next 52 Sundays, of being friend and helper to your Class. A chance is a gift – a responsibility… By your enrolment as a teacher you shew your desire to serve. You give up time that you could gladly use in other ways. This is much. I clasp your hand with respect. Make the sacrifice *worthwhile*: what is worth doing at all is worth doing well. Our young people

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\(^{43}\) Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900* (Florida, 1994), pp. 95-96.

\(^{44}\) Quoted in Aucott, *Women of Courage*, p. 60.

are intelligent and impressionable; they are worthy of your best. Many of them have had little opportunity of contact with refinement, and culture, and kindness. Their school days end; they are plunged into the work, the difficulties and dangers of the world, to sink or to swim. It is the moment of the Sunday teacher’s great chance. Magnify your office! Feel that, perhaps, it depends on you whether these bright lads, these dear girls, will all come to shore in safety, or whether some of them will be lost in the deep waters of misery. You, even you, may be a saviour.\textsuperscript{46}

Edith adhered to the Unitarian principle that it was the environment which formed human character and intellect and not physiology. For her, a strong religious faith heightened her sense of duty and responsibility to others and she urged other teachers to realise theirs.

Although more reserved than her younger sister, Catherine Gittins was also very active in public life in the second half of the nineteenth century. She was born in Leicester in 1840 and as well as being a governess in Liverpool taught art in Birmingham at Edgbaston High School and was secretary of the Kyrle Society there. When she left Birmingham she returned to Leicester to live with her mother and sister. Like her sister, she too was very interested in politics, this interest possibly being fostered by her time as a governess since the head of the family, George Melly M.P., a prominent Unitarian Liberal MP for Stoke-on-Trent, spent a considerable amount of time in London. This afforded Catherine the opportunity to hear debates in the House of Commons.\textsuperscript{47} In a tribute written after her death it was noted that ‘She had high ideals of womanhood and she had the power to impress those ideals deeply on her

\textsuperscript{46}LRO: \textit{In Memory of Edith Gittins 1845-1910}, p.17.
\textsuperscript{47}Ellis, \textit{Records}, pp. 143-147.
pupils. She had hopes and aims for girls and women much beyond those common at the time."48

As with her sister, it was her Unitarian beliefs which shaped her positive attitude towards women’s capabilities and her own public role. Miss E. Melly of Liverpool, the daughter of George Melly, wrote at the time of her death that ‘Love of God and her fellow men was the leading note of her life.’49 Catherine Gittins held advanced ideas for her time and moved further to the left in her political beliefs than Edith becoming a socialist and a campaigner in later years for peace.50 During the Boer War she campaigned in Leicester for the re-establishment of good-will between the Dutch and the British. She formed the ‘Leicester Society for the Promotion of Peace’ in 1900 with Alexander Wilson.51 By November the Society had at least sixty members.52 Isabel Ellis wrote of Edith that she was a ‘born leader’, yet at the time of her death Catherine was also recognised as such.

In her quiet way she was a leader and pioneer, making for freedom of thought and self-development and higher education. Her old friend Miss Last writes of the work she did in bringing beauty into the homes and lives of the poor and her talent for organisation:

‘She was keenly interested in politics and I remember the remark made by a working man who was near her at a big political meeting: “You do seem to take up the points well- for a woman.”’53

48 The Inquirer, 3 January, 1931, p. 8.
49 The Inquirer, 10 January 1931, p. 20.
50 Ibid.
51 John Rylands Library, Manchester, R188183 DY89W, Letter from Catherine Gittins April 20, 1900.
52 John Rylands Library, R188429 DW7GO, Pamphlet written by the Leicester Society for the Promotion of Peace.
53 The Inquirer, 3 January, 1931, p. 8.
Born in 1854 the Unitarian Annie Clephan was like Edith Gittins involved in the Women’s Liberal Association and was President of the Sunday School Association. Annie Clephan alongside Edith Gittins was one of the first women to be elected onto the Vestry eventually becoming chairman of the Vestry from 1920-6.54 She served as president of the North Midland Presbyterian and Unitarian Association as well as on the Midland Advisory Board. At a local level as well as her involvement with the Great Meeting, she was particularly concerned with education, once again her interest having been fostered by her Unitarian background. At her death in 1930 the Unitarian newspaper, The Inquirer wrote a lengthy tribute showing how religion was the driving force behind an active engagement with public life.

To the public life of Leicester, especially in educational work, Miss Clephan gave whole-hearted service…Miss Clephan, like most of the religious-minded Unitarians whom I have known, seldom spoke of the deeper thoughts that stirred within; but it was easy to perceive that she was possessed by a real and abiding faith, while her allegiance to truth and freedom never wavered.55

She served on the Leicester School Board from 1891 and was a member of the committee of the Leicester College of Art and Technology. In addition she pioneered the education of what were then described as mentally deficient children and was one of the founders of the Home for Feeble-Minded Girls in 1907. Her concern for women continued into the twentieth century when she became president of the Leicester branch of the National Council of Women and attended congresses at Toronto,

54The Inquirer, 19 July 1930, p. 356.
55Ibid., 26 June, 1930, p. 366.
Rome, Oslo and Washington as a delegate of the International Council of Women.\textsuperscript{56}

However, although the Unitarians were more forward-looking than many of their contemporaries in their attitudes to female education and participation in public life, it would be a mistake to give the impression that women in the Great Meeting were not subject to ‘separate spheres’ ideology. A gender divide can be seen in the roles which women and men assumed within the Unitarian chapel in Leicester. The Unitarian Leicester Domestic Mission, discussed in more detail in chapter three, provides a case in point. Founded in 1846 and led by the Domestic Missionary, Joseph Dare, it aimed to relieve the social conditions of the poor, the sick and the aged in a non-judgemental way.\textsuperscript{57} The Inquirer reported in 1860 that at the annual meeting of the Leicester Domestic Mission

Mr F. T. Mott moved the following resolution: “That the best thanks of the meeting be given to the members of the Ladies’ Committee, for the interest they have continued to take in the objects of the Mission, and especially to those ladies who have assisted in the girls’ evening and sewing schools, and to Miss Graham as a permanent visitor.”\textsuperscript{58}

He noted that ‘their work had been in by-ways and quiet corners’ and that some of the women should organise some scheme for the wide distribution of tracts. In the congregational report for 1877 the members of the Great Meeting Tract Society consisted entirely of women as did those of the Dorcas Society. One mixed-sex committee which did exist at this time was the library committee. The report of this committee for the year

\textsuperscript{56} The Inquirer, 26 June, 1930, p. 366.
\textsuperscript{58} The Inquirer, Annual Report of the Leicester Domestic Mission, 7 November, 1860
ending December 31 1880 noted that the five members were Miss Paget, Miss E. Gittins, Mr E.F. Cooper, Mr J.M. Gimson and Mr E. Else.\textsuperscript{59} Unsurprisingly the members of the governing Vestry itself which made the important financial decisions were all men. At this stage the roles which women and men played in the church were still divided along conventional gender lines.\textsuperscript{60}

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there is evidence of change. In March 1893 at a special meeting of the congregation to welcome the new minister, the Revd. Henry Gow and his wife, The Leicester Daily Post reported on a speech given by Mrs T. Fielding-Johnson, as a representative of the women.\textsuperscript{61} She used the occasion to ‘flag up’ the good work which women performed both as members of the Unitarian chapel and as citizens of Leicester. Mrs Fielding-Johnson noted the ‘modern custom’ of women increasingly ‘taking an active share in public matters’ although she was also aware of an underlying hostility to the prominence of women amongst some members of the wider community. For some this was seen as ‘an element of weakness’. Mrs Fielding-Johnson, however, stressed that the women of the Great Meeting were amongst those who were keen to cooperate in performing good works and emphasised the positive role which women can play – ‘most of them believed that in time women’s influence upon men was exerted for good’. As well as taking part in traditional areas of female concern such as the Sunday schools, women were willing and able to participate in the

\textsuperscript{60} LRO: N/U/179/41, Minute book of the Great Meeting Vestry, Congregational report 1877.
\textsuperscript{61} LRO: N/U/179/43, Minute book of the Great Meeting Vestry 1893, Copy of a report from the Leicester Daily Post 23 March 1893.
‘larger interests of the town work.’ Women in Leicester were increasing their involvement in middle-class public life.

It is also noticeable that by the end of the century, women were participating more in the decision-making processes within the Great Meeting and not just raising money for good causes, distributing tracts or running the girls’ Sunday school. Thus in 1898 Miss Fullagar, Miss Clephan and Miss Gittins took part in a discussion to decide whether to host the National Triennial Conference of Unitarian and Free Christian churches. In October Catharine Gittins was appointed one of two delegates to represent the congregation at the meeting of the North Midland Presbyterian and Unitarian Association. Finally in 1905 women were elected onto the Vestry committee themselves although they were already eligible voters. The latter change came about when at a special meeting of the Vestry it was decided to increase the numbers from twelve to eighteen. The aim was both to change the Vestry from being mainly a finance committee and to make sure that the new Vestry should include ‘active members of the congregation’. Of the six new members elected, two women were chosen, Edith Gittins and Annie Clephan. The nature of the Vestry had changed to some degree which allowed women to be accommodated, and women were finally included in the most important local decision making body within the Great Meeting. Women’s value to the community which they served was at last gradually being recognised.

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62 LRO: N/U/179/43, Minute book of the Great Meeting Vestry, Special meeting of the congregation after morning service 12 June 1898.
63 LRO: N/U/179/43, Minute book of the Great Meeting Vestry, 8 October 1899.
64 LRO: N/U/179 43, Minute book of the Great Meeting Vestry, Special meeting of the congregation, 8 June 1905.
1.3 Quaker Women

Everyone in Belgrave knew the Miss Ellises... During the seventies, women began to realize that they had public as well as private responsibilities, and the Belgrave cousins were among the pioneers.65

This acknowledgment of the Ellis sisters’ contribution to Leicester’s public life was made some years later by Isabel Ellis, who married into the family. The seven sisters (Lucy, Eliza, Jane, Isabella, Margaret, Charlotte and Ellen Maria) were the daughters of John and Priscilla Ellis who lived at Belgrave Hall. They became particularly noted for their lives as active female citizens. Although the Quaker community in Leicester was small, they had a disproportionate influence on public life especially through the extended Ellis family.66 John Ellis himself was a railway magnate and coal merchant who had become increasingly involved in the politics of Leicester from the 1840s onwards and from 1848-1852 sat as a Liberal M.P. The Quaker community in Leicester met in a ‘small but neat’ meeting-house in Soar Lane until 1877 when it moved to Prebend Street.67

The minute books of the Leicester Women’s Monthly Meetings have survived for the years 1869-1890. Unfortunately those of the earlier period have not. The Letters and Memorials of Eliza Ellis compiled by her sister,

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65 Ellis, Records, pp.55-58.
66 House of Commons Parliamentary Papers online, 1851 religious census reveals that 78 people attended morning worship in Leicester compared with 350 Unitarians, 1700 Independents and 4700 Baptists.
67 Temple-Patterson, Radical Leicester, p. 17.
Margaret, also provide an interesting insight into the life of perhaps the most radical of the Ellis sisters.\(^{68}\)

Isichei notes that

The equality of men and women in Quakerism was more apparent than real, but the powers open to women were so large compared with their restricted role in other religious – or, for that matter, secular – organisations in Victorian England, that they deserve to be regarded as one of the most striking elements in Quaker organization.\(^{69}\)

Quaker women were allowed to preach and were highly visible in philanthropic organisations as well as having a reputation for ‘domestic virtues’. They were noticed by their contemporaries such as the Anglican anti-slavery campaigner, Thomas Clarkson who felt that such qualities were indicative of ‘a new era in female history.’\(^{70}\) More recently, the motivation of women Friends in public life and their significance in the emerging ‘Women’s Movement’ have been subject to varying assessments by historians as Holton points out.\(^{71}\) The importance of education, evangelicalism and strong Quaker networks is acknowledged in this thesis.

Quakerism was considered by many as a ‘feminine religion’ because of its emphasis on the female characteristics of intuition and

\(^{68}\) M. Ellis, *Letters and Memorials of Eliza Ellis – compiled by her sister Margaret Ellis* (Leicester, 1883).


Quakerism emphasised the denial of self, itself a ‘female’ characteristic. Since the voice of the ‘Inward Light’ was valued whether spoken by men or women, the language used by Quaker preachers was genderless. Men and women were equals spiritually. Nonetheless although Quaker men and women were considered to be spiritually equal it would be a mistake to infer from this that they were considered to be equal socially. Quakers were, in spite of their ‘peculiarities’, part of the wider world which still held traditional views on women’s position in society. Whilst women were allowed to preach and they argued for an equal role in the ministry, with one or two exceptions such as the anti-slavery campaigner Anne Knight, they did not, during the early nineteenth century, argue for social equality. Thus the Leicester anti-slavery campaigner and Quaker Elizabeth Heyrick (1769-1831), who was admired greatly by Eliza Ellis, never argued for women’s rights, but rather her ideas and campaigning were informed by her conscience and a sense of duty which stemmed from her religious faith.

Midgley stresses the huge importance of Heyrick’s ‘deep spiritual crisis’ which preceded her conversion to Quakerism in 1802 prior to her increased engagement with public life. Her family background of Unitarianism provided her with a good standard of education and a greater sense of woman’s intellectual worth, but it was Quakerism with its

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72 Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, p. 12.
73 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
emphasis on self-denial and as a place where women could pursue their spirituality as equals which became particularly attractive to her.\textsuperscript{76} It enabled her to adopt a moral high ground and, like other Quaker women, to campaign against slavery. Her duty was primarily to God not to man and this informed her conscience and her subsequent political campaigning.\textsuperscript{77} Heyrick herself did not consider her position to be subordinate to that of a man, but rather that men and women were equal but different. Their roles were ‘complementary’.\textsuperscript{78}

However the nature of women’s engagement with public life changed and developed during the second half of the century as Quakerism became influenced by evangelicalism. O’ Donnell argues that historians have largely ignored the importance of evangelicalism within Quakerism during the nineteenth century and the implications which this had for the developing women’s movement.\textsuperscript{79} Isichei also attributes many of these changes within Quakerism from the 1850s onwards to the effects of evangelicalism which reached its peak between c. 1830-1885.\textsuperscript{80} It came into conflict with the theology of the quietists who regarded the ‘Light Within’, (God’s spirit within), as the main source of God’s revelation. For quietists Christians should be divinely inspired and therefore the emphasis was not on Bible reading and religious instruction (as with evangelicalism) since these could be construed to be intellectual and ‘of the head’ rather than ‘of the heart’.

\textsuperscript{76} Corfield, ‘Elizabeth Heyrick: Radical Quaker’, pp. 41-67.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p.99.
\textsuperscript{80} Isichei, \textit{Victorian Quakers}, pp. 3-16.
'Dependence was at the core of the evangelical Christian view of womanhood, and the new female subject, constructed in real religious terms, was the godly wife and mother.'  

Although having a wife confined to domestic duties became a symbol of gentility amongst the growing middle-class, crucial to this evangelical outlook was a sense of Salvation which involved a mission not only to save oneself but the wider world. 

Thus although the natural sphere for women was considered to be the domestic one, conversely evangelicalism provided women, including Quaker women, with the opportunity to become more involved in philanthropic and campaigning causes and encouraged links with other women outside their own community. 

It was the interaction of evangelicalism with Quakerism which encouraged women’s entry into public life in the early nineteenth century.

That the Quakers in Leicester were changing since the days of Heyrick is indicated in Eliza Ellis’s letters. In 1861 she wrote to Lydia Rouse that ‘I feel very much to need something to raise me to a sense of the need there is for us to commune with God, to be in more close communion with Him’. As a woman who possessed a ‘profound reverence for the character, private as well as public, of Elizabeth Heyrick’, she felt that looking through her manuscript memorial might help. 

I have been struck with the amount of time she devoted to prayer, to silent intercourse with God. I cannot see the necessity for setting apart so much time to the performance of the duty of prayer. I think

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83 O'Donnell, ‘Woman’s Rights and Woman’s Duties’, p. 27.
84 Ellis, Letters and Memorials, p. 98.
our daily life ought to have a prayerful spirit infused into it, and that would be more in accordance with the will of God than the mere separating ourselves from the business of life.85

Significantly Eliza Ellis, who was born into the Quaker tradition, did not undergo the same ‘spiritual crisis’ which led to Heyrick’s conversion. Eliza, although she desired to be in ‘close communion’ with God, placed particular emphasis on her Christianity being expressed through her daily living rather than through prayer. For both women, nonetheless, it was their Quakerism which informed their consciences and their public lives. Midgley argues that one can call Heyrick neither ‘feminist’ nor ‘anti-feminist’, although she was closer ‘on the spectrum’ to those who advocated women’s rights.86 Eliza Ellis who was only five years old when Elizabeth Heyrick died in 1831, travelled further along this spectrum in her more open assertion of ‘woman’s rights’.

By the early 1870s women were beginning to show more dissatisfaction with their situation. Kennedy suggests that this was the result of the education which upper middle-class Quaker women received, (although the quality of education was nonetheless inferior to that of males in the Society), as well as a ‘residuum of spiritual equality’ which they had formerly enjoyed to a greater extent.87 That Quaker women were well-educated compared with many of their peers is undeniable although O’Donnell downplays the importance of this link arguing that although they

85Ellis, Letters and Memorials, p. 98.
probably were better-educated, this education was nonetheless gender-specific.\textsuperscript{88}

The Ellis sisters in Leicester certainly received a superior education compared with the majority of their contemporaries and for them this does appear to have been empowering. Moore claims that the sisters were educated at home by Lydia Rous who had been a governess to the Bright family and later became Headmistress of the Mount School at York.\textsuperscript{89} Dingsdale, on the other hand, claims that Lydia Rous made friends with Eliza Ellis (1825-1879) when visiting a relative in Leicestershire.\textsuperscript{90} (It is possible that both versions are true. Lydia, who was born in 1819, was a contemporary of Eliza, and may have been employed, after visiting Leicester, to teach the younger members of the Ellis family).\textsuperscript{91} Of all the sisters, it was Eliza who was considered to be particularly academic. She developed a particular interest in geology, collected fossils and kept her own 'museum'.\textsuperscript{92} Isabel Ellis commented later that ‘With no help from Newnham or Girton, Eliza Ellis was as cultured as any woman of her day.’\textsuperscript{93} Moreover, the friendship she developed with Lydia Rous was one route open for Eliza to be in touch with the wider public world and in particular with the early Woman’s Movement. The other important link was through Hannah Lucas, the sister of Samuel Lucas who was married to Margaret Bright. Dingsdale notes that Eliza met Hannah Lucas when

\begin{itemize}
\item[88] O'Donnell, ‘Woman’s Rights and Woman’s Duties’, pp. 22-3.
\item[89] A. Moore, \textit{Ellis of Leicester – A Quaker Family’s Vocation} (Leicester, 2003), p. 28-9.
\item[92] Dingsdale, ‘Generous and Lofty Sympathies’, p. 72.
\item[93] Ellis, \textit{Records}, p. 47.
\end{itemize}
she attended a family wedding as a bridesmaid in her late teens.\textsuperscript{94}

Dingsdale suggests that it was probably Hannah who persuaded four of the Ellis sisters (Eliza, Charlotte, Isabella and Margaret) to sign the 1866 Women’s Suffrage Petition.\textsuperscript{95}

Eliza, of all of the Ellis sisters, was particularly interested in politics. She was an admirer of John Stuart Mill. Holton notes that the women of the Priestman-Bright circle were unusual among Quaker women in their interest in radical politics.\textsuperscript{96} Eliza Ellis was likewise ‘unusual’. She admitted to Lydia Rous in 1862, that she was ‘looked upon as a Radical by many’ and she had ‘some difficulty in making my cause good with them’.\textsuperscript{97} Her father had actively encouraged this early interest which was never to leave her. She travelled with her father to London, Scotland, the Lakes and to Northern Ireland and gained a knowledge of the wider world. After his death she continued to be interested in politics. In March 1869 she wrote to Hannah Lucas that

\begin{quote}
     thou wilt be surprised to hear that I have been up to London to hear the Irish debate. I found that Henry had business there and thought of getting an order for the Speaker’s Gallery, so I decided to allow myself the treat, if our member, Mr Harris, could give me an order for the Ladies’ Gallery; this he was able to do.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

Eliza Ellis was keenly interested in the question of political rights for women although she did at times despair of the attitudes taken by others.

\textsuperscript{94} Dingsdale, ‘Generous and Lofty Sympathies’, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Holton, Quaker Women, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{97} Ellis, Letters and Memorials, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid. p. 331.
of her sex. When writing to Lydia Rous in September 1868 she commented that

I had come to the conclusion thou has arrived at, that this question has made very great progress during the past year; it is treated now so differently from the way it used to be treated by the better class of newspapers, and those who used only to speak of it with contempt now treat it with some measure of respect. Yet how strongly prejudiced women in our own Society still are against the idea of admitting their own sex to political rights! As if the consideration of subjects that affect the welfare of the world must render them unwomanly! I meet with numbers of women who think thus, and feel it too, and while I wish ever to remember that they have an equal right to their opinions as I to mine, I very much question whether they have taken the trouble to consider the subject thoughtfully.  

By 1878, on receiving a note from the secretary of the Branch Committee for Promoting Women’s Suffrage, asking for her name to be placed on it, Eliza wrote to Hannah Lucas from her Belgrave home that she was ‘convinced that women ought to have the suffrage, and so I will ‘come out’ in this way’. Eliza Ellis provides evidence that radical views were permeating down to a local level at an early stage in the campaign for women’s rights.

Quaker women’s networks and women’s meetings were important in the development of the women’s movement. Close female friendships created a ‘woman’s culture’ all the more significant because being a Friend involved a sense of separation from the world. Quaker women were expected to live simply and to devote themselves to the church and those in need. By 1884 there were between fifty and sixty

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99 Ellis, Letters and Memorials, p.323.
100 Ibid., p.425.
Quaker women attending the Leicester Monthly Meeting with about half that number of men and about twelve children.\textsuperscript{102} The disproportionate number of women Friends in Leicester was not unusual. This situation was recognised by contemporaries and attributed to the fact that men emigrated and resigned their membership more frequently than women. Moreover men were expelled more often from the Society.\textsuperscript{103}

Isichei notes that the composition of Friends was largely middle-class.\textsuperscript{104} The Leicester Women’s Monthly Meetings were led by a small group of middle-class women. They included the Ellis and Burgess families and Ann and Rachel Hutchinson who lived at Oadby Hill in Leicester. Both the Ellis and the Hutchinson families made money through the railways.\textsuperscript{105} Ann Hutchinson’s husband, William Evans Hutchinson, was described in 1861 as a ‘railway director and gentleman.’\textsuperscript{106} The Burgess family came from a family of farmers.\textsuperscript{107} The 1861 census indicates that by this date the Burgess women were all of independent means. These women took office, acted as representatives at quarterly meetings, conferred with the men over the appointment of overseers or elders or who drew up reports on specific issues such as temperance work. Between 1869 and 1890 there were only two other women unrelated to these families who held office or acted as representatives within the Leicester Women’s Friends.

\textsuperscript{102} LRO: 3D55/11, Minute Book of the Leicester Women’s Monthly Meeting 1869-1890.
\textsuperscript{103} Isichei, Victorian Quakers, pp. 167-168.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} 1871 census
\textsuperscript{106} 1861 census
\textsuperscript{107} 1841 census
Marriage ties also reveal close family connections in Leicester. The Burgess and the Ellis families were related not only through the marriage of Emma Burgess in 1838 to Edward Shipley Ellis (1817-1879), the eldest son of John Ellis M.P., and half-brother to the seven Ellis sisters of Belgrave Hall, but also through the earlier marriage of Edward Shipley Ellis’s grandparents, Joseph Ellis and Rebecca Burgess in the late eighteenth century. Before the Ellis family moved to Belgrave, the Ellis and Burgess families lived close to one another, in the Beaumont Leys district of Leicester. After Edward was married, the couple lived in a large house in the Newarke which was owned by his wife’s family indicating perhaps the importance of ‘family money’. These close family ties are unsurprising given the Quaker practice forbidding marriage to non-Quakers. Quaker families tended to marry later than those from other communities and also to marry less frequently. Only two of the Ellis sisters married and in middle age. Lucy, the eldest married a widower, Joseph Stickney Sewell and they lived nearby. Ellen, the youngest, married Alfred Priestman from Malton in Yorkshire in 1887. He had been married previously to Mary Ann Tuke and was a distant cousin of the more prominent Priestman family of Newcastle. Thus as well as close Quaker kinship and friendship networks within Leicester, for the Ellis sisters at least, these extended beyond the town.

108 Moore, Ellis of Leicester, pp. 178-80.
109 1841 census
110 Isichei, Victorian Quakers, p. 115.
111 Ibid., pp.167-168.
112 Moore, Ellis of Leicester, p. 31.
However, as Kennedy points out, whereas from the days of George Fox women had been considered to be spiritually equal to men, they were still subordinate to men as far as the government of the church was concerned.\(^{114}\) The true power lay with the Men’s London Yearly meeting and the Meeting for Sufferings. Women’s meetings were limited to an advisory capacity only.\(^{115}\) Although women Friends were permitted to hold certain offices, the most important of which was minister, all important decisions were still made at the men’s meetings without any reference to women until the late nineteenth century.\(^{116}\)

O’Donnell questions whether the involvement of women Friends in the administration of the Society through their own meetings allowed them to acquire skills useful for public life such as minute taking and drafting public statements. ‘The survival of Quakerism depended on its ability to organize and discipline its members.’\(^{117}\) This necessarily involved a degree of acknowledgement of more traditional gender roles. On the other hand, it can be argued that ‘the relative scope which Quaker women enjoyed and their lack of equality with men in the society’s organisation tended to sensitize their minds to the relative position of the sexes.’\(^{118}\) Quaker women, like the Unitarians, were relatively well-educated and anxious to participate more fully in public life. Frustrated by contemporary gender ideology, they became more inclined to radical feminism.

\(^{114}\) Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, chapter 6.
\(^{115}\) Holton, *Quaker Women*, p. 11.
\(^{116}\) Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, pp. 107-110.
\(^{118}\) Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, p. 253.
In 1896 the Men’s Yearly Meeting formally decided that women should be allowed to serve on the Meeting for Sufferings, and that the most important issues at the Yearly Meeting should be debated in joint sittings of men and women. Local business meetings were already adopting joint sittings of men and women by the early 1880s including in Leicester.\textsuperscript{119} The Triennial report of the state of the Friends meeting in Leicester in 1876 noted that ‘Now that… the more important parts of the business affecting women are transacted in the Joint Monthly Meetings, our women’s meetings for discipline are often merely formal. As a consequence the attendance is small. Pastoral care is left to the meeting on Ministry and Oversight.’\textsuperscript{120}

The authors of the 1884 report on the state of the Monthly Meeting of Women Friends in Leicester were concerned that ‘there is a weakness in the corporate life of the meeting; this appears to be caused by the want of strong attachment to the principles on which the separate existence of the Society is based.’\textsuperscript{121} Many individuals were now working either alone or with members of other denominations to take Sunday classes, mothers’ meetings and distributing tracts. The report also mentioned the work done in support of the temperance cause and the Leicester branch of the Kyrle Society. All of this is indicative of a more outward-looking approach and reveals how the Society had adapted during the nineteenth century. Quaker women had greater opportunities to socialize with women from

\textsuperscript{119} Isichei, Victorian Quakers, p.109.
\textsuperscript{120} LRO 3D55/11 Minute Book of the Leicester Women’s Monthly Meeting 1869-1890, Leicester Monthly Meeting held there the 16\textsuperscript{th} of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} month, 1876.
\textsuperscript{121} LRO 3D55/11, Triennial report read at the Leicester Monthly Meeting of Women Friends held there the 20\textsuperscript{th} of 11\textsuperscript{th} month, 1884.
other denominations and participated in many of the reforming movements of the nineteenth century. From the evidence in Leicester by the late nineteenth century we should be cautious about treating Quakers as an isolated group who did not engage with the wider community both within Leicester and nationally.

Several factors therefore contributed towards a greater involvement of Quaker women in public life. Although there were exceptional individuals, such as the Ellis family, and we should be cautious about viewing them as typical because of their higher profile, they were representative on a local scale of more prominent Quaker women. The education of Quaker girls, the importance of close kinship and friendship networks within the church as well as an acute awareness of one’s responsibility to society helped to develop an increased engagement with public life. The Quakers were not an isolated community but responded to changes in society as the nineteenth century progressed and evangelicalism had an impact on the Quaker community. Quakers became more outward-looking and gradually the concept of a Peculiar People was destroyed. It was religion which motivated them to become involved in many of social and moral reform movements of the nineteenth century.

1.4 Congregationalist Women

Three of the women identified in Appendix Two as having played a significant role in the public life of Leicester in the late nineteenth century were Congregationalists. Congregationalist women have not received the
same attention as Unitarians and Quakers, yet the evidence from Leicester suggests this is perhaps an oversight.\textsuperscript{122} Bebbington identifies the Congregationalists, along with the Unitarians and Quakers, as being particularly middle-class.\textsuperscript{123} They had separated from the Established Church in the seventeenth century and were part of the group of Nonconformists known as ‘Old Dissent’.\textsuperscript{124} The Congregationalists had also been influenced by evangelicalism and their numbers grew rapidly during the nineteenth century.

Least is known about Mary Ewing although it can be said that her public work was conducted in a gendered way. In her capacity as a member of the Leicester Board of Guardians she was remembered at her death as a ‘quiet, unassuming’ lady who wished to do ‘all the good she could without making very much noise.’\textsuperscript{125} Yet she was also described as ‘enthusiastic’ and committed in her work, these characteristics stemming from a ‘deep and reverent love for God’.\textsuperscript{126} She held a mothers’ meeting at Wycliffe Congregational Church which she attended, the minister describing her as ‘one of the best workers of that church’. In addition she supported the campaign for temperance and sat as a Poor Law guardian\textsuperscript{127}.

\textsuperscript{122} This point is made with regard to Baptist and Congregationalist abolitionists in A. Twells, ‘We ought to Obey God rather than Man’: Women, Anti-Slavery, and Nonconformist Religious Cultures’ in E. J. Clapp and J.R. Jeffrey (eds), \textit{Women, Dissent and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790-1865} (Oxford, 2011), pp.67-8.
\textsuperscript{123} Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain}, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{125} The Women’s Signal, 6 February, 1896.
\textsuperscript{126} LC, 8 February, 1896.
\textsuperscript{127} See Chapter 5.
Dr Mary Royce, Leicester’s first female doctor, also preferred that the outside world remained unaware of the extent of her work amongst the poor. At her funeral she was remembered for her ‘brave unselfish spirit on her path of service’ and her ‘absolute self-surrender to her ideals.’

The daughter of Alderman George Royce and his wife, Barbara she was educated at Belmont House School in Leicester. Abandoning thoughts of a literary career, she qualified as a doctor at the age of forty-four. Her motivation behind a medical career appears to have been to provide the women of Leicester with a female doctor. By then, however, she had already established an educational and religious organisation in Leicester choosing rather unusually to work amongst working-class boys and young men. This later became known as the Royce Institute. Beginning as a Sunday School class in 1868, night classes were begun when Mary Royce realised that the boys, who often started work at the age of eight or nine, needed to acquire a basic education.

At first it was held in Sanvey Gate and then moved to Slater Street. After she was evicted Mary Royce purchased two cottages out of her money in Lower Church Gate and a school was built. This was later expanded when she bought two cottages next door where she could work as a doctor and a teacher.

Allowing for its hagiographical tone, Smith’s biography places great emphasis on the religious motivation behind Mary Royce’s public work. Her ideal was embodied in the personality of Jesus. He was her ‘Strong Son of God, Immortal Love, and she gave her life to His service, that she

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128 LC, 5 November, 1892.
130 Smith, The Royce Institute, pp. 3-4.
might lead her boys to the feet of Him who gave His life that they might live’.  

Smith notes that her ‘boys absorbed her whole attention’ her aim being to create good husbands, fathers and citizens and ‘finally to be disciples of Jesus’.  

As well as the classes she realised the importance of recreation and arranged outings for the boys and Saturday evening entertainments.

The Revd. Page Hopps spoke at her funeral of when he had accompanied Dr Royce to her Mission –room. He described how he had never felt closer to Christ,

never did I seem to be more aware of the meaning of His penetrating words, “Whomsoever shall do the will of my Father who is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother”, and I said to myself – Jesus is saying this here; and to his woman also he speaks, “Thou hast chosen the good part which shall never be taken away.”

Eileen Yeo argues that Victorian feminists viewed ‘the law of sacrifice’ as central to their lives. In a world which prioritised the Christian married mother, single women particularly saw this divine calling to love and service as a justification for their public work.  

Dr Mary Royce was a woman who believed that she had a divine calling. Her own convictions are reflected in her own short story, *Little Scrigget* in which a street urchin is rescued from destitution by John Wright.  

Several times Scrigget had to be drawn back from temptation after falling into bad company. (In her own life Mary Royce personally sought out the boys who would not discard

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131 Smith, *The Royce Institute*, p. 4.
133 *LC*, 5 November, 1892.
old habits and ‘brought them back into the fold’). A fight ensues when John tries to bring the boy home from the lodgings of the man who had led Scrigget astray and John himself is mortally wounded. Self-sacrificial work is continued by John’s fiancée, Maggie, who after his death became a ‘good and noble woman – ever trying to help her fellow-creatures up the difficult hill of duty. She remained single all her life for Jack’s sake’. 

Mary’s religious and political convictions went hand-in-hand. Like Eliza Ellis she appears to have been influenced by her father to whom she was ‘deeply attached’. He was described by Smith as of ‘that sturdy radical school of political thought’. Mary believed strongly in civil and religious freedom and was described as a radical in politics. She was in favour of female enfranchisement and argued that women should become involved in politics since this would lead to the improvement of humanity. In particular if Parliamentary laws were based on the ‘ethics of the Christian faith’ social and moral improvement would ensue. Susan Mumm notes that women’s charity work could be a stepping-stone into political activism, but many women maintained ‘a foot in both camps’. Mary Royce was a local woman who continued to be committed to her ‘boys’ at weekends although she studied in London during the week, was a political radical, a Poor Law guardian as well as practising as a medical doctor. Unsurprisingly at one point during her studies she suffered a

136 Smith, The Royce Institute, pp. 15 & 28.
137 Royce, Little Scrigget, pp. 84-5.
138 Smith, The Royce Institute, p. 6.
139 Ibid., p. 12.
140 Ibid., p. 29.
141 Ibid., p. 30.
142 S. Mumm. ‘Women and Philanthropic Cultures’ in S. Morgan and J. de Vries (eds), Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940 (London and New York, 2010), pp. 54-71.
nervous breakdown and on the advice of her doctor, took time off to recover abroad. Dr Mary Royce died in 1892 after a visit to the workhouse infirmary where she caught erysipelas.

Mary Livens was most forthcoming of the women. Her letters to the press are littered with Biblical quotations which would have needed no explanation to the readers of her day. In appealing for donations towards religious accommodation in the Clarendon Park Estate in 1880, she argued that what may be at first a tiny spring would feed into waters ‘that river whose streams shall make glad the city of our God’.\textsuperscript{143} She continued by appealing for offers of help, quoting from Genesis, 22: 7, ‘Behold the fire and the wood’, as Isaac did of yore; what is needed is the offering of willing service to point out and say to the people – ‘Behold the Lamb of God’.\textsuperscript{144}

Her religious faith was the motivation behind her public work. She became the leader of the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in Leicester.\textsuperscript{145} In a further appeal through the press in 1887 for the Refuge for Destitute Women she used frequent religious references. Thus

The fact that “ye have the poor with you always” is as true as when it was spoken eighteen centuries ago. The duty of considering them equally as binding as when the command was given that neither field, vineyard, nor olive tree should be stored by any niggard hand that would leave naught to benefit them. The taking in of the stranger and the clothing of the naked received words of commendation from the Divine teacher.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{143} Bible, Psalm 46:4.
\textsuperscript{144} LC, 25 December, 1880.
\textsuperscript{145} See Chapter Two.
\textsuperscript{146} LC, 26 November, 1887.
Influenced by evangelicalism, Congregational women desired to bring about social and moral reform within their own community. By doing so, as Mary Livens wrote, they would be fulfilling their ‘Christian duty… as their brother’s keeper’.\textsuperscript{147}

1.5 Conclusions

This chapter has explored how religious faith motivated local Nonconformist middle-class women to take a greater part in the public life of the town. In a comparison of how religion influenced and empowered these women there are both similarities to be drawn as well as differences. Superior education compared with many of their contemporaries was an enabling force even though this may still have been of an inferior quality compared to that received by their brothers. We should moreover be careful of assuming that women were not encouraged to be interested in politics by their male relatives as the examples of both Eliza Ellis and Dr Mary Royce testify. Quakers and Unitarians also enjoyed close family and friendship networks which extended beyond their local community, as witnessed by Eliza’s contacts with Hannah Lucas and Lydia Rous and Edith Gittins’s links with Clara Collett. Both local women were thus provided with opportunities to be in touch with the wider Quaker and Unitarian communities.

However there were areas of difference between the denominations which underpinned women’s activism. Quakerism itself developed and

\textsuperscript{147}LC, 20 April, 1878.
changed during the second half of the nineteenth century as it came into contact with evangelicalism and this encouraged greater public participation. Women far from being confined to the ‘domestic sphere’ could justify an increased public involvement in campaigning and philanthropy. Evangelicalism also influenced women from the Congregational chapels in Leicester to become empowered to take part in public life. It was their Christian duty to the point of self-sacrifice to commit themselves to the improvement of society. Unitarianism particularly emphasised the importance of education for women and as a means of changing and reforming individuals. In addition they valued the importance of doing good deeds and civil and religious freedom, all of this encouraging positive and active involvement by women.

Active women from all religious communities in late nineteenth century Leicester largely justified their public work by stressing the need to remodel public life to include the benefits of feminine influence. This emphasis on the gender specific natures of men and women did not challenge traditional gender stereotypes and therefore women’s public work in the town was mostly ‘gendered’. The following chapters will examine in greater depth the nature and extent of women’s involvement in aspects of public life in the second half of the nineteenth century as the boundary between the male public and female private sphere became more indistinct. The next chapter examines female action in the Leicester campaigns for temperance and against the Contagious Diseases Acts.
Chapter 2  Campaigning Women

2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the campaigns in which middle-class women in Leicester became involved during the second half of the nineteenth century. It begins by discussing the earlier precedents of female public involvement in the anti-slavery and anti-Corn Laws movements. The chapter then considers the later temperance campaign in Leicester and the local movement against the Contagious Diseases Acts in greater depth.

Campaigns such as anti-slavery, the temperance movement and the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts all enabled women to use the language of moral superiority and so provided them with an entrance into the public sphere. As Levine has commented ‘Feminists took hold of the position to which they were limited by Victorian ideology and inverted its precepts, turning the duties of moral guardianship into a crusade which castigated the laxity and degradation of precisely those who ascribed to them that role.’\(^1\) The campaign against the Corn Laws was a more difficult arena for women to negotiate a public role. The Anti-Corn Law League was essentially ‘a businessman’s pressure group’ that was formed to exert pressure on the economic policy of the day.\(^2\) However, as Tyrell argues, the discourse of ‘Woman’s Mission’ was also effectively applied to this campaign since women could

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\(^1\) P. Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900* (Florida, 1994), p.133.

represent their involvement as deeds of charity to bring cheap bread to the poor. Moreover as the century advanced women became increasingly aware that the issues on which they campaigned from a moral standpoint were often issues of a particularly female concern. Levine points out the centrality of these campaigns to feminism by noting the overlap of female activists involved in the campaigns.

Levine notes that ‘The invocation of the importance of gender in feminist circles was certainly strengthened by the tight network and genealogy of feminism emerging at this time.’ In Leicester one is struck by the female family networks which ran through women’s activism and which often continued throughout the century down the generations. Many of the later campaigns drew their support from women who either themselves came from a background of involvement in earlier moral reform movements or whose mothers and aunts had been actively involved in the earlier campaigns. In Leicester the female Ellis sisters, cousins, mothers and aunts provide perhaps the most obvious example. During the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century successive generations of female members of the Ellis family became deeply involved in the middle class public life of Leicester including the early suffrage movement in the town.

As in other cities and towns, women began campaigning by using well established ‘female’ philanthropic methods in order to keep within

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5 Ibid., p. 27.
the dominant ‘separate spheres’ ideology. The formation of ladies’ associations during the anti-slavery campaign was opposed by some men such as William Wilberforce who argued that it was ‘unsuited to the female character as delineated in Scripture.’ Early female campaigning usually involved less controversial methods such as organising tea parties, bazaars, collecting subscriptions and distributing tracts and pamphlets. As the century advanced one begins to see women using methods more often associated with men such as public speaking. Petitions were also presented to Parliament from the women of Leicester. However, although women were becoming more aware of the feminist implications of campaigning, they still looked to sympathetic male leadership to provide a respectable cover for their involvement. This was particularly true of a subject such as the Contagious Diseases Acts.

2.2 Precedents

From the early nineteenth century, Leicester had a history of female campaigning. This was evident in the anti-slavery campaigns and later in the movement against the Corn Laws. Temple-Patterson noted how in the early 1790s the campaign for the abolition of the slave-trade ‘evoked considerable interest in the town.' This interest largely centred around Thomas Babbington (1758-1837), the M.P. for Leicester, who lived at Rothley Temple and who was a member of the Clapham Sect. Midgley notes that at this time there were no female

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7 A. Temple-Patterson, Radical Leicester (Leicester, 1954), pp. 91-92.
subscribers to the Abolition Society in Leicester, although there were thirty-six male subscribers.⁹

Active female involvement in the anti-slavery campaign in Leicester centred around Elizabeth Heyrick and Susannah Watts, who provided both local leadership at the time and were exemplars for later female reformers such as Eliza Ellis. They wrote tracts and with some success persuaded local shopkeepers not to stock goods produced by slaves. Elizabeth Heyrick (1769-1831), the daughter of John and Elizabeth Coltman, as well as campaigning through her writing and through the urging of others to boycott slave-grown sugar, became the Treasurer of the Birmingham Female Society for the Relief of British Slaves, in 1825. In June of the same year a local district branch of the same society was formed. By 1828 there were fifty-eight women subscribers in Leicester and Leicestershire.¹⁰ One of these was Priscilla Ellis of Beaumont Leys, the mother of the seven Ellis sisters who featured so prominently in the public life in Leicester in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Ellis family support for the anti-Slavery campaign continued well into the nineteenth century. The Anti-slavery Reporter and Aborigines Friend in January 1882 lists amongst its subscribers the Misses Ellis (£1.1s.) and a Miss H. Ellis (5/-).¹² Another family group mentioned by Aucott were Mrs Burgess and her daughters

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⁹ Midgley, Women Against Slavery, p. 18.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 124.
¹² Anti-slavery Reporter and Aborigines Friend, January 1882.
of Wigston Grange. These two examples reinforce the point about the importance of family networks and in particular of female influence across the generations.

Elizabeth Heyrick, as has already been noted in chapter one, was born into a family of dissenters. Her father was sympathetic towards the movement for religious and civil rights. However, although by upbringing she was pre-disposed to liberal views and her family undoubtedly influenced her, Corfield stresses that the crucial event in Heyrick’s life occurred following the sudden death of her husband in 1797 and the subsequent ‘spiritual crisis’ which she underwent. Her objections to slavery were essentially grounded within her religious faith since because all human beings were spiritually equal before God, slavery by implication must be totally evil. Midgley likewise sees Quakerism and Heyrick’s conversion as the driving force behind Heyrick’s commitment. Heyrick went further than the male Quakers in the Society of Friends calling in her 1824 pamphlet for ‘Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition’. In her writing she attempted to prick the consciences of male Quakers who had moved into the world of business and who had in the process acquired much wealth and social status. Midgley suggests that Heyrick drew her inspiration from the gender tension being expressed within the Society of Friends at the

15 Ibid.
time as women. Friends noted the inherent contradiction between their own value as dispensers of spiritual authority and their subordinate position within the organisation of the Society. Elizabeth Heyrick provides an example of strong and radical female activism in Leicester in the early nineteenth century.

Susanna Watts (1768-1842) was the youngest daughter of John and Joan Watts of Danetts Hall in Leicester. She was an evangelical Baptist and when her father died vowed to support her mother through learning Latin, French and Italian and thereby translating foreign texts. Like Heyrick much of her campaigning was through her writings and she was unafraid to engage with men in written argument. As well as campaigning against slavery she also campaigned against cruelty towards animals. Moira Ferguson argues that in Watts’ writings ‘slavery and cruelty are seen as two sides of the same coin.’ Moreover she goes further and suggests that Watts also wished to link women’s rights to both the emancipation of slaves and respect towards animals. By introducing the issue of gender into her writings (i.e. the Queen Bee as a heroine), Watts linked together three downtrodden groups. Watts also displayed little fear in arguing that women had a right to speak out publicly on issues which many men considered to be outside of the female domain. She was certainly not a pacifist like her Quaker friend, Elizabeth Heyrick and was arguably more radical believing that

19 Ibid., p. 57.
20 Ibid., pp. 70-72.
where necessary aggression could be justified and that women could fight back against injustice by involvement in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{21}

It is less well-documented that Leicester also had a group of women who were involved in the Anti-Corn Law League. For some time before the Anti-Corn Law Association was founded in Manchester in October 1838, opposition to the Corn Laws had been growing in Leicester from both the middle and working classes.\textsuperscript{22} In December 1838, Leicester followed the example of Manchester and formed an Anti-Corn Law Society. Pickering and Tyrell note that Leicester was a place where anti-Corn Law activity was strong. Attendance records compiled for eight national conferences of the League held between 1839 and 1843 show that Leicester was amongst only thirteen localities out of 192 to send representatives to six or more conferences.\textsuperscript{23}

Nationally, Morgan divides the involvement of women in the campaign into three main phases. The early years from February 1839 to October 1840 saw women attending lectures in small numbers. From then until February 1842 there was a more determined effort to enlist female opinion when the bazaar in Manchester brought women together from across the country. Activity quietened down thereafter until the launch of the Covent Garden Bazaar in 1845.\textsuperscript{24} The evidence of female activity in Leicester broadly fits in with this analysis. In February 1840 at a Great Demonstration for the repeal of the Corn

\textsuperscript{21} Ferguson, \textit{Animal Advocacy}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{22} Temple-Patterson, \textit{Radical Leicester}, pp. 305-6.
\textsuperscript{23} Pickering and Tyrell, \textit{The People’s Bread}, p. 47.
Laws held in Leicester a ‘large number of ladies were present in the boxes, whose presence, we need scarcely say, added very considerably to the deep interest attendant on the object of the meeting.’\textsuperscript{25} In 1842 at a meeting where between five and six hundred persons sat down to tea in the New Hall, it was reported that ‘A great number of ladies were present.’\textsuperscript{26} The following month ‘The following individuals attended a public meeting on 2nd February, 1842 in Leicester and signed a petition... for the repeal of the Corn Laws – Ann Wood and sons.’\textsuperscript{27} In February 1842 a report of the bazaar in Manchester in the \textit{Anti-Bread Tax Circular} noted that stall number 25 had been run by four ladies from Leicester, Mrs Potter, Mrs Hilton, Miss Ellis and Miss Giles.\textsuperscript{28}

In Leicester evidence exists that this interest continued throughout 1843 with ladies attending a meeting of the Working Men’s Anti-Corn Law Association in January 1843.\textsuperscript{29} In December 1843 at a Great League meeting held in the theatre, Horsefair Street long before the doors were due to be opened the entrances to the theatre were ‘thronged by parties anxious to obtain admission, and by the time the proceedings commenced, soon after six o’clock, the house was comfortably filled, the principal occupiers of the boxes being elegantly-

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Leicester Chronicle}, 29 February, 1840.
\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Leicestershire Mercury}, 1 January 1842.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 5 February 1842.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Anti-Bread Tax Circular}, 10 February, 1842.
dressed ladies, and there was a fair sprinkling of the “fair sex” in the pit perhaps indicating some cross-class female support for the League.\textsuperscript{30}

As Morgan says, activity then quietened down until 1845 when the Anti-Corn Law Bazaar took place. The 1845 Bazaar became an ‘outlet for local pride’ as well as encouraging national cooperation.\textsuperscript{31} In this endeavour the efforts of the women were crucial. The \textit{Leicestershire Mercury} reported in February that William Biggs, one of the Radical brothers who played a prominent role in the political life of Leicester in the early nineteenth century, had written to George Wilson concerning the Bazaar.

\begin{quote}
Dear Sir, - Your indefatiguable friend... had called upon us here, to stir us up in the good work. The result of his visit has been most successful and satisfactory. He has obtained on all hands, from the ladies as well as from the leading manufacturers, promises of contributions and support.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

In April of the same year, it was reported that the Ladies’ Committee of Leicester were ‘not inactive’. They issued a circular requesting that if contributions to the Bazaar were to be made, they should be forwarded by the 10\textsuperscript{th} of the month.

\begin{quote}
The Ladies before mentioned, viz., Mrs Joseph Biggs, Mrs Fielding, Mrs Legge, or Miss Bedells, will be happy to take charge of any contributions, and forward the same to London; or if it should be more convenient to you, to send them direct to the Bazaar, you are requested to address them to George Wilson, Esq., 67 Fleet Street, by whom they will be received and properly acknowledged. The Ladies’ Committee will, at all times, be happy to supply any information that may assist you in your kind intentions of contributing.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} The League, 30 December 1843.\
\textsuperscript{31} Morgan, ‘Domestic Economy and Political Agitation’, p. 127.\
\textsuperscript{32} The Leicestershire Mercury, 22 February, 1845.\
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, 5 April, 1845.
As others have pointed out, the Anti-Corn Law League Bazaar in 1845 and the earlier one in Manchester thus provided the opportunity for women from across the country to come together and organise effectively a fund-raising event in a specifically ‘female’ way.\textsuperscript{34} The charity bazaar was employed as a respectable method of raising money by women.

From the available evidence in Leicester it is striking how many of the women involved in the League can be linked to male Leaguers in Leicester through ties of kinship. Pickering and Tyrell suggest that this feature whereby the same surnames appear frequently was one which it shared with other contemporary reform movements. The campaign itself was something like ‘a family business’.\textsuperscript{35} This is especially noticeable with the women from the Biggs family. The extent of such female family involvement in the League is revealed by a report in the \textit{Manchester Times} of the 1842 Bazaar. ‘This stall was the depot of a splendid contribution from the ladies of Leicester; amongst whom we may mention the names of Mrs Biggs, the Misses Biggs, Mrs Thomas Biggs, Mrs William Biggs, Mrs Joshua Biggs’\textsuperscript{36}

As well as the women from the Biggs family, other female links with leading local male manufacturers and radicals can be traced. Mrs Fielding may have been related to Thomas Fielding, a leading Leicester manufacturer in the 1830s and another prominent Radical. Mrs Legge

\textsuperscript{35} Pickering and Tyrell, \textit{The People’s Bread}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Manchester Times}, 5 February 1842.
was almost certainly the wife of the Revd. Dr George Legge, the minister of the Gallowtree Gate Independent chapel, who campaigned for the abolition of Church rates with ‘characteristic vehemence’. Mrs Bedells was probably related to Caleb Bedells, another manufacturer and inventor in 1839 of ‘an improved caoutchouc webbing’ for braces which was adapted for other purposes.\(^{38}\)

Simon Morgan writes that the Corn Laws have been neglected in the historiography of nineteenth-century women’s politics, even though as long ago as the early years of the twentieth century, women’s rights campaigners such as Helen Blackburn argued that the agitation against the Corn Laws was ‘the nursery in which many a girl of that generation learned to know how closely public questions concerned her’.\(^{39}\) He points out that only Alex Tyrell has looked at women’s role in the campaign against the Corn Laws in depth by arguing that like the anti-slavery movement, the discourse of ‘Women’s Mission’ was applied to allow respectable women to take part in public agitation by representing their acts as ones of philanthropy. Morgan, whilst not disagreeing with Tyrell’s analysis, argues that ‘Woman’s Mission’ was not the only discourse employed. The role of women within the household as housekeepers was politicised and much of their participation within the campaign was independent of men. He argues that a deliberate attempt was made to appeal to women by linking the running of the household economy with that of economic policy. The campaign to

\(^{37}\) Temple-Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, pp.251-2.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 381.

\(^{39}\) Morgan, ‘Domestic Economy and Political Agitation’, p. 115.
abolish the duty on Corn was the political and economic equivalent of women as housekeepers obtaining food for the family at the cheapest possible rates.

Thus although close family, religious and political interests were important in mobilising women to the cause, the discourses of ‘Women’s Mission’ and ‘domestic economy’ which were employed were crucial because they introduced an ‘embryonic language of women’s issues’.40 Both allowed women to step outside of the domestic sphere and to take part in public life. The evidence from Leicester thus points to significant interest by the women of the town in the campaign against the Corn Laws from soon after an Anti-Corn Law Society was formed. Interest can also be particularly linked to times when there was a need for fundraising as in 1842 and more noticeably in 1845 and therefore can be said to roughly agree with the division of the campaign into three phases. Leicester provides further evidence that the employment of specifically female ways of raising funds, especially bazaars, enabled women to demonstrate their organisational skills without incurring the wrath of respectable society. It was within these limited boundaries that early campaigning women were able to be most useful in the Anti-Corn Law campaign and to take some part in public life. From these early precedents women expanded their sphere of action as they became more fully involved in public life through the temperance movement in Leicester and in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts as will be shown.

40 Morgan, ‘Domestic Economy and Political Agitation’, p. 129.
2.3 Women and Temperance

Women can be found campaigning against alcohol early in the nineteenth century. Historians, however, have disagreed about the influence that women had on the temperance movement. Brian Harrison makes little reference to the work of women.41 Others emphasise that although women can be found campaigning from an early stage, the majority only performed roles which society deemed acceptable for a woman such as organising tea parties and collecting subscriptions. The real power and influence still lay with the men.42 More recent historians view women’s contribution in a more positive light and argue that women’s involvement developed their ‘sense of public duty’.43 Margaret Barrow has studied the British Women’s Temperance Association [hereafter the BWTA] in depth and has established a link between this organisation and the expansion of women into public life later in the century.44 Doern also argues that contemporary domestic ideology placed the family at the heart of a Christian society and temperance women such as Clara Lucas Balfour used this issue to negotiate their entrance into the public sphere.45 Whilst still adhering to a ‘separate spheres’ ideology she maintained that women were in no way spiritually or morally inferior to men and

campaigns on moral issues thus provided women with a stepping stone to enter the public arena.

Leicester was at the centre of much temperance activity in the mid-nineteenth century. Thomas Cook published temperance literature, including the short-lived *National Temperance Magazine* (published in Leicester from 1844-6) and in 1841 began his famous teetotal excursions from Leicester to Loughborough.\(^{46}\) In 1853 the Temperance Hall was built in Leicester.\(^{47}\) Women were at the heart of much of this activity in Leicester but their contribution hitherto has not been appreciated. Yet as early as the 1890s, the lack of recognition which women received for their role in promoting temperance was observed by Winskill who chose Mrs Thomas Cook of Leicester as his example.

Some of the most ardent and heroic workers in the temperance field have been rarely noticed, viz. the noble women who so bravely stood by their husbands, cheering and encouraging them to persevere in the struggle against intemperance and sin of every form. Not only had they the cares of the household, the nursing and training of the children… many of our best temperance workers owe more to the affectionate and faithful teaching of their mother than to the example and precept of their father. \(^{48}\)

Winskill continued,

Few can tell the influence and power of some of these women, such for example, as…Mrs Thomas Cook of Leicester and many others. Mrs Cook was “a temperance worker of the first rank. In her own household, in the temperance hotel, and abroad in the busy world she never failed to be by her husband’s side”. \(^{49}\)

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\(^{46}\) M. Elliott, *Victorian Leicester* (Leicester, 2010), p. 38.
\(^{47}\) LC, 24 September, 1853.
\(^{49}\) Ibid.
Women in Leicester, as in other parts of the country, organised tea parties and bazaars to raise money, distributed tracts and collected subscriptions for the temperance campaign. Activities such as these fell within what was considered to be ‘acceptable’ work for a woman. The Leicester campaign was noticed nationally, however, as being particularly strong. Arguably this strength could be attributed to the contribution and dedication of the female members. The *National Temperance Magazine* in 1844, when comparing the finances of the Midland Counties, noted that the cause in Leicester was in a more healthy state than its neighbours. This, it was claimed, was due to a system of regular contributions which the members had adopted enabling them to discharge their obligations without troubling the public with annual appeals.

This agreeable change has been mainly brought about by the zeal and perseverance of one female member, who having been raised from degradation by the society now devotes a considerable portion of her time to the collection of the weekly subscriptions of the members. 50 On Whit-Monday the lady mentioned, Mrs Wood, was presented with a tea and coffee service in recognition of her efficient services as a weekly collector for the society. In 1854 *The Bristol Temperance Herald* when commenting on the annual report of the Leicester Temperance Society indicated that it also regarded Leicester as being in the vanguard of the temperance campaign when it commented that ladies who have so long been engaged in the distribution of tracts on the loan system, still persevere in their good work with

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unwearied regularity. This, like the manner of obtaining their funds, is as it should be, and worthy of imitation.

Such acts were considered to be completely respectable work for a woman. As women were considered to be guardians of their family’s morals, a natural extension of this was concern for the moral welfare of the wider community and temperance was a field in which women could find a useful public role. Through performing such acts of Christian duty, women were able to take part in the wider community.

Emma, the wife of Edward Shipley Ellis, was a long term supporter of the Leicester Temperance Society. The local press noted after her death in 1889 that she had for many years collected the greater part of the Temperance Society’s annual subscriptions. The first list published in 1850 reported that she had collected £116, rising eventually to £170. The *Leicester Chronicle* reported that at her funeral ‘Members of the Leicester Temperance Society and kindred organisations in particular were present in full force, it having been in this direction that the deceased lady’s influence and support were more especially exercised.’ In addition, she took an interest in other Temperance organisations especially the Railway Employee Total Abstinence Society.

She spared no pains and missed no opportunity of furthering the cause she had so much at heart. For many years she adopted the practice of enclosing tracts on temperance in nearly all her correspondence.

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51 *The Bristol Temperance Herald*, November 1854 number 11, vol. CVIII.
52 *LC*, 11 January, 1890.
53 *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 8 January, 1890.
As well as distributing literature and collecting subscriptions, women also became invaluable to the temperance movement as tea parties were organised to raise money for the societies’ funds. As Morgan has said ‘Tea parties became synonymous with women and custodianship of the urn was an exclusively feminine duty.’\textsuperscript{54} A picture was painted by a newspaper in 1850 of this particular role which the women campaigners in Leicester performed. At the time the campaign in Leicester was thriving to the extent that the town was incapable of accommodating everyone when a large meeting was held and this led to the building of the Temperance Hall which was as yet incomplete. In January 1850, about five hundred supporters of the movement assembled for tea in the largest public hall in the town.

Tea was served from a large and beautifully plated urn…which is capable of providing, simultaneously, for one thousand persons. The urn is placed at the head of the party, and from it a tube of about seventy feet, with projecting from either side, extends to the bottom of the hall. The tea is made in the urn, and by a valve and index the party in charge of it can regulate the supply to almost any extent; and the great advantage of this tea-making machine is, that the strength and heat of the liquid are uniformly secured to the whole party… the cups are filled from the taps by ladies who have charge of them, and the rate of supply is quite equal to the demands of the most rapid consumers.\textsuperscript{55}

However, as well as these more acceptable forms of female campaigning the temperance movement was one area of social reform which witnessed women speakers by the 1830s. Early speakers included Jane Anne Carlile and Clara Lucas Balfour. Carlile addressed

\textsuperscript{54}Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Daily News}, January 1, 1850.
a meeting in Glasgow in 1840 and Clara Lucas Balfour was lecturing by 1841.\textsuperscript{56} By the end of the 1840s Balfour was the most important female lecturer on temperance, but she also wrote and spoke on woman’s role in society. It has been argued that she can be seen as a forerunner to late nineteenth-century feminism. Within her own circle of friends topics discussed as early as 1846 included female education and suffrage.\textsuperscript{57}

Although not as well-known as Balfour, an early female lecturer from Leicester was Mrs Susan Theobald. In 1894 the Leicester Temperance Society presented her with an illuminated address on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of her signing the pledge. In that time she had been ‘an ardent advocate of temperance principles on public platforms in all parts of Great Britain and was recognised as one of the most effective lady speakers who have lectured against the drink traffic’.\textsuperscript{58} Born in Ireland she was only thirteen when she signed the pledge and sixteen when she began to speak in public. Like Balfour she did not confine herself to lecturing on temperance. In January 1849, she could be found lecturing at Bingley not only on temperance but also ‘On Woman’s Duty, Interest and Position in Society’.\textsuperscript{59} She castigated the Christian Church during another lecture in 1858 in London for its ‘neutrality and indifference’ in tacitly sanctioning the drinking customs of society. Such customs she claimed led to most cases of brutality that she had seen tried at the Leicester police-court where husbands had

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{The Leicester Daily Mercury}, 9 July, 1894.
\textsuperscript{59} Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, p. 100.
been accused of beating their wives.\(^{60}\) She was thus linking alcohol abuse and male violence. It was later acknowledged at the time of her Temperance Jubilee in 1894 that

Few indeed were the ladies who ventured to mount the platform in the early fifties, and the Temperance cause was not only an unpopular one, but was even pronounced to be ‘vulgar’...One never hears now of a ‘female lecturer’, nor is it necessary for a lady who stands up to plead the cause of Temperance to explain that “she does not seek the platform from a desire to gain applause, or to undervalue the comforts of domestic retirement!”\(^{61}\)

In the space of fifty years, attitudes had changed considerably.

Mrs Theobald was not only active as a temperance lecturer. It has been argued that the real success of the ‘fight against drink’ for many temperance women was to be found in the homes they founded for inebriate women.\(^{62}\) However Barrow mentions only those established after the Acts of 1879 and 1888 had been passed. These Acts dealt with the care and control of habitual drunkards. The *British Women’s Temperance Journal* in 1886 noted that while it was believed that the oldest Home was probably in Edinburgh,

The next Home of long standing is a private one for ladies, Tower House, Leicester. It is superintended by Mrs Theobald who has twenty-one years’ experience in the care of inebriate women of the upper classes. Mrs Theobald deplores the lack of legal power to retain the patients until they are cured. She says ‘I believe I was the first in the country to open such a home, feeling from public and private experience, its great need, and that such a refuge was wanted for the upper classes of my own sex for which my house is set apart’\(^{63}\)

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\(^{60}\) *The Englishwoman’s Review*, 30 October, 1858.

\(^{61}\) *Wings*, 1 December, 1894.


\(^{63}\) *The British Women’s Temperance Journal*, 1 March, 1886.
Mrs Theobald was an example of a woman working independently for a cause in which she passionately believed. Other local women worked together within societies for the temperance cause using traditional female methods of fundraising. It was not until 1876, however, that the BWTA was founded, the most important female Temperance organisation. Its aim was to unite the various women’s temperance societies which already existed, in the belief that by combining their efforts women would be a more effective force. In its early days Christianity remained at the heart of the Association. Temperance was seen as a moral and Christian crusade and the Quaker Mrs Margaret Parker (1828-1896), became its first president.64 She was succeeded by Clara Lucas Balfour in 1877 and after her death by the Quaker and supporter of women’s suffrage, Margaret Bright Lucas. It was under Lucas that the Association began to adopt a more political stance and widen its remit. However she did so slowly and without upsetting the more conservative branches.65

Despite the long history of female temperance activism in Leicester, it was only in 1889 that it became affiliated to the Association. In March it was reported after a visit by Mrs Eynon that it was hoped a branch would soon be formed.66 The initiative for this appears to have come from the Leicester and District Temperance Union who had called together a large number of women with the aim of forming a branch. The report for May 1889 confirmed that a branch had been decided on

65Ibid., pp. 71-5.
66The British Women’s Temperance Journal, 1 March, 1889.
with Mrs Edwards, ‘a temperance worker well-known and highly respected’ as the President. 67 The first meeting was attended by about one hundred and fifty women. Thereafter, reports regularly appeared in the British Women’s Temperance Journal of the activities of the BWTA in Leicester and the branch appeared to thrive. By 1891 it was reported that the branch had two hundred members and was openly debating wider issues such as the pros and cons of woman’s suffrage, reflecting the widening discussion about this issue on the national stage. 68 The Leicester branch had a particularly middle-class membership. It was a feature recognised by the branch. This was not, however, because the temperance message was not reaching women from all classes but although a great many pledges taken, they are not taken for our Association, because the people are too poor to be able to afford the subscription. We hold many meetings during the year in the surrounding villages, and wherever the British Women have been asked to go and speak, they have never refused. We have a woman who visits the prison cells on every day except Sunday. 69

In spite of the relatively late affiliation of the Leicester branch to the BWTA, earlier in the nineteenth century women in Leicester had realised that temperance was a feminist issue. In the 1850s Mrs Theobald had been linking domestic violence and alcohol. One writer in the temperance press noted ‘that woman has been the chief and greatest sufferer through the inebriety of fathers, husbands, and brothers.’ 70 Such arguments were not lost on local women. Women discussed the issue of men’s fondness for alcohol and showed how

67 British Women’s Temperance Journal, 1 May, 1889.
68 Ibid. 1 April, 1891.
69 Ibid. 1 July, 1891.
70 The National Temperance Magazine vol.1 (Leicester, 1844), pp. 229-232.
men lost their inhibitions and sense of reason when drunk. Thus in 1845, ‘A Woman of Leicester’, although she preferred to remain anonymous, wrote a short article in the *National Temperance Magazine* arguing that...

The gentlemen have been telling us these many years that we are the ‘weaker vessel’ and that ‘frailty’ is the name of ‘woman’, with many other little tales that have helped to feed man’s vanity and caused us to sit quietly under the delusion, without endeavouring to dispel it. Now I, for one, am tired of this ‘circulating clack’ about woman’s inferiority...

I had just been reading the article on ‘Ladies’ Logic’ in Chamber’s Journal, when... I overheard a little bit of gentleman’s logic. Let me premise that it was an exculpatory defence on the scorn of tipling. It was inferential that the lady had just concluded a kind of CROSS examination as to how her ‘Lord’ got tipsy. “Oh” says our logician in ‘smalls’, “it was all through that fool; he was sixpence and we were three halfpence a piece to it; and when that was drank, he would be another quart”, and so on.

Now ladies, this is a little bit of gentleman’s logic: how very unlike ladies’ logic! How the poor dear souls were entrapped by the man with the ‘sixpence’ – how they were cozened out of their sobriety – their three-halfpence! Aye, and by a ‘fool’ too, in the superlative degree!!

But lest I should tire the editor’s, yours and the readers’ patience, I remain yours, in assisting to make woman know her own worth, her own rights and her own duties.71

It is not possible to identify the writer, but one woman from Leicester who was committed to the temperance cause and who held radical beliefs was Eliza Ellis, discussed in chapter one. For Eliza, her opposition to alcohol stemmed from her Christian faith and belief that alcohol could result in such unhappiness. In 1862 she wrote to her friend Lydia Rous,

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The last evening some of my sisters and I attended the most interesting Temperance lecture I have heard for a very long time. It was given by Lieutenant Colonel Wakefield of Oxford, who was thirty-four years in India, and a friend of Havelock... After listening to Colonel Wakefield’s recitals, I feel more than ever confirmed in my teetotal principles, and in the belief that it is a Christian duty to abstain from the use of what is such an awful source of sin, misery and crime.\footnote{M. Ellis, \textit{Letters and Memorials of Eliza Ellis} – compiled by her sister Margaret Ellis (Leicester, 1883), 17 January, 1862, p.213.}

Through the Ellis family we can see the importance of family and Quaker networks for the temperance cause. Eliza Ellis, her sisters and her sister-in-law, Emma Ellis, strongly supported the temperance campaign in Leicester. Emma’s commitment was mirrored by her own sister, Mrs Marriage of Colchester, as well as by Mrs William Neild of Warrington, one of her husband Edward’s other sisters who was a ‘most devoted and laborious temperance worker.’\footnote{Winskill, \textit{The Temperance Movement} vol I, p.248.}

Through the temperance campaign local women can be shown to be demonstrating their value to society as organisers, fundraisers and increasingly as orators. It was a woman from Leicester who opened and ran one of the first homes for inebriate women in the country. On the wider front, as early as 1845 when discussing temperance the issue of female suffering and women’s supposed inferiority was raised by a ‘Woman of Leicester’. By 1891 the issue of woman’s suffrage was being openly discussed within the framework of temperance. The various ways in which women took part in the temperance movement in Leicester illustrate that whereas for many women the appeal was purely

\footnote{M. Ellis, \textit{Letters and Memorials of Eliza Ellis} – compiled by her sister Margaret Ellis (Leicester, 1883), 17 January, 1862, p.213.}

\footnote{Winskill, \textit{The Temperance Movement} vol I, p.248.}
a ‘Christian crusade’, the movement also held appeal for more Radical women. The movement offered women a moral platform on which to speak and campaign and a way into public life as the moral guardians of society. Gradually as it was realised that it was frequently women who were the true victims of alcohol abuse, the temperance campaign became linked with wider issues such as feminism and the campaign for women’s suffrage.

2.4 The Campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts

As Walkowitz has pointed out many of the women who campaigned for repeal came from a background of similar moral reform campaigns, especially temperance and anti-slavery. It was natural to move from fighting against slavery in the West Indies and in South America to fighting against the attempt to enslave ‘women to a life of vice’. This argument is supported by the evidence from Leicester. Several of the women who promoted repeal in Leicester had been involved in earlier campaigns. These included Mrs E. S. Ellis, an ardent supporter of the temperance campaign in Leicester throughout her life and the Ellis sisters who supported the temperance campaign and were subscribers, as their mother had been, to the Ladies’ Negro

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75 *The Shield*, 5 February, 1881.
Friendly Society. The temperance reformer, Mrs Theobald, also campaigned in Leicester against the Contagious Diseases Acts.

The Contagious Diseases Acts came into existence as a result of the high incidence of venereal disease amongst the armed forces. Initially the Acts applied to a few garrison towns and ports. Women who were deemed to be common prostitutes could be subject to a genital examination and if found to be infected detained for a period of up to three months. The first of the Acts came into existence in 1864 and applied to eleven garrison towns and docks. A second Act extended its operation in 1866 to two more districts and it was intended to have periodic fortnightly compulsory examination of all known prostitutes. Finally the third Act was passed in 1869 and extended the legislation to five extra districts and set nine months as the maximum period of detention in hospital. The jurisdiction of the Acts was extended to within a ten mile radius of the subjected districts and the Acts were made effective for an indefinite period.

In 1869 a National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was formed. The National Association, however, excluded women and therefore in December 1869 Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy asked Josephine Butler to organise a women’s campaign against the Acts. By 1871 fifty-seven branches of the Ladies’ National Association [hereafter the LNA] had been formed with eight

77 Leicester Daily Mercury, 9 March, 1883.
78 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, chapters 4&5.
hundred and eleven subscribing members. Walkowitz points out that the level of female protest surprised both the press and public officials, who were not used to women speaking out publicly on such matters. The campaign was well-organised and communicated with sympathisers through its weekly circular, *The Shield*.

The arguments used by those in favour of repeal included the double standards inherent in the Acts. Whilst women were subject to an intrusive and degrading examination, the men who might be infected were ignored. Tales of ‘instrumental rape’ abounded and there was a fear that the Acts would be applied to virtuous working-class women. At the same time, however, some of the leading campaigners also argued that the Acts were a piece of class legislation. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy spoke of ‘women who are driven to this unhappy life in most cases by sheer poverty.’

The campaign against the Acts in Leicester began slowly. The first mention of Leicester in *The Shield* was when the local M.P., Peter Taylor, husband of Clementia Taylor, presented a petition to Parliament praying for the Repeal of the Acts in March, 1870. However the annual report of the LNA for the year ending 1871 noted seventeen Leicester women who had donated sums of money or subscribed to the organisation. In October, 1871 we learn that Miss E.M. Ellis attended the annual meeting of the National Association in the Assembly Rooms,

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80 Ibid., pp. 108–10.
82 *The Shield*, March 7, 1870.
By 1872 there existed a Ladies’ Committee, although it was under the care of the Revd. A. A. Isaacs, of Christ Church Vicarage. The names of the subscribers were as for the previous year with the important addition of Mrs Mary Livens, a Congregationalist who became involved both in the Leicester suffrage campaign and in the local movement to establish a ‘Home for destitute women’. She was to become the Secretary of the Leicester branch of the LNA and provided leadership for many years. It is noteworthy that initially the women of Leicester looked to a man, and particularly a clergyman, to provide a degree of respectable leadership for their cause. This was not a subject on which it was expected that women might have a public voice.

It was from March 1873 that public concern about the implementation of the Acts in Leicester reached a new height. This was due to the threat that Leicester might be designated as a Military Centre and would therefore be brought directly under the operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts. From a different perspective Robert Read, who felt that it would be uncharitable to deny the soldiers a comfortable home after the Afghan campaign and undertook personally to collect 2000 signatures for a petition in favour of the proposal, wrote in 1881 that

The unfair feeling of prejudiced people, who eight years ago expressed themselves anxious to shunt soldiers “anywhere, anywhere out of their little local world”, has happily died in Leicester. For the period it existed, their resistance to the ‘Military

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84 *The Shield*, October 14, 1871.
87 *The Shield*, 8 March, 1873.
Centre’ was hot and uncharitable…Then they gratuitously imagined a series of moral and physical evils as the natural outcome of a resident soldiery. 88

The threat that Leicester might become a military centre certainly provided a catalyst for the local campaign against the Acts. In May 1873 Mr Taylor presented a petition to Parliament from the female inhabitants of Leicester praying for the repeal of the Acts with two hundred and twenty-two signatures. 89 The Annual Report of the LNA for the year ending September 1873 now referred to Leicester as a ‘Branch Association’ and several new names were listed as donors or subscribers. 90

Walkowitz notes that the repealers aimed not only to influence Parliament, but to educate the public about the Acts. 91 The repealers held large public meetings in great halls and religious assemblies as well as in mechanics’ institutes and radical workingmen’s clubs. Most of these were attended by both sexes. In Leicester most of the large meetings at this time took place in the Temperance Hall. The women of Leicester received encouragement in December 1876 when a public meeting was held at the Temperance Hall at which one of the speakers was the charismatic national leader of the LNA, Josephine Butler. This was a meeting for both sexes and it was reported that ‘a number of ladies’ were present. In her speech Butler warned ‘the working-men against this disgusting tyranny.’ However she also appealed directly to

88 R. Read, Modern Leicester (Leicester, 1881), p. 89. (Leicester did become a military centre. Glenn Parva Barracks was occupied by the 27th Brigade Depot on the 26th May, 1880. See Read, Modern Leicester, p. 92.)
89 The Shield, 3 May, 1873.
90 WLL: “The Fourth Annual Report of the LNA, 1873”.
91 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 104.
the women in her audience to join her in her work claiming that the law was unjust. As Walkowitz has shown, Butler viewed the fight against these Acts as one to be fought mainly by middle-class women and working-class men. She realised that the Acts were a piece of class legislation and that she could therefore appeal to radical working men for support. The presence of Butler seems to have also had a positive effect on the women of Leicester. Later that month when a meeting for women was convened under the auspices of the Birmingham Ladies’ Committee and held in the lecture room of the Temperance Hall, ‘very many women had to go away unable to find even standing room. Many ladies of position and influence in the town were present.’

It was from the mid-1870s that a more specifically female response to the Contagious Acts can be detected in Leicester. The Shield reported in July 1878 that 4389 signatures had been collected for the ‘Women’s Monster Petition’ against the Acts in Leicester. (The adult female population of Leicester in 1878 can only be estimated, but in 1871 the female census figure was 50,247 and by 1881 this had risen to 64,656). The leaders of the LNA in Leicester were proud of this achievement. Mrs Livens reported that ‘I believe the result of these meetings, and the efforts of our various Bible women, made the town of Leicester stand third in the numerical list of names obtained throughout the country for the monster petition…The apathy of the better class was

92 The Leicester Daily Mercury, 13 December, 1876.
93 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 102.
94 The Shield, 30 December 1876.
95 Ibid. 6 July 1878.
96 LRO: the 1871 and 1881 census, The female population of Leicester municipal borough.
not at all shared in by the lower.' It would appear that there was some considerable enthusiasm for the cause amongst the working-class women of Leicester at this point.

Certainly this was an impressive achievement, but a closer examination of the efforts by the Leicester LNA reveals that much of the impetus for this success had been organised from above. This hierarchical relationship between middle-class and working-class women was evident in the attitude of the leadership. For Josephine Butler motherhood was sacred and in public life this translated itself into rescuing fallen women and defending the home and family. Similar attitudes can be seen by the middle-class repealers in Leicester.

At the beginning of 1878, a few middle-class women met at the Friends’ Meeting House to consider the best way to carry out the suggestion to obtain signatures for a general petition from women in the UK. They decided that there was so much ignorance about the subject by working-class women that a meeting would be held to explain the Acts and to warn women of the dangers of prostitution and the reasons which led some to become ‘fallen women’. Hundreds of invitations were distributed among women at the factories and a meeting held in the Temperance Hall. During the meeting the working-class women who were present were educated about the dangers and the Acts were explained using extracts from Josephine Butler’s writings. After the meeting petition sheets were handed out and signatures collected. A

99 WLL:“The Ninth Annual Report of the LNA, 1878”.
second meeting was held and a petition sent from the committee along with ten or twelve from mothers’ meetings and two or three from Christian churches. Thus we can see in detail how the initiative for gathering signatures for a large petition was very much a middle-class affair and how the ‘ladies’ of Leicester were concerned not only to campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, but also to educate those who were most likely to fall victim to them.

Nationally early on in the campaign large public meetings were held for working women even though attention was more focused on working-class men. However, rarely were these attempts followed up by long-term activity, a failure acknowledged by the national leadership. This would appear to be the case in Leicester. Walkowitz argues that a possible reason for this might be Dorothy Thompson’s suggestion that the gradual separation between the workshop and the home which took place during the nineteenth century led to the increasing isolation of working class women from public life. Moreover ‘respectable’ working-class women would perhaps be less inclined to support a cause which might compromise their own respectability unlike middle-class women who were more assured of their status within society and justified in their actions as the defenders of the nation’s morals. Many respectable working-class women must have felt patronised by the middle-class leadership, however, and it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that they did not commit themselves to long-term activism.

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In spite of this activity an anonymous letter appeared in the local press in August 1878 asking what the opponents were doing. The author of the letter had been asked to subscribe ‘some time ago’ towards the expenses incurred by a committee to agitate against the Acts and felt that not enough was being done.

I should have thought, knowing that there is nearly completed a military barracks, and that a regiment had been selected to occupy the same, that continued explanation of the Acts and agitation against them would have been certain. But where are the committees and what are they doing, then, I ask?  

By the early 1880s, however, evidence does exist of regular public meetings in Leicester and of on-going female-led campaigning. In January 1881 a meeting attended by ‘a large number of ladies and gentlemen’ took place in the Temperance Hall to promote Repeal. As well as those women who were present, letters of apologies were received from prominent local women who were unable to attend, including Mrs E. S. Ellis and Mrs Islip. Mrs Livens, the leader of the branch of the LNA in Leicester was present at the meeting.

Women had their own distinct ways of organising protest meetings. As well as using large halls, smaller mothers’ meetings took place for working women. Thus twenty-two attendants at a mothers’ meeting held at Hill Street Chapel in Leicester signed a petition which was presented to Parliament in February 1883. A religious setting such as this lent respectability to the cause. Different types of meeting, however, are illustrative of the class and religious issues which were at

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102 The Leicester Daily Mercury, 29 August. 1878.
103 The Shield, 5 February. 1881.
104 Ibid., 16 June, 1883.
the heart of the campaigning. Drawing-room meetings for ‘ladies’ were held to further the cause of repeal. A description of one such meeting appeared in the local press in March 1883. The lengthy report provides an insight into the concerted efforts which were made over the course of a just a couple of days to press for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in Leicester.

On Tuesday a drawing-room meeting for ‘ladies’ was held at the home of Mrs Livens, during which they were addressed by two national leaders, Mrs Steward of Ongar and Mrs Alicia Bewicke, Honorary Secretary of the London Association.

In the evening of the same day a very hearty meeting of women was held in the lecture room belonging to the Misses Ellis of Belgrave, over which Mrs. Ewing, of Leicester, presided. The proceedings were commenced with singing a hymn, followed by a prayer, after which impressive addresses were delivered by Mrs. Steward and Miss Bewicke. On the morning of Wednesday, the 7th, a meeting of ladies was held in the Friends’ Meeting House, Prebend Street, at which Mrs. Tanner of Bristol, presided. Mrs. Steward of Ongar, in an earnest and solemn address, moved “That this meeting of ladies records its solemn protest against the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1866, and 1869, as immoral and unjust, and therefore at variance with the Divine Law.” In the evening a meeting for women was held in the Temperance Hall...Mrs Theobald moved: “That the Contagious Diseases Acts, 1866-69, are based on the blasphemous principle that what is sternly condemned by the law of God, is a necessity for men; that they are thus subversive alike of religion and morality and ought, therefore to be immediately and totally repealed

Middle-class women clearly believed that they were leading the way when it came to moral guidance in society. The Acts were by their very nature blasphemous. Nationally a high percentage of subscribers and donors were Nonconformists and members of the Society of

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Friends were especially well represented. In Leicester of the women who subscribed and whom it has been possible to trace, several of the female Ellis family were members as were the Misses Burgesses (of whom there were several).\textsuperscript{107} The presence of Mrs Margaret Tanner (nee Priestman) who presided at the meeting at Leicester’s Quaker Meeting House also shows the importance of wider Quaker links. Mrs Livens, the local secretary, and Mrs Royce were both Congregationalists.\textsuperscript{108}

It is not surprising given the centrality of religion in the lives of many of these women that we hear the arguments against the Acts presented in the language of a moral crusade. Women were the protectors of home, family and morality. For middle-class women, therefore, the campaign had assumed a moral and religious legitimacy. They were justified in defending less fortunate women from the evil of the Acts, since the Acts contravened Divine Law and were sanctioning State regulated vice. When Mary Livens wrote to the press in January 1883 informing the public of a meeting in the town on January 25\textsuperscript{th} to coincide with simultaneous meetings held throughout the country she hoped that ‘Christians of all denominations will unite in helping to repeal laws which are a reproach to our nation’.\textsuperscript{109}

The presence of national leaders emphasises another point made by Walkowitz that at a national level the LNA leadership were a mature, affluent and stable group who were often single, widowed or

\textsuperscript{107} LRO: 3D55/11, \textit{Minute Book of the Leicester Quaker Women’s Monthly Meeting 1869-1890.}
\textsuperscript{108} LRO: P19831, \textit{Gallowtree Gate Congregational Church Manual 1874.}
\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Leicester Daily Mercury}, 19 January 1883.
childless and thus freer to undertake public responsibilities which might involve travelling and campaigning throughout the country.\textsuperscript{110} At a local level more women were married and the LNA branches were generally more conservative in outlook. Leicester was typical in this respect especially in the early years of the campaign. In 1871 out of the seventeen names who were listed as subscribers or donors, only the Misses Burgess and Miss Hull were unmarried.\textsuperscript{111} By the end of 1873 this percentage had increased slightly with the addition of a Miss Cooper. This may have been Alicia Cooper who ran a school in Leicester was a niece of Elizabeth Coltman who was a friend of Elizabeth Heyrick, the Leicester abolitionist.\textsuperscript{112} Also listed were two groups of the Misses Ellis, those who lived at Belgrave and those who lived at The Fosse.\textsuperscript{113} (It is, of course, unclear how many of the several Ellis sisters actually subscribed). Even by 1884 married women were still the majority of subscribers in Leicester. This perhaps indicates that the subject matter was still felt by some to be not quite a suitable one for single women (outside of the rather more radical circles in London) to discuss.

One can begin to detect a tailing off of enthusiasm for the cause in Leicester from 1883 onwards. Towards the end of 1883 Mrs Livens reported that ‘Although the work during the past year in Leicester has not been as earnest as those of old who worked with one hand while holding a defensive weapon in the other, still good seed has been

\textsuperscript{110} Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, pp. 118-20.
\textsuperscript{111} WLL: Second Annual Report of the LNA for the year ending 1871.
\textsuperscript{112} Aucott, Women of Courage, pp. 75-6.
\textsuperscript{113} WLL: Fourth Annual Report of the LNA for the year ending 1873.
sown, it is hoped, with good results.'114 The following year James Stansfield M.P., the national leader, took the Chair at a women’s public meeting in London and Mrs Livens attended as the representative from Leicester. However, from 1885 onwards the number of subscribers and donors decreased until by 1886 there were no local reports and no local names recorded apart from Mrs Livens and the Misses Ellis. The Misses Ellis steadfastly continued to support the organisation until 1915.115 This gradual dwindling of support locally may reflect the fact that in Leicester itself the threat was felt to be less great. According to Read the ‘uniformly excellent behaviour’ of the soldiers at Glenn Parva should be ‘a standing reproach’ to those who objected to Leicester becoming a ‘military centre’.116 In addition at a national level the cause was gathering momentum and it became more evident that the Acts would be repealed. The Acts were eventually suspended in 1883 and finally repealed in 1886.117

From the mid-1870s onwards the women of Leicester were at the forefront of the local campaign. The reports in the local newspapers informing the public about the campaign were invariably written by Mrs Livens as the local secretary of the LNA. The motives which drew women into the campaign were varied and, although for some this led them into the feminist movement, for others this was purely a moral and religious crusade since the Acts were seen to contravene ‘Divine Law’. Women adopted the moral high ground and aimed to protect those of

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115 WLL: Annual Reports of the LNA, 1884-1915.
116 Read, Modern Leicester, p. 89.
117 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 98.
their sisters who were less fortunate than themselves. The repeal movement often attracted women who had been involved in other similar campaigns especially the anti-slavery campaign and the temperance movement. For some women the CD Acts came to be seen as a form of sexual slavery and were indicative of women’s impotency at the hands of men. Women realised that the CD Acts were a feminist issue and many later became involved in the early campaign for female suffrage in Leicester. The link was being made between these campaigns and the need for women to have the vote to speak for themselves. This was true for both Mrs Livens and for some of the Ellis sisters.

2.5 Conclusion

Women’s increasing contribution to the public life of Leicester can be traced through their involvement in the above campaigns. Certain characteristics which enabled this development can be identified. Ties of kinship and friendship and religious conviction were crucial in fostering women’s awareness of issues which were of concern not only to society, but of particular concern to women. During the agitation against the Corn Laws, several of the women had links with leading male manufacturers and radicals in Leicester throughout the period. Others, such as Matilda Biggs and later Eliza Ellis, could also claim to have wider links with a radical circle and network of friends which extended beyond their immediate vicinity.

Women, as in other parts of the country, developed peculiarly female ways of fundraising and campaigning. They organised
Leicester’s contribution towards the Anti-Corn Law League Bazaar, held tea parties and provided invaluable support as subscription collectors for the temperance movement. Women organised mothers’ meetings and drawing-room gatherings to further the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in the town. Although it can be claimed that men still held the important offices at this time, this work was important because it provided women with organisational experience, and as the moral guardians of society, justification for their entry into public life.\(^{118}\) Mrs Theobald led the way as she took the platform as an orator and ran one of the first refuge homes in the country for inebriate ladies. By the time of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Mary Livens was openly writing to the press on an issue which only a few years earlier many would have considered an inappropriate topic for a woman to discuss.

The language used to justify women’s campaigning work in Leicester, as elsewhere, was invariably presented in strong moral and religious overtones. Women used the role to which society had designated them and inverted it to claim the necessity of female public involvement. Women became part of the middle-class public culture of the town concentrating on social and moral reform. Furthermore their increased public involvement was crucial for the future development of feminism as women began to realise that temperance and the Contagious Diseases Acts were indeed ‘women’s issues’. The next chapter looks at the nature and extent of women’s participation in the

middle-class public culture of Leicester in the second half of the nineteenth century, focusing particularly on philanthropy in the town.
Chapter 3  Women and Philanthropy

3.1  Introduction

Historians have accepted for some time the close relationship between women’s involvement in philanthropy in the nineteenth century and their participation in public life. Prochaska has argued that philanthropy enlarged women’s horizons and provided an ‘escape from boredom’.¹ More recently Alison Twells has argued that during the period 1792-1850 ‘women were at the heart of the missionary philanthropic movement.’² Many acted independently of men and formed societies themselves. In addition they subscribed to a variety of societies in large numbers as well as acting as collectors, teachers and domestic visitors. She argues that far from leading a dull restricted domestic life, it was the values inherent in early nineteenth century domesticity which provided women and girls with their concern for a range of social projects. Philanthropy should not be seen just as an escape mechanism from ‘boring lives’ for nineteenth century women.

According to the mid-Victorian understanding of scripture, although women’s sphere was primarily within the home, they also had a responsibility outside of the home to spread the gospel and to reform society. As Twells has shown, this was particularly articulated in the 1790s as an evangelical project by the Clapham Sect and took root amongst the middle class in the early nineteenth century. Women such as

Hannah More in the 1790s had drawn upon scriptural authority for their interpretation of female domesticity referring to the missionary women mentioned by St. Paul.³ Within the evangelical home the family was especially valued, family relationships were ordained by God and women were valued for their mothering skills and their moral example. However, women’s special qualities of domesticity and morality could also be used to improve the social and moral condition of the poor in society.⁴ By the 1830s and 1840s ‘missionary philanthropy’ had thus become a well-established part of middle class life. Philanthropy rooted in a strong religious faith was the impetus behind women playing a more visible role in society and led to the development of a middle-class female identity in the interaction between the middle-class and the urban poor.⁵ In this Leicester was no exception as discussed in chapter one. For these women there was no more worthwhile cause than improving the moral and physical lives of the poor.

In Leicester, whilst the roots of female philanthropy can be found earlier in the nineteenth century, there is no doubt that from 1850 onwards more evidence exists of women’s public involvement in philanthropic endeavours. More sources have survived from the second half of the nineteenth century, but increased evidence of female involvement may also reflect, as Morgan says, the increased confidence of women themselves taking on public roles as well as a greater acceptance of

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women in public life.\textsuperscript{6} By the mid-nineteenth century the English civilising mission ‘occupied a central place in the national culture’.\textsuperscript{7} Nonetheless in their philanthropic mission to the poor women’s work was gendered.\textsuperscript{8} This chapter will examine firstly women’s enthusiastic adoption of the charity bazaar in Leicester as an illustration of a particularly female method of raising funds and as an event which gave women a high profile within local society.\textsuperscript{9} Secondly, women and ‘missionary philanthropy’ within the town will be discussed, focusing on how gender and class defined women’s public role in philanthropic organisations. In particular the role they played in the reform of prostitutes and their involvement in the Unitarian Leicester Domestic Mission will be examined. Lastly the chapter will investigate women’s increasing involvement from the 1870s onwards in the social concerns of Leicester focusing on the Charity Organisation Society and the National Union of Women Workers. As the century advanced a tightly-knit group of women emerged who led the way in local philanthropy in a semi-professional way, pointing the way to developments in the early twentieth century. Several of these women were related to an earlier generation of active women in the town and they came to be seen as leading citizens of Leicester in their own right through their public work.

\textsuperscript{6} Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{7} Twells, \textit{The Civilising Mission}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{9} Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, pp. 116-118.
3.2 Women and Philanthropy

One of the earliest and peculiarly female ways of raising money during the Victorian period was the charity bazaar. Morgan points out that the bazaar through its fundraising methods particularly threatened ‘masculine’ principles of subscriber democracy and was therefore not entirely welcomed by all. Leicester was no exception in enthusiastically adopting the bazaar as a way of raising money. As has been discussed in chapter two, one of the earliest examples in Leicester was the bazaar organised by the women in aid of the Anti-Corn Law League in 1845 at Covent Garden. Prior to this some women from Leicester had also been involved in the Manchester bazaar in 1842. The role taken by the women was crucial to the success of this venture as their committee took charge of the contributions and forwarded them to London as well as supplying information to any potential contributors.

Over the next few years the local Leicester newspapers are full of reports of bazaars often held for causes linked with particular churches or chapels as well as for societies. Popular with all denominations, women were at the forefront of organisation. A typical example was the bazaar organised for the Thorpe Satchville Church Restoration fund at the Corn Exchange in Leicester. The Leicester Chronicle reported on February 27th, 1869 that

During the afternoon the Bazaar was patronised by many of the elite of the neighbourhood, and throughout the evening we believe

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10 Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy, chapter 2.
11 Morgan, A Victorian Woman’s Place, pp. 116-125.
12 The Anti-Bread Tax Circular, 10 February, 1842.
13 The Leicestershire Mercury, 5 April, 1845.
a good deal of business was transacted. The Bazaar was continued throughout the day on Friday.¹⁴

By 1877 when commenting on the Grand Bazaar at the Temperance Hall in aid of the London Road Chapel Mission, the *Leicester Mercury* noted that

Bazaars have become quite a fashion of the times. Now-a-days scarcely any benevolent, charitable, or Christian work is promoted without their aid, and they have subsequently come to be regarded as one of the established institutions of the country. Certainly, for the objects they have in view, no institutions are more popular or taken up with more real zeal or earnestness.¹⁵

As was usual it was the women who presided over the stalls at the Grand Bazaar. The report continued

The stalls are filled with a very varied collection of articles, fancy, useful, and ornamental. Many of them are most costly and beautiful, and attract much attention. The ladies who have charge of the different stalls have evidently vied with each other in their efforts to exhibit articles which would be alike creditable to themselves and a bazaar.¹⁶

The women who organised the Newby Street Congregational Church bazaar at the Temperance Hall in 1888 made the bazaar more innovative and interesting by adopting a Japanese theme for the event, reflecting the contemporary interest in Japan. Some of the stallholders themselves appeared in Japanese costumes and the stalls instead of being numbered had imaginative names such as ‘The Golden Gate’, ‘The Crescent Moon’, ‘The Eye of the Day’, ‘The Flowery Doll’, ‘The Celestial Sea’ and ‘The Land of Delights’.¹⁷

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¹⁴*LC*, 27 February, 1869.
¹⁵ *The Leicester Daily Mercury*, 10 May, 1877.
¹⁶ *Ibid*.
¹⁷ *The Leicester Mercury*, 3 April, 1888.
As Morgan says, the public not only needed to be made aware of the coming event, but also that it would be a respectable and worthwhile occasion to attend.\textsuperscript{18} Newspapers therefore stressed the attendance of ‘the elite of the neighbourhood’ at the larger bazaars. The female organisers realised that it was most advantageous to secure the patronage and preferably the attendance of a well-known lady to provide a public seal of approval for their efforts to be accepted as part of Leicester’s respectable middle-class life. Thus at a bazaar at the New Hall in Wellington Street, in September 1850 in aid of the Asylum for Young Destitute Orphan Girls whose patroness was Her Royal Highness, The Duchess of Kent, some of the ladies of the county such as Lady Hazelrigg of Noseley Hall in Leicestershire and Lady Fowkes presided over some of the stalls.\textsuperscript{19} Bazaars thus allowed women to organise events in an acceptable and respectable public way. They were adopted by the more prestigious charities who could boast well-known patronesses as well as by the more lowly chapels.

Women were also drawn into public life through their missionary philanthropy work. Women formed the backbone of workers ‘on the ground’ who visited the poor, distributed Bibles and collected for missionary donations.\textsuperscript{20} Missionary responsibility was an accepted part a of a woman’s sphere. However, although women were important as a link between the classes, their role was still largely overseen by men.\textsuperscript{21} A woman’s philanthropic role was defined by her gender and by her social

\textsuperscript{18} Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{LC}, 14 & 28 September, 1850.
\textsuperscript{20} Twells, \textit{The Civilising Mission}, pp. 69-81.
\textsuperscript{21} Morgan, \textit{A Victorian Woman’s Place}, p. 106.
status as a surviving 1861 report of the St. Mary’s Church Visiting Society established in April 1849 with twenty-two lady visitors covering nineteen districts makes clear.

In addition to the Pastoral Care of my curate and myself, the homes of the Poor are visited by a Scripture Reader, under the direction of the Clergy; and a Bible Woman who is superintended by a Committee of Ladies chiefly belonging to St. Mary’s congregation…

The report further stated that

The object of this Society is to ascertain the state and condition of the Poor in the extensive and populous Parish of St. Mary’s, to administer with the Divine Blessing, to their Spiritual instruction and comfort, and to relieve their temporal wants, hoping that thus a way may be found into the sympathies of those who would otherwise feel themselves shut out from the good office of their richer brethren.

It was the lady Visitors who were entrusted to overcome the class barrier. Women, by their very nature were considered to be capable of empathising with and reaching out to the poor. The report envisaged that physical and spiritual reform must go hand-in-hand if progress was to be made in reaching out to the poor. It echoed the later ‘Civic Gospel’ of which Birmingham was a model in the mid to late Victorian period under Joseph Chamberlain. As Bartley has pointed out, however, women’s role in the civic gospel was defined by their gender. Where middle-class men sought to solve the problems of sanitation and disease within the industrial towns and cities, women focused on the moral and spiritual needs of the poor.

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22 LRO Misc. 835 The Annual Reports of St. Mary’s Church, 1861.
In January 1861 the Bible and Domestic Female Mission was established in Leicester. The report in the press emphasised that the women’s work was done ‘quietly’ and ‘under the direction of the parish clergy’. By August 1861 six districts had been formed. Soup kitchens had been established and 2833 gallons of soup made by the Bible women as well as 513 Bibles, Testaments and Psalters sold to the poor. £838- 8s-7d had been spent and the Chronicle reported that

the mission appears to be doing its work quietly and well and it will no doubt prove – especially if it is under the direction of the parish clergy…a valuable, though perhaps rather costly, agent in reclaiming the poorest and most depraved classes.

However, such work, as Twells says, was not uncontroversial. The sale of Bibles and religious tracts involved an exchange of money which the poor could ill-afford. This led to claims that the poor were being oppressed. For the Victorian evangelical middle class, however, the purchase of a Bible by the poor was an active and welcome choice and part of the civilizing process. They needed to reclaim ‘the poorest and most depraved classes’ to produce Christian men and women and middle-class women had a large role to play in this reforming process.

For middle-class women some of the ‘most depraved’ members of society were fallen women. As Morgan notes given the nature of the subject, until the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts began, women’s public role in this area was very limited. However, as it was not considered to be appropriate for middle-class men to have contact with the

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25 LC, 5 January, 1861.
26 LC, 24 August, 1861.
28 Morgan, A Victorian Woman’s Place, pp. 101-105.
women in the penitentiaries, middle-class women were an essential link between those who needed to be rescued and the male middle-class rescuers. Men played the supervisory role. Penitentiaries were supported financially by men and men ran the committees, but most of the work was carried out by the matron and lady visitors.

The Home for Penitent Females in Leicester was established in 1847. The aim was to rescue prostitutes, reform them morally and then provide them with employment, often in domestic service. Although no records remain, annual reports appeared regularly in the local Press. A typical report in the *Leicester Chronicle* in 1850 noted the Home’s third year of existence commenting that at the beginning of 1849 there had been twenty inmates in the Home and thirteen more received during the year. Of those who had left, three had gone to stay with friends, four had left at their own request, four had been sent as emigrants to Australia, nine had gone into domestic service and one had died. The latter had given

in her last hours…every reason to believe that she was in the best meaning of the word, a penitent indeed.\(^29\)

As Morgan notes, prostitutes were still regarded as lost souls to be saved, an attitude common to both male and female middle-class reformers.\(^30\)

Bartley also points out that the parable of the lost sheep was frequently used in the context of the rescue of prostitutes. As Christians no work was more worthwhile than to save a soul from eternal damnation.\(^31\)

\(^{29}\) *LC*, 2 February 1850.

\(^{30}\) Morgan, *A Victorian Woman’s Place*, pp.102-3.

Penitentiaries, as the harsh name suggests, were places of reform under religious guidance. Yeo argues that it is here that we find the face of the disciplining middle-class mother, ‘deeply rooted in psyche and class’. As well as preserving her femininity through the mother figure, the position of a middle-class woman was also maintained in a hierarchical relationship with the working-class. Bartley similarly points out that the emphasis on ‘mothering’ was indicative of a degree of control because the relationship between ‘parent’ and ‘child’ is unequal. Women who entered ‘The Home’ had the equivalent status of dependent children. It should not be forgotten, however, that those being helped were not always powerless. Charitable help could be refused as Mary Royce discovered in Leicester. The inter-personal relationship between the helper and those being helped was often more complex.

Bartley argues that the naming of penitentiaries as ‘The Home’ was highly significant as a marker of domesticity. This was where women were treated with sympathy and given support. In Leicester the work of the Lady Visitors was highly valued as part of the effort to reform ‘fallen women’. In 1862 the Revd. Hill remarked at the annual meeting that he knew no part of the institution which was more important than the religious and secular work which devolved upon the visitors…The committees knew nothing of the special cases, but the visitors came not only in contact with them, but knew their doubts, their difficulties, and trials; and possessing sympathy, and

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armed with the truth of God, the visitors had peculiar facilities for conveying religious instruction to them.\textsuperscript{35}

The Revd. Hill stressed the Visitors’ special ‘womanly’ qualities of sympathy as well as the importance of their religious background. The Visiting ladies of the ‘Home’ not only reported back to the committees (and it was upon their reports that much of the annual report was based), but also gave instruction to the inmates ‘both in knowledge, and in forming industrious habits’.\textsuperscript{36} The 1862 report from ‘The Home’ emphasised the important and responsible position of the matron. ‘Firmness’ and ‘tenderness’ went hand-in-hand.

They all felt that the efficiency of the institution altogether depended upon the character of the matron; and it was indispensable in an institution of that kind that the matron should, with personal piety, possess sound judgement, firmness, tenderness, and discretion.\textsuperscript{37}

One of the most important ways in which Leicester women involved themselves in philanthropic missions was through the Unitarian Leicester Domestic Mission Society [hereafter the LDMS]. It was in the early 1840s that the Unitarians decided to set up a Domestic Mission in the town and through one of the leading members of the community, Thomas Paget who had been elected as the first mayor of the Reformed Corporation, Joseph Dare was invited to take charge. He accepted and began his new work in 1845.\textsuperscript{38} Domestic Missions had originated in Massachusetts in 1826-9 through the work of Joseph Tuckerman. In the 1830s he visited

\textsuperscript{35}LC, 22 March, 1862.
\textsuperscript{36}LC, 28 January, 1854.
\textsuperscript{37}LC, 22 March, 1862.
England and subsequently Missions were established in London, Manchester and Liverpool and later in Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds and Leicester.\textsuperscript{39}

The LDMS was smaller than the ones established in larger cities and towns and it had a much more modest income. Leicester had a population of about 55,000 in 1845.\textsuperscript{40} All of the paid agents throughout the country were male and the London Mission, which was by far the largest, had forty-plus visitors. There were, however, only four in Leeds and Liverpool and two in Sheffield.\textsuperscript{41} Leicester had one missionary, Dare, who stayed for thirty years. He confined his work to a limited area in the northern part of Leicester.

It has been argued that women were side-lined as domestic visitors in the Unitarian Missions and other urban missions in order to make the work more appealing to men. Women’s earlier involvement in voluntary visiting societies had deterred masculine involvement. Therefore women formed Ladies’ Societies and became engaged in work largely for the purpose of raising funds.\textsuperscript{42} However, the reports from the LDMS suggest that women were involved in the Mission in areas other than fund-raising. As with their work with prostitutes, women were particularly valued for their mothering skills and experience. When Mrs Paget resigned from managing the Sewing School in 1864 after eighteen years in charge she

\textsuperscript{39}Simmons, ‘A Victorian Social Worker’, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{40}M. Elliott, \textit{Victorian Leicester} (Stroud, 2010), p. 30.
\textsuperscript{41}Twells, \textit{The Civilising Mission}, p. 170.
\textsuperscript{42}Ibid.
was praised for her ‘maternal care and genial kindness’. In the first annual report of 1846 Dare commented that

Many ladies have kindly attended the Instruction Society…May reflection on its great importance induce them to continue their laudable exertions. Ladies, who have brought up families might render incalculable service by coming forward and giving hints to the children of their poorer sisters in the management of domestic affairs, and the peculiar duties that will one day devolve upon them, whether they are fitted to discharge them or not. Many an industrious man is made unhappy, and at last a drunkard, through the untidiness and waste of his slatternly wife, who is, at the same time, more an object of commiseration than censure – never having been taught the duties of her position.

The above report does not blame the working-class wife, who were the victims of poverty and ignorance. Twells identifies this as an important difference between the domestic missions and their earlier evangelical counterparts. Whilst still being concerned with spiritual nourishment, the emphasis was shifting towards a more material analysis of hardship.

Nonetheless, although the emphasis may have been shifting, the ladies’ committee of the LDM was still keen to inculcate the virtues of self-reliance. In their attitudes towards the poor they reflected the widely held mid-Victorian belief that poverty was largely due to moral deficiencies. A Provident Society was opened in the boys’ and girls’ departments to encourage saving with Mrs W. Biggs as Treasurer. After school each evening there followed a short moral address and the singing of a

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devotional hymn. By 1850 this venture had proved successful enough to encourage the formation of a Female Friendly Society. A male society already existed and it was felt to be appropriate to establish one for the women. As the report noted 'It is hoped this institution will be productive of good in fostering prudent habits, and mitigating distress by that best of all means – self-reliance.'

A further initiative to encourage self-help was the Sewing School superintended by Mrs and Miss Hollins. There was a quarterly sale of the garments which were made during the year and women could withdraw the money they had saved in the provident society to purchase them at a reduced rate. Middle-class ladies such as Mrs William Biggs and Mrs Thomas Paget attended the sales as a sign of approval. Schemes such as this were intended to assist the poor by teaching them the value of self-reliance and were part of the reforming process. The elder daughters and mothers of poor families were allowed to attend the school in order to learn mending and the importance of the proverb ‘a stitch in time saves nine’, - ‘a philosophy in which the poor are sadly deficient.’

The reports emphasise self-improvement for the poor and middle-class ladies played their part in encouraging this process. Dare wrote in 1864 that he had been able to purchase a set of books called ‘Better Days for the Working Classes’ with the assistance of Miss Spurrett and Mrs E.S. Ellis which he intended to use as a senior class book ‘with the hope of diffusing more correct ideas as to personal habits, domestic economy, and

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47 The Fifth Annual Report of the LDMS, 27 October, 1850.  
48 The Second Annual Report of the LDMS, 18 September, 1847.
sanitary matters in general.\textsuperscript{49} However at the same time it was recognised that a relief fund was necessary for ‘though it is always best, if possible, to enable the poor to help themselves, the difficulty is frequently in making a start.’\textsuperscript{50} To this end the Ladies’ Working Society as an act of charity provided articles of new and cast-off clothing.

Women became heavily involved in the education classes which the mission held, as well as providing reading material for the library. Miss Lloyd supplied \textit{Chambers Journal} and Mrs William Biggs several numbers of the \textit{Athanaeum}. Meanwhile Mrs Thomas Paget provided copies of the hymn book. They taught in the girls’ and adult female classes. Christian wives and mothers had long been seen as having an indispensable role in educating the family within the home and it was a small step to take to extend this role to the wider global family.\textsuperscript{51} Best of all were women from the educated middle-class. As the \textit{Fifth Report} commented on the girls’ and adult female Classes:

\begin{quote}
It has happened very fortunately for the class that Mrs Gittins and Miss Lloyd have kindly promised to attend. This portion of the poor require the best of teachers. Educated persons carry with them the prestige of authority; they exercise, almost unconsciously, an influence over the untaught mind which teachers from the working-classes can seldom command.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

In 1867 the Annual Report noted that a further initiative by the women of the LDMS proposed in the previous year was now in place.

Plans had been successfully organised by the women, in particular by Mrs

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\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{The Nineteenth Annual Report of the LDMS}, 1864.  \\
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{The First Annual Report of the LDMS}, 1846.  \\
\textsuperscript{51} Prochaska, \textit{Women and Philanthropy}, pp. 73-94.  \\
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Fifth Annual Report of the LDMS}, 1850, p. 9.
\end{flushright}
Walker, to train nurses in London so that they might subsequently work in Leicester. The object was not only to nurse the poor but to educate and teach them how best to help each other.

About a year ago, a society was formed and funds collected for the purpose of sending to London intelligent young women of good character to be thoroughly trained in the hospitals there and afterwards brought to Leicester, some to nurse the poor gratuitously, and others to go out as salaried private nurses. The undertaking has so far been attended with the happiest results...I am happy to say this work of Christian charity had been taken up and supported without creed or opinion...It must not be overlooked that the nurse will be an educator, as a dispenser of charity, and that the poor will learn from her the best way of nursing each other.\textsuperscript{53}

The authors of the Annual Report were clearly impressed by the achievements of the women for the report continued,

As the ladies have opened this excellent institution it may be hoped that the gentlemen of the town will start a 'Mendicity Society' that, dealing properly with true cases, vagabondism may be entirely suppressed.\textsuperscript{54}

The work of the Ladies' Committee gave the women of the LDMS both organisational expertise and experience.

Belief in the family and the role of the mother was crucial to solving the problems of the urban poor. Middle-class women had a vital part to play in nurturing this process. In a letter to Lord John Russell printed in the last issue of the \textit{Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society} in 1865 the writer urged women to become more involved in the government of workhouses so that the

maternal as well as the paternal element should be made available, on the principle which I believe is now generally acknowledged, that

\textsuperscript{53} The Twenty-Second Annual Report of the LDMS, 14 November, 1867, pp. 16-17.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
the more you carry out the family law... the more harmonious and the more perfect will they be. This supposes, of course, that women so employed should be properly trained for their vocation, as coming within the 'woman’s sphere’ of natural and necessary duties, would be a great advantage; it would open a field of employment for the educated classes and it would greatly benefit the humbler classes of women.  

The Workhouse Visiting Society had been founded by Louisa Twining in 1858 when women were still fighting to gain access to many workhouses. After visiting the Strand workhouse in London, Twining decided to organise charitable visits for the poor to provide mental stimulation and relieve the boredom. Louisa Twining was one of the nineteenth century activists who, as Deane points out,

used the model of domesticity not only to expose men’s inability to regulate the operations of the workhouse but also to create a space for women’s work as providers and managers. She saw no barrier to middle and upper-class women having an active and independent public life, and challenged the prevailing idea that they had ever been confined to the home.

In February 1861 a female member of the Ellis family established the Workhouse Visiting Society in Leicester. In 1859 the clerk of the Leicester Poor Law Union had told Louisa Twining that should any branch of your Society be formed in Leicester, the guardians would gladly afford its members an opportunity of visiting any part of the workhouse.

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56 Prochaska, Women and Philanthropy, chapter 5.
59 Ibid.
Unfortunately, however, no records have survived and evidence is patchy. It is known, however, that a Ladies’ Visiting Committee was still in existence in 1896 since passes were issued to seven ladies in October of that year.\(^6^0\)

Although the Workhouse Visiting Society established by Louisa Twining ceased to exist in 1865 after only seven years it ‘provided an invaluable local focus for unified female effort.’\(^6^1\) Gleadle argues that the Workhouse Visiting Society by focusing on particular groups of inmates provides an early indication of a shift in attitude towards women’s involvement in philanthropy, placing it on a semi-professional level.\(^6^2\) Hollis also notes that the Workhouse Visiting Society was one organisation which helped to move women from philanthropic work onto poor law boards later in the Victorian period where they further developed this focus on particular groups in need, as will be seen in chapter five.\(^6^3\)

This gradual change towards semi-professionalization and efficiency in charity can be seen within the Charity Organisation Society [hereafter the COS] established in 1869.\(^6^4\) Contemporary class and gender attitudes were in evidence most strongly within the work of the COS. Even before the COS was founded the poor in Leicester had been encouraged to help themselves rather than to rely on charity and strict enquiries were made before charity was dispensed. In May 1876 the COS

\(^6^0\) LRO: G/12/8c/1 Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union, 19 October, 1896.
\(^6^1\) King, Women, Welfare and Local Politics, p. 13.
\(^6^4\)ibid., pp. 202-4.
was established in Leicester. The large Committee which subsequently met on June 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1876 included twenty-four women and sixty-six men. The COS in Leicester came under attack early in its existence and was forced stoutly to defend itself in local newspapers.

It is indeed a pity that more people cannot be persuaded to show an active interest in a society which… brings down upon itself the more obloquy the more thoroughly it does its work. The detection of imposture and the repression of professional beggary… are only a small portion of its programme, but they happen to be the portion which at the present time are most on the surface, and the few public-spirited men and women who undertake it deserve the sympathy and thanks of the whole community. The object of the society is to ‘organise’ charity – not to repress it; to direct it into worthy channels, instead of being wasted in indiscriminate doles. It does as much to bring the deserving poor and kindly generosity together as it does to expose the impostor.

It was within the COS that the policy of distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserving poor was more fully developed and divisions between middle-class reformers and the urban poor became particularly evident. Most members were professionals or businessmen as well as middle-class women who believed it was a mistake to give indiscriminately. Rather the character of the able-bodied poor should be improved by encouraging methods of self-help. Eventually the Society developed a reputation for harshness as the members attempted to put their beliefs into practice. They were seen as prying and had difficulty attracting volunteers. At the formation of the Society in Leicester in April 1876, Charlotte and Helena Ellis were members of a committee of fifteen

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{65} LRO: DE 2340/1 Leicester Charity Organisation (COS) Minute Book (1876-1881).
\textsuperscript{66} LRO: DE2340/2 Leicester COS Minute Book (1881-1885).
\textsuperscript{67} R. Humphreys, Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England (London, 1995), chapters 5&6.}
women and were the first Honorary Secretaries of the Leicester COS.\textsuperscript{68} By 1879 the number of women who sat on the Council had increased to twenty-eight and included the first female poor law guardian in Leicester, Fanny Fullagar, as well as Charlotte and Helena Ellis and Marianne Wilder.\textsuperscript{69}

Women’s philanthropic work in the COS was always gendered. Thus the women in Leicester were given the task of organising the ‘Women’s Relief Work’ during the prolonged winter of 1878-9. They distributed plain sewing on a large scale, but only after each case had been investigated and those of ‘ascertained need’ were put on the work list. The prices paid for the work were fixed at just below trade prices so as not to interfere with existing industries. Some of the completed work was given to the Infirmary and Fever Hospital and the rest to the Provident Dispensary for the bazaar on behalf of its development fund. On March 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1879 the Society passed a vote of thanks to ‘the ladies who have so ably managed the ‘Women’s Relief Work’’.\textsuperscript{70}

Humphreys has drawn up an organisation chart for a typical medium-sized provincial Charity Organisation Society.\textsuperscript{71} At the top were the president, chairman and four vice-chairmen. The other main office-holders were the Hon. Treasurer and the Hon. Secretary. There were three main committees including the finance committee, the general committee consisting of about thirty to fifty members and the decisions

\textsuperscript{68} LRO: DE2340/1 Leicester COS Minute Book (1876-1881).
\textsuperscript{70} LRO: 2340/1 LCOS Minute Book (1876-1881).
\textsuperscript{71} Humphreys, Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law, p. 103.
committee. Women would sit on the latter two committees, but not on the finance committee. The visitors who numbered about thirty to forty were mainly women and included many spinsters. The day to day collecting by the provident department was also mainly carried out by women.

The COS in Leicester fits in well with this plan. Women did not appear on the important finance committee although they were present on the general and decisions committees. The finance committee came within the ‘male sphere’. Women still formed the backbone of workers who visited and collected money but they were gradually taking on more responsibility. The women of Leicester were involved on the decisions committee especially towards the end of the Victorian period. From 1898-1902 there were between sixty-three and sixty-seven members of whom twenty-four to twenty-eight were women.72 Several of these women belonged to prominent Leicester nineteenth century families including four female members of the Ellis family, Fanny Fullagar, Marianne Willder, Mrs and Miss Gimson, Mrs and Miss Paget and Mrs Fielding-Johnson.

Moira Martin in a case study of single women and philanthropy in Bristol between the years 1880-1914 argues that many previous studies of philanthropy have ‘tended to characterise women as mere foot soldiers in the army of charitable workers.’ Rather she demonstrates that in Bristol women, who were often the younger generation of families who had been active in local philanthropy in the earlier Victorian period, were recognised as leaders in local society as a result of their philanthropic and political

72 LRO: 2340/5 LCOS Minute Book of the Decisions Committee (1898-1902).
activity.\textsuperscript{73} In a similar manner to Bristol, Leicester developed a clearly identifiable female philanthropic elite between c. 1870-1900. Edith Gittins, whose mother had earlier been involved in the domestic mission, was considered to be ‘a born leader, and all her life organised and led her fellows’.\textsuperscript{74} One particular charity close to her heart was the Kyrle Society founded in 1880 and discussed in Chapter Four. Other prominent local women in late Victorian Leicester included Fanny Fullagar, Charlotte Ellis and her sisters, the daughters of John Ellis and his wife Priscilla who had been a member of the Ladies Negro Friendly Society;\textsuperscript{75} Isabella Evans, the daughter of the Leicester Domestic Missionary, Joseph Dare; and Marian Buck, founder of the Leicester School of Cookery, whose mother Mrs W. H. Walker had been one of the main instigators of the Leicester Institution for trained nurses in 1868 which developed into Leicester’s earliest District Nursing Association.\textsuperscript{76} Women such as these came from a philanthropic tradition rooted in the Nonconformist communities of Leicester and believed it was their Christian duty to serve and reform the poor.

Perhaps the epitome of female philanthropic solidarity and efficiency in Leicester can be found within the National Union of Women Workers [hereafter the NUWW]. The NUWW was not formally constituted

\textsuperscript{74} LRO: 920GIT, I.C. Ellis, Memorial of Catharine and Edith Gittins (Leicester, 1931).
\textsuperscript{75} S. Aucott, Women of Courage, Vision and Talent – Lives in Leicester 1780-1925 (Leicester, 2008), p. 80. See also Chapter Two.
\textsuperscript{76} I. C. Ellis, Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester (Leicester, 1935), p. 93.
However it had developed during the previous two decades through meetings which brought together a variety of women’s philanthropic associations in order to share experiences and provide support. It was determinedly non-partisan and in the early years neither for nor against female suffrage. It thus attracted women with a wide range of opinions and ideas. Although for a brief period during the militant suffrage campaign of the Edwardian years the suffrage issue threatened the unity of the NUWW, even then the members were eventually determined to reach a workable compromise.\textsuperscript{78} Moreover, as Hollis says, as the public work of women was partly mobilized by the NUWW in a way which was largely within ‘women’s mission’, the organization did much to dispel the idea that it was ‘unfeminine’ for women to work in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{79} It pursued its objectives in a manner which was non-threatening to those opposed to women collectively taking a greater role in public life.

The Leicester branch came into existence between 1894 and 1895. The \textit{Leicester Chronicle} reported in May 1894 that a meeting had been held at the Co-operative Hall with the object of trying to establish a branch in the town and a committee.\textsuperscript{80} The meeting was attended by many local women including Fanny Fullagar and Mrs Ewings and was addressed by Louise Creighton, the national President, and Emily Janes, the organising secretary, as well as Mary Clifford who gave a short account of the work of

\textsuperscript{78} Bush, ‘The National Union of Women Workers’, pp. 105-129.
\textsuperscript{79} Hollis, \textit{Ladies Elect – Women in English Local Government}, pp. 25-7.
\textsuperscript{80} LC, 12 May, 1894. The only existing report from the Leicester branch of the NUWW for the 1890s is for 1897. However there are two brief reports in the \textit{Leicester Chronicle} for 1898 and 1899.
the branch which had been founded in Bristol. Emily Janes explained that
the objects of the union were to unite

all thoughtful Christian women, whether they worked for
righteousness in the quiet of home, as ‘freelancers’ in connection
with their parish or church, or as committee workers...It was
intended to unite those of diverse views and divers gifts in the
threefold work of prevention, preservation and rescue and to
prevent overlapping in charitable effort...If a union was formed it
could do many things which would be exceedingly useful in
Leicester. It could be a centre of information and advice for
charitable work within its area; it could promote sympathy and guide
volunteers into suitable directions for practical effort.81

The presence of Mary Clifford and Emily Janes shows the
importance of links between the national leadership of women’s
organisations and leading women at a local level. The NUWW had as its
motto ‘Union is Strength’, and its objectives were ‘To form a common
centre for all women and associations engaged or interested in religious,
educational, social and philanthropic work, and to encourage sympathy
and co-operation.’82 Having decided that a previous Council in Leicester
of over sixty members was unworkable, by 1897 the consultative and
administrative powers lay with a body of just fifteen members, including
the President, Mrs J.E. Ellis, the three Vice-Presidents, Mrs Sanders, Miss
Edith Gittins and Miss Fanny Fullagar, the Hon. Treasurer, Miss Fanny
Bolus, the Hon. Secretary, Mrs William Evans and nine other women
elected from the general body of the Union.83 The minimum annual
subscription was set at 1/- . There was also a category of associate

81LC, 12 May, 1894.
82LRO: 16D58/1, Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950, (1897).
83Ibid.
members who were to be admitted in groups of four, each group paying a single annual 1/- subscription. Charitable societies affiliated to the Union had to provide two annual reports of their work and there were to be conferences of the whole Union in November of every year and in the May of alternate years. By 1900 there were thirty-four different local charitable societies affiliated to the Leicester branch of the NUWW.84

From its earliest days the evidence from Leicester points to a branch which was practical, well-organised and appears to have quickly identified areas of social priority for the town. These included in 1897 the promotion of the Midwives’ Registration Bill by lobbying the local MPs for the County and Borough. The 1900 report noted the existence of a sub-committee of seven women headed by Mrs Bernard Ellis to achieve this end and that there was a good chance that the Midwives’ Bill would become law (which it subsequently did in 1902).85 The branch also used its influence to promote the appointment of female Visitors to the Leicester Infirmary. Before the intervention of the Leicester NUWW branch, although female Governors were eligible for election as weekly Visitors to the Infirmary, they were rarely nominated.86 The 1900 report indicated that the women of Leicester were pressing to move beyond the status of Visitors and looking to have a greater say in hospital management. ‘Mrs Evans went on to question the constitution of Hospital and other Boards, showing that women had as yet, partly through their own fault, but a small share in

84LRO: 16D58/1, Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950, (1900).
85Ibid.
86LRO: 16D58/1, Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950, (1897).
their management.\textsuperscript{87} Women needed and wanted to be more pro-active. Confident in their traditional role as philanthropists and social reformers, they were now becoming anxious to use their influence and experience in those areas of public life which had until now been dominated by men.

A third area of concern was the pressing forward with measures to introduce female prison visitors since prison and preventative work among women appears to have been identified as a particular need in Leicester. The 1897 report noted that the local delegates to the national conference should report back on just three subjects, one of which was ‘The Prison Life of Women and Children’. Through the influence of the Leicester branch of the NUWW, Mrs Sanders was made a Visitor to Leicester prison in 1897. Concern about women prisoners continued and in 1898 at Leicester’s annual conference in November, the Hon. Secretary, Mrs Evans, spoke in favour of more female Visitors to the prison ‘to elevate the female prisoners.’\textsuperscript{88} In 1899 Mrs Evans again called on more women to help Mr Morris at the police-court, since Miss Carryer, who had previously done the work, had left.\textsuperscript{89} By 1900 a sub-committee of five women had been established to concentrate on prison work.\textsuperscript{90} The annual report for 1900 reported that Catherine Gittins had undertaken the task of meeting women prisoners on discharge, in co-operation with Mr Morris of the

\textsuperscript{87} LRO: 16D58/1, Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950, (1900).
\textsuperscript{88} LC, 12 November, 1898.
\textsuperscript{89} LC, 25 November, 1899.
\textsuperscript{90} LRO: 16D58/1 Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW, (1900).
Discharged Prisoners’ Aid Society, whilst Mrs Sanders continued to visit the prison.\(^{91}\)

By 1900 the branch had established five sub-committees dealing with prison rescue and preventative work; the Midwives’ Registration Bill; Women’s Local Government; Industrial issues; and Industrial cases of distress. The branch was thus very focused in its work. This was no mere discussion forum, but a Union of mainly middle-class women within Leicester who were prepared to organise themselves efficiently, work together and press for more intervention to achieve social reform.

From the mid-1890s onwards, as women were becoming more involved in local government, the Union recognised the need to achieve reform of the working-classes ‘through collective action rather than merely individual self-improvement’.\(^{92}\) In this the NUWW looked forward to the twentieth century and reflected a developing change in attitudes towards charity and the poor. Individualistic middle-class philanthropy could still be a feature of women’s culture within the Leicester branch of the NUWW. When in 1900 a sub-committee reporting on the sanitary conditions in Oadby noted that there was a need for public baths, the problem was solved ‘by the kind generosity of our President, Mrs. G. H. Ellis.’\(^{93}\) It would be a mistake to see the individualist approach of much of the nineteenth century and the collectivism of the early twentieth century as completely irreconcilable. Whilst still accepting that individual enquiries needed to be made and self-help encouraged, women were at the same time

\(^{91}\)LRO: 16D58/1, *Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW* (1900).


\(^{93}\)LRO: 16D58/1, *Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW* (1900).
increasingly realising the value of state intervention. The two could coexist. Thus even Fanny Fullagar, who reported to the commission on the Poor Laws in 1909 that she was ‘turned off by the Labour Party – according to them I had no sympathy with the poor, because I advocated stricter enquiries’, at the same time looked forward to the day when old age pensions would be provided.\textsuperscript{94}

By 1900 women were discussing and pressing for greater state intervention. In 1900 a sub-committee of the Leicester branch of the NUWW consisting of Charlotte Ellis, Fanny Fullagar and the Secretary considered the clauses of the Housing Bill then before Parliament and drew up six resolutions upon it to forward to the local MPs and to the National Housing Committee. By 1901 although Leicester was not suffering from the same degree of over-crowding as in many other towns and cities, it nonetheless had areas of housing congestion largely due to rapid population expansion especially from the 1860s onwards.\textsuperscript{95} The resolutions which the Leicester branch of the NUWW passed on the Bill included ‘that local authorities be empowered to hold land outside their areas for future need’ and ‘that there be an extension of the period for the repayment of building loans’. The same sub-committee were also empowered to draw up resolutions on the Factories and Workshop Bill and recommended that the Bill be amended. The women of the Leicester NUWW were particularly concerned with how this Bill might affect women and young people. They noted that whilst it allowed two eight-hour shifts in

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{cd. 4855, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress,} (1909), Appendix No. CXXX, Statement of Evidence by Miss Fanny Elizabeth Fullagar, Leicester.

\textsuperscript{95} Elliott, \textit{Victorian Leicester}, Chapter six.
factories there was no guarantee against the employment of the same person on both shifts and the Home Secretary, in an emergency, would also be enabled to permit the employment of young people and women on Sundays and holidays for the first time.\textsuperscript{96}

By the end of the 1890s the admittedly limited sources indicate that the local branch of the NUWW was drawing together leading Leicester women who used the skills they had acquired through a long tradition of campaigning, philanthropy and local government to achieve reforms in charitable and social work in a coherent and structured way. By 1897 the report stated that considering the size of Leicester and the work that there was for women to do, it would be highly desirable to increase the membership from 106. It urged its members to encourage others to join and for themselves to attend a series of lectures to be held in the town on ‘Charitable and Social Work’ in the autumn. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, they were increasingly prepared to adopt an approach which allowed for more state intervention to solve the social problems of Leicester alongside one which still encouraged one’s individual philanthropic duty as a Christian.

\subsection{3.3 Conclusions}

This chapter has shown how philanthropy provided women with an acceptable route into the local public life of Leicester. Women subverted the ‘culture of domesticity’ to justify their participation in the public sphere.

\textsuperscript{96} LRO: 16D58/1 Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950.
The chapter has highlighted the sheer range of female involvement and action as women gradually acquired a wealth of organisational experience within the field of philanthropy in the public sphere. By the turn of the century they were regarded as leading citizens in their own right within the town through their public involvement as members of Leicester’s middle-class reforming culture.

It was women who visited the homes of the poor, distributed Bibles and reached out to address their spiritual needs. This was part of women’s wider reforming mission. Women were the link between the classes and their natural mothering role was extended beyond the domestic home to encompass the needs of the wider world. They became particularly involved in philanthropic causes which affected working-class women and children. At the same time middle-class women were always in a superior position to their working-class sisters. They were the educators and the source of moral guidance, valued because they carried ‘the prestige of authority’. It was middle-class women who extolled the virtues of self-help to their social inferiors. This policy became more fully developed within the COS, some of whose members became Leicester’s future female poor law guardians.

Women’s concern for the poor often derived from a strong religious faith which valued the home and the family, a woman’s role as a mother and a father’s role as the breadwinner. The commitment to serve others was a woman’s Christian duty. For much of the period the emphasis was on tackling social problems by rooting out the moral causes of poverty. Thus women encouraged self-help, and acted as educators of the poor in
order in the long run to produce self-reliant, reformed individuals. The economic causes of poverty were less frequently taken into account. Towards the end of the century women’s philanthropic experience fed into a gradual shift in social policy which developed in the Edwardian period as the need for greater state intervention was recognised. The evidence from Leicester indicates that by the late 1890s women were ready to accept changes which pointed to increased state intervention in the twentieth century as a means of solving social problems, whilst at the same time not discouraging individual philanthropy and an approach which strongly encouraged self-reliance amongst the poor. This was most clearly expressed through the social and charitable work of the NUWW.

The link between philanthropy and feminism is complicated. Not all female philanthropists were feminists. However, as Steven King notes, while there was no inevitable link between philanthropy and political activity, both types of activity enabled women to contemplate wider political activity. As he writes, ‘individual women did seem to think about their overlapping philanthropic, campaigning and political activities in terms of a feminist journey.’97 The development of an increased political awareness amongst Leicester’s women will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

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97 King, Women, Welfare and Local Politics, p. 63.
Chapter 4  Women, Civic Life and Societies

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the nature and extent of the engagement of urban middle-class women with the civic life of Leicester in the nineteenth century, looking in particular at local societies. By studying some different societies in Leicester in which women were involved, this chapter provides a local perspective of the recent debate about the nature of bourgeois public culture and the role of women. The chapter focuses on the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society and the Kyrle Society as well as two women-only organisations, the Leicester Ladies Reading Society and the Belmont House Society.

It is also well-known that Leicester had a Secular Society which was founded between 1852 and 1853.\(^1\) However until the 1890s secularism had a particularly masculine and artisan image and mostly drew its membership from a different section of society than that discussed in this thesis. The Secular Society is therefore not explored in any depth. Women in Leicester played a minor role in the Leicester Secular Society. David Nash has pointed out that women in both local and national secularism were largely conspicuous by their absence.\(^2\) The Society was not opposed to women’s rights. On the contrary in 1883 and in 1898 signatures were sought for petitions in favour of women’s

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\(^1\) D. Nash, *Secularism, Art and Freedom* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 30-1

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 76-8.
suffrage. However much of the female activism discussed in this thesis was underpinned by Nonconformity and this may account for the local under-representation of middle-class women within Secularism.

The women discussed in this chapter were members of the same social grouping as the town’s most eminent men and shared the same cultural outlook. Both men and women aspired to improve life for both themselves and for the working-class. However, although they were part of Leicester’s middle-class Liberal culture the ease with which women crossed the public/private divide into Leicester’s civic societies depended upon the nature of the particular society. Where their involvement could be justified as an expansion of women’s domestic sphere, then women faced fewer barriers entering civic life. In some civic societies, however, they were required to fight harder for recognition. Nonetheless, the women held high ideals as they aspired to be ‘Worthy Citizens’ of Leicester. They aimed to improve both themselves and the town in which they lived. As Isabel Ellis commented with reference to the Belmont House Society,

The command, “Be ye perfect”, is no easy one to fulfil. The plea, “I am not clever”, is not admitted. We are bound to ask ourselves, “Have I done my utmost, even to seeking diligently and with tears?” before we may stand back as incapable.

It is important for the purposes of this chapter to establish what is understood by the term ‘civic life’. For Simon Gunn, towns and the middle class became inextricably linked in the early nineteenth century both

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3 Nash, Secularism, Art and Freedom, p. 53.
4 LRO: 18D57/1, Records of the Belmont House Society Minute Book 1886-1903, Miss Beale’s letter to the Belmont House Society, July 1886.
through ‘commerce’ and through the liberal idea that they represented ‘civilisation’.\textsuperscript{6} This was especially the case after the Municipal Corporations Act was passed in 1835. Nineteenth century middle-class civic culture in many industrial towns and cities was distinguished by the philosophy of liberalism. Gunn argues that there was a strong vein of liberalism running through the civic culture of Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds with their commitment to the ‘Liberal virtues of freedom, commerce and civilisation’.\textsuperscript{7} From 1835 onwards, liberalism was similarly the dominant force in Leicester and this dominance lasted throughout the nineteenth century.

Women’s contribution to the middle-class, liberal public identity can be found particularly in their desire to civilize and improve their locality through moral and educational reform and philanthropy.\textsuperscript{8} Many nineteenth century women believed that they had a contribution to make and for them this was often to be achieved by rehabilitating the individual. It was often through such beliefs that women became involved in philanthropic work and missions to the poor.\textsuperscript{9} As Moira Martin has pointed out in a study of single women and philanthropy in Bristol, ‘single women of different political persuasions defined themselves as members of civic society in terms of their contribution to social progress…Acting as members of charitable organisations and other associations, single women were able to traverse the boundaries of class and gender without any loss of social

\textsuperscript{7} S. Gunn, \textit{The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class – Ritual and authority in the English industrial city 1840-1914} (Manchester, 2000), p. 171.
\textsuperscript{8} See Chapter Three.
status.'  

Middle class women, whether married or single in Leicester, as well as men became agents of change in civic life, although their role was largely 'gendered'.

There has recently been some debate about the extent of women's exclusion from middle-class civic life. Gunn argues that women, along with other marginalized groups, were denied the right to public expression because they did not take part in the rites of civic culture. He argues that civic processions, for example, were all-male affairs and women's role was largely passive or supportive. Simon Morgan, however, argues that for the period c. 1830 - c. 1860 women were 'written into the civic narrative as champions of civic virtue.' Although public culture was divided along gender lines and women were excluded from many urban institutions by virtue of their sex, women nonetheless played an important role in middle-class civic life and culture in ways which drew on their 'domestic' virtues and influence. Moreover, he argues that their appearance at public events has been largely misinterpreted. In the construction of a middle-class civic identity, it became important for middle-class women to be seen in public 'as the guardians of public morality and civic virtue.' Their segregated presence therefore 'reflected ideals of feminine virtue and purity.'

At the declaration of the poll at the borough election in Leicester in May 1859, as the friends of the candidates, Mr Biggs and Dr Noble,  

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11 S. Gunn, The Public Culture, p. 182.  
12 Ibid., p. 172.  
14 Ibid., p. 195.  
15 Ibid.
gathered in the Market Place, Dr Noble claimed that he had
‘unquestionable evidence of the goodwill of the ladies. Everywhere they
regretted they had not votes, for if they had they would certainly give them
to Mr Biggs and himself.¹⁶ Here women were valued as part of middle-
class civic life for their approval and ‘goodwill’. They cannot, therefore, be
written out of the narrative if we are to obtain a complete picture of civic
life and culture in nineteenth century Leicester. Women were part of the
construction of a middle-class public identity.

The Leicester Chronicle reflected upon the effect on male life in
clubs and societies when unchecked by female influence, when it quoted
from the London Phalanx in November 1841.

There are two distinctive spheres for the sexes - there is a
masculine and feminine morality; a masculine and feminine duty, as
well as a masculine and feminine person; but there is such a
relationship between the two, that the characteristics of each sex
are dependent for the attainment of excellence upon those of the
other...Ladies seldom qualify themselves to converse with
gentlemen in the masculine sphere. (We admit of splendid
exceptions). This is a defect in the prevailing system of social
correspondence; and leads to the formation of clubs and societies,
and smoking and drinking associations, which being wholly
masculine, and unchecked and unrefined by the superior delicacy
of the female, have a most injurious tendency upon the moral
character of the age. It is not, however, solely the fault of woman,
for men in their present state of immorality and corruption are
averse to the moral restraint of refined female society, and seek the
society of one another for the sake of rude liberty, in which they
delight.¹⁷

¹⁶LC, 7 May, 1859.
¹⁷LC. 13 November, 1841.
In reality the division between separate spheres was not so marked as Morgan has shown.\textsuperscript{18} Women frequently adapted the language of ‘separate spheres’ to justify their participation in various aspects of public, civic life and this increased markedly in the second half of the nineteenth century. By doing so women wrote themselves into much of the narrative of Leicester’s middle-class civic culture. As their involvement in the public sphere increased a group of women became known locally in their own right as leading citizens of late nineteenth-century Leicester.

4.2 Women and Civic Societies

Much of civic life and culture was, however, essentially masculine in nature. In particular, clubs were often exclusively male and if women met they formed their own societies or formed separate ladies’ committees within local organisations. Men especially strictly preserved the male social club from female intrusion and this was more likely to be the case the higher the status of the club.\textsuperscript{19} This exclusivity of male clubs remained in spite of the increased visibility of women in public life later in the nineteenth century and only began to dissolve between the two World Wars.\textsuperscript{20} It has also been argued that before the introduction of universal suffrage in the twentieth century, although women were visible within the same institutions as men, their presence and identity was frequently

\textsuperscript{19}Gunn, \textit{The Public culture}, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, pp.91-8.
defined by men. As will be seen, middle-class women frequently had to negotiate their way into the civic life and societies of Leicester and met with a variety of obstacles on the way. In spite of this by the turn of the twentieth century, women had made considerable progress and a substantial contribution towards the civic culture of Leicester.

The difficulties which women faced can be demonstrated by looking at the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society. The Literary and Philosophical Society was founded in 1835 by Dr Shaw and Mr Alfred Paget, on lines similar to the one already in existence in Manchester where Dr Shaw had lived. He anticipated that its benefits would include the development of literary and scientific taste in Leicester noting that although the town had produced some distinguished individuals, they were few and far between. In his inaugural address the first President, the Revd. Andrew Irvine, Vicar of St. Margaret’s Church, argued that the Literary and Philosophical Society ‘should acquire the habit of exchanging ideas dispassionately and without animosity’. For the first three or four years, however, women were not admitted. Eventually in 1838 they were admitted to lectures as guests of members. The Transactions for 1837-8 noted rather reluctantly that ‘At the Annual Meeting of the Society,

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23 Ibid., p. 7.
25 Lott, The Centenary Book, p. 3.
26 Ibid., 131.
June 1\textsuperscript{st} 1837, a motion for the admission of Ladies, which had been discussed at three successive meetings, was finally carried.\textsuperscript{27}

It was not until 1870 however that ladies were admitted as associate members in Leicester for a subscription of 10/6d.\textsuperscript{28} This compared with an annual admission fee of 21s. for full members for which they had the right to invite two members of their families to the lectures.\textsuperscript{29} The decision appears to have been taken largely to benefit unmarried women, who could not be introduced as guests by their husbands. The new associate members would also have the right to introduce their own guests for a fee of 7s.6d. It was anticipated that this new rule would apply generally to ‘the better off class of ladies’ schools in that town’ who might admit a select number of their pupils.\textsuperscript{30} Women had no voice in the business of the society although the decision to admit women as associates was felt to be long overdue by some male members. The President, the Revd. R. Harley commented that although women ‘might not be ambitious to exercise any administrative power on that important body’ by having to rely on male friends to supply them with tickets they were ‘placed in a position which he believed they felt to be a humiliating one’.\textsuperscript{31} By 1877 there were twenty-six female associate members of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society.\textsuperscript{32} They included several of the female relations of the male elite of the town such as Mrs E. S. Ellis,

\textsuperscript{27} Transactions of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, (1835-1879), 1 June 1837.
\textsuperscript{28} Lott, pp.66-7.
\textsuperscript{29} LC, 16 July 1870.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} LRO: 14D55/31 Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society List of Members, August 1877.
Mrs E. Paget and Mrs Islip as well as Miss Ellen Leicester of Wyggeston Girls’ School and Miss A. C. Beale of Belmont House School in New Walk.

Although the Council did not specify its reasons why, it was felt that ‘the time had not yet arrived when they could admit the ladies as full members’.33 The admission of women as associate members was resisted by Dr Shaw who feared the meetings would become too much like soirées. This may possibly have been true. The Leeds Literary and Philosophical Society, formed in 1820, had admitted women to membership since 1836 although their numbers were few.34 Morgan argues that the true significance of the admission of women to membership of the Leeds Literary and Philosophical Society was in ‘oiling the wheels of social interaction’.35 Indeed the soirées of the Leeds Society became a very successful part of middle-class civic life. Nonetheless, in Leeds female lecturers such as Clara Balfour can be found addressing cultural institutions such as the Leeds Institute as early as 1847 when she spoke ‘On the Influence of Women’.36

The position of women within the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society was largely defined by men for most of the nineteenth century. Decisions had to be made by the all-male Council. There were quite particular ideas about the type of activities considered to be suitable for women. When a geological excursion was organised to examine the rocks in Charnwood Forest it was decided that

33LC, 16 July, 1870.
34Lott, p. 10. See also Morgan, ‘A sort of land debatable’, p.189.
36Ibid.
Considering the purely scientific object of the excursion, and the amount of rough walking to be expected, it was thought impossible to include ladies in the party. The invitation was therefore confined to members and their male friends.\textsuperscript{37}

When the women requested of the council that they be allowed to have lectures and classes for themselves under the auspices of the Society, a sub-committee reported in March 1877 that there was no rule which was inconsistent with such a request and suggested that the proposed lectures would best be promoted by the appointment of an Educational section.\textsuperscript{38} However the decision was adjourned and by the time the subject was discussed again in May, the women had decided not to go ahead with the proposal.\textsuperscript{39}

In 1886 a more significant change did occur. For the first time women were to be elected as full members. The women elected included Miss Ellen Leicester, Miss A. Kilgour, Miss A. C. Beale, Mrs J.H. Ellis, Mrs E.S. Ellis and Miss Edith Gittins, all of whom were active and affluent middle-class women in the town.\textsuperscript{40} Nonetheless the first woman President of the Society was not elected until 1913 when Mrs William Evans (nee Kilgour) occupied the post.\textsuperscript{41} The Society clearly recognised by 1886 that women were playing a more public role in middle-class urban life. The fifty-second Annual Report of the Council noted that:

\begin{quote}
The Rules of the Society do not expressly exclude ladies from the advantages of membership, and the fact that they had not been nominated before was doubtless due to the influence of custom.
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{37} LC, 28 May, 1870
\textsuperscript{38} LRO: 14D55/8 Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Council Minute Book, 3 Oct. 1870-1 June 1877, 2 March 1877.
\textsuperscript{39} LRO: 14D55/8 Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Minute Book, 4 May 1877.
\textsuperscript{40} LRO: 14D55/7 Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Minute Book – general meetings, 30 Nov. 1885-12 May 1909, 11 October 1886.
\textsuperscript{41} Lott, The Centenary Book, p. 161.
\end{flushright}
The present change of practice appears to be a natural outcome of
the alteration which is taking place in the English mind with regard
to the position and education of women.\(^{42}\)

It is significant that the President of the Literary and Philosophical
Society in 1886 was the Revd. Page Hopps, the minister of the Unitarian
Church, who was sympathetic to the question of women’s rights.\(^{43}\)

Women were beginning to be invited as speakers to the Literary and
Philosophical Society. The earliest woman recorded as addressing the
Society was the actress, Miss Glyn (Mrs E. S. Dallas), who gave a reading
of ‘Hamlet’ on 14 October 1872.\(^{44}\) There was then a gap of several years
before Miss Anna Beale, headmistress of Belmont House School in
Leicester, addressed the society on the subject of ‘Educational Results
and the Phonic System’ on 22 January, 1883.\(^{45}\) This was followed on 8
February 1886 by Miss Jane Harrison, the classicist, on ‘Death and the
Underworld as seen on Greek Monuments.’\(^{46}\) Then in December of that
year Mrs Millicent Garrett Fawcett delivered a lecture to a room ‘crowded
to excess’ on ‘The social position of women; its progress during the last
one hundred years.’\(^{47}\)

Although it had taken over fifty years for women to be admitted as
full members of the Society and it would be another twenty-seven years
before a woman became President, some of the women of Leicester had
finally been accepted as full members of the Literary and Philosophical

\(^{42}\text{Lott, The Centenary Book, p.132.}\)
\(^{43}\text{LRO: 14D55/7 Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Minute Book - general meetings, 11 October 1886.}\)
\(^{44}\text{Transactions of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, (1835-1879), 14 October 1872, p.323.}\)
\(^{45}\text{Transactions, (1882-83), 22 January 1883, p.45.}\)
\(^{46}\text{Transactions, (1886-1889), 8 February 1886, p.11.}\)
\(^{47}\text{LC, 11 December, 1886.}\)
Society. As was the case in Bristol, this change reflects the somewhat different situation which existed in the late nineteenth century compared with the first half of the nineteenth century as some of the most active middle-class women gradually began to assume a more prominent role in the civic life of Leicester.\textsuperscript{48} We should perhaps bear in mind, however, that within the exclusive confines of ‘The Club’, the all-male off-shoot of the Literary and Philosophical Society, attitudes towards women were still somewhat traditional. Caroline Wessel notes how at one social event in 1883 ‘the bright little hostess who had not appeared was summoned from the nursery, to receive the final greetings of The Club.’\textsuperscript{49}

A significant comparison can be drawn between the largely male culture of the Literary and Philosophical Society against which women had to fight, and the more feminine culture of the Kyrle Society, a branch of which was formed in Leicester in 1880.\textsuperscript{50} From the outset women were heavily involved, reflecting the preponderance of women on the Kyrle Society National committee.\textsuperscript{51} The Kyrle Society aimed to bring ‘the refining and cheering influences of natural and artistic beauty into the homes and neighbourhood of the poor in our large towns’ by such means as paintings and murals in rooms used by the poor, making gifts of flowers and pictures for the homes of the poor and the laying out of gardens and ‘the cultivation of plants’.\textsuperscript{52} It had been founded by Miranda Hill, the sister

\textsuperscript{50} LRO: 17D51/1, \textit{Leicester Kyrle Society records}, 9 & 25 November 1880.
\textsuperscript{51} LRO: 17D51/1 In November 1880 as attempts were made to form a Society in Leicester, a booklet listing the members of the National Committee and its aims was circulated. The National Committee included nine women and two men. The Treasurer was Octavia Hill.
\textsuperscript{52} LRO: 17D51/1 \textit{Leicester Kyrle Society Records}
of Octavia Hill, and was named after John Kyrle, the Man of Ross who had been well-known for his efforts to improve the facilities in his native town.  

It has been argued that the coming together of philanthropy with housing schemes such as the Settlement Movement as well the influence of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the late nineteenth century brought together the ‘personal, artistic and social attributes’ of women and allowed them to engage with the problems of the urban environment without upsetting ‘established codes of class and social behaviour’. The emphasis of reformers such as the Hills was not on indiscriminate financial aid, but on ‘moral and spiritual reform’. The Settlement Movement, for example, encouraged the middle-classes to give their time and abilities to improve impoverished local communities. The COS meanwhile stressed the importance of developing personal relationships with applicants for charity to assess appropriate means of support. As Anderson and Darling point out the ethos of the Kyrle Society reflected these beliefs. In many ways the Kyrle Society can be linked with nineteenth-century middle-class attempts to improve the culture and quality of life of the working-classes. The moral and spiritual environment of the poor was just as important as their material environment and the Society thus aimed to enhance surroundings rather than demolish them and begin again. Meller notes that the Hill sisters and those who followed their lead realised that

55 Ibid., pp.36-37.
housing alone was insufficient to improve the lives of the poor.\textsuperscript{56} The context in which housing schemes were set and the activities within the local environment also needed improvement. It was in this way that the Kyrle Society became ‘the epitome of women-orientated environmental activity’\textsuperscript{57} It allowed middle-class women to engage with urban improvement schemes for the working-classes.

Meller argues that the work which women volunteers performed in local towns and cities encouraged them to consider the special qualities which they might bring to urban problems and thus also helped in the development of a feminist consciousness.\textsuperscript{58} Certainly some of the women involved in the Kyrle Society were later involved in the local branch of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies and were instrumental in the formation of a local branch of the Women’s Liberal Association in Leicester as well as being some of the first women in Leicester to be elected to local government. They included Edith Gittins, Fanny Fullagar, Annie Clephan and various members of the Ellis family. Through all of these networks of friendship, kinship and activity within the locality, a strong female culture developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{59}

In November 1880 three people, including Edith Gittins, wrote to those local people who might potentially support such an organisation as

\textsuperscript{56} Meller. ‘Women and Citizenship’, p. 244.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 241.
the Kyrle Society in Leicester. Diana Maltz makes the point that Kyrle Society membership included a large number of practising artists, in particular painters of fruit and flowers. Both Edith Gittins and her sister Catharine were artists, Edith teaching at Belmont House School whilst Catharine had worked in Birmingham as an art mistress. Edith was particularly influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Following a meeting in the Mayor's Parlour of the Old Town Hall on November 25th, 1880 the Leicester Kyrle Society was established. The first provisional committee in Leicester consisted of nine men and ten women. The *Leicester Chronicle* of February 1881 notes that there were three sections – The Decoration, Gardening or Flowers and the Entertainments Sections – and that there were eighty members. Its aims were broadly in line with the London Kyrle Society. The object of the Leicester Society was 'to bring the refining and cheering influences of natural and artistic beauty into the homes and resorts of the poor of Leicester; and to promote their well-being by whatever means the Society may from time to time think proper to employ.' As Anderson and Darling comment, such objectives seem to us to be 'patronising in the extreme...something done to the poor, rather than with or through them.' However, in their belief that space could be re-made through changes to

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63 LC, 5 February, 1881.  
64 Anderson and Darling, 'The Hill Sisters', pp. 44-48.  
65 LRO 17D51/1, *The Leicester Kyrle Society – Draft Rules*  
the activities within it, such women were looking forward in time. Maltz points out that Octavia Hill urged philanthropists to focus on institutions such as hospital wards, schoolrooms and mission rooms which would benefit from some cheerful murals and decoration.

It took some time for the Leicester Kyrle Society to become an established organisation in the town. A year after its foundation it found it necessary pointedly to dissociate itself from accusations of aestheticism ("worshipping the sunflower") aimed at the London Society. In November 1882 the annual report of the Leicester Kyrle Society again pressed for more members and for the society to be more 'obtrusive' so that it was better known. Although the 'gibes and ridicule' had stopped, the society still lacked funds and volunteers. Edith Gittins compared Leicester where the society had to seek out the work for itself with Birmingham where the help of the Kyrle Society was requested. Again in November 1883 the annual report stated that the Kyrle Society was not yet satisfied with its progress and the esteem in which it was held by the townspeople. By November 1884 there was serious concern about the state of the society’s finances. Funds were so low that the Kyrle Society was unable to grant any money to the entertainment section to meet the cost of concerts for the coming season. It was not until November 1889 that the Leicester Chronicle finally reported an improvement in the Leicester Kyrle Society’s

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68 Maltz, British Aestheticism, pp. 55-6.
69 LC, 5 November, 1881.
70 LC, 4 November, 1882.
71 LC, 3 November, 1883.
72 LC, 1 November, 1884.
financial position. It is not easy to be certain of the causes of the Kyrle Society’s early difficulties in establishing firm support within the town. However, it does appear that from the outset the Leicester Kyrle Society had suffered unfairly from criticism aimed primarily at the parent society in London.

From the beginning the women of Leicester were placed in charge of some of the sections and held important leadership roles. Thus Annie Clephan was the manager of the decoration section and Gertrude Ellis the secretary of the gardening and flowers section. Here was an uncontroversial way in which women could use traditional domestic skills in a public way to improve their local urban environment. The women of Leicester worked co-operatively alongside men and brought what were considered to be special female qualities to tackle some of the issues facing the poor. At first this took the form of decorating schools and rooms such as the Old Men’s Common Room at Trinity Hospital with prints and pictures to brighten the environment. Plants and flowers were distributed to poor people by Bible women in twenty-two areas. The entertainments section gave concerts to those in institutions and in the Workhouse and a Kyrle Choir was formed for the purpose of entertaining. The women constituted the majority on a committee formed in March 1887 to arrange for the performances of the Band in Victoria Park during the summer. They visited the workhouse, bringing flowers, distributing newspapers and

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73 LC, 2 November, 1889.
74 LRO: 17D51/1, Leicester Kyrle Society records, Meeting of the Provisional Committee, Jan. 13, 1881.
75 LC, 4 November, 1882.
76 LRO: 17D51/3 Quarterly meeting of the Council, 30 March, 1887.
magazines and they pressed for the opening of a library for use by the inmates.\textsuperscript{77} All of this voluntary work fell well within women’s philanthropic sphere and was a way in which women could actively take part publicly in civic life without causing any controversy. They worked alongside the men in the society and in many cases formed a majority on the committees.

However it was not long before the Kyrle Society interested itself in a wider variety of projects which impacted upon the local urban environment and which were felt to lie within its broad remit. As well as the more traditional ‘female’ areas mentioned above, the Kyrle Society pressed for the establishment of a proper Coroners’ Court. It was considered to lie within the province of the Society because of its ‘bearing upon public propriety.’\textsuperscript{78} Previously the custom had been to hold Coroners’ inquests in public houses and the lack of a public mortuary in Leicester had led to dead bodies being placed in the out-buildings of public houses. However, after pressure from the Kyrle Society, the Town Council recommended that the mortuary at the Cemetery might be made available and that the Old Town Hall would be a suitable venue for Coroners’ inquests.

A degree of gender division still persisted within the Leicester Kyrle Society when tasks were allotted. It was the women of the Kyrle Society in Leicester who put their minds towards tackling such problems as the lack of seats for young women in shops and drives for local invalids.\textsuperscript{79} The

\textsuperscript{77} LRO: 17D51/3, Quarterly meeting of the Council, 30 March, 1887.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} LRO: 17D51/1, Quarterly meeting of the Council, Dec. 22, 1882. 17D51/3, Quarterly meeting of the Council Oct. 11, 1887.
question of seats for saleswomen was particularly considered to be a task best suited for the women to solve and a committee of ladies was thus entrusted with the task.

All will agree that it is only fitting that in this woman’s matter the women of wealth and position in the community should exercise their influence on behalf of those who can hardly speak for themselves, and endeavour to bring about a reform which will conduce in no small measure to the comfort and health of a large number of their hard-working sisters.\footnote{LC, 17 March, 1883.}

They enthusiastically put their minds to the problem and drew up a petition, signed by 103 of the most influential female representatives of the town and county, citing the additional support of strong medical opinion.

The position of women within the Kyrle Society is striking compared with their much more passive role in the Literary and Philosophical Society, although this can partly be attributed to changes in attitudes towards women as the century had advanced. Their path into the Kyrle Society never had to be negotiated in the same way, because it could more easily be justified as lying within a woman’s sphere. Edith Gittins was particularly deeply involved with the Society, frequently taking the lead, not afraid to take an active and public role on her own as a woman or with the Society’s leading men. She thus, for example, appealed in 1887 for ‘Holiday Shillings’ to provide some summer pleasure to those who could not buy holidays themselves raising £10 5s.\footnote{LC, 29 October, 1887.}

During the 1890s the gendered division of work became more indistinct in the Kyrle Society as women made maximum use of opportunities to use their influence for the good of the town. Thus in 1892
Edith Gittins and the Secretary, Mr. A. H. Paget, were jointly asked to communicate with the Estate/Burial committee of the Town Council with a view to procuring the placing of flowers in the Chapels of the Leicester Cemetery and to urge the Council to repair dilapidated gravestones where necessary.  

Edith Gittins remarked in 1895 that their Society ‘was a standing protest against the ugliness which threatened and oppressed them in all directions.’ In her remarks to the Leicester Kyrle Society on this occasion, she was protesting against ‘the frightful advertisement boards that defaced and desecrated the fields. That seemed to her a serious matter, which all enlightened patriots should set their faces against, and, in the long run, stop.’ In raising her objections Edith was voicing views held at a national level by several influential people, including William Morris and Lord Brabazon. In 1893 a Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising (SCAPA) had been founded by Richardson Evans of Wimbledon to fight against the growing number of advertisement boards.

Concern with the preservation of sites of particular interest to local inhabitants, as well as the improvement of open spaces for use by the poor became an issue in 1893 in Leicester when the Kyrle Society expressed its members’ objections to the re-building of St. Stephen’s Presbyterian Church in De Montfort Square.

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82 LRO 17DS1/3 Leicester Kyrle Society, Quarterly meeting of the Council, Jan. 26, 1892.
83 LC, 9 November, 1895.
84 Ibid.
86 LC, 18 November, 1893.
Our council consider the New-Walk a feature of our town of very special interest, highly prized by inhabitants, and the admiration of strangers. They, therefore, disapprove of any curtailment of the open space adjoining the Walk, and hold that a tower and spire thrust forward at this point will block the prospect and injure the character of the Walk.\textsuperscript{87}

In a similar vein in 1895 the Leicester Kyrle Society reported that good work had been done towards preserving the Jewry Wall from the encroachments of the railway company.\textsuperscript{88} In these concerns the Leicester Kyrle Society reflected the development in the late nineteenth-century of several organisations which aimed either to preserve open spaces in towns for the old and young, to protect old buildings from decay or to convert derelict land into a worthwhile use which was not economic. These included the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association founded in 1882 by Lord Brabazon to provide open spaces for the old and playgrounds for the young, the Commons Preservation Society (1865) and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877).\textsuperscript{89} All of the above organisations had at their heart the conservation and improvement of the local environment rather than the demolishing and re-building of buildings and the development of waste land for economic purposes.

As well as the preservation of sites of special historical and architectural interest to the town, the Kyrle Society also became involved in the conservation of local rural beauty spots against encroaching industrial development. A proposed scheme to construct a railway from Rothley to Newtown Linford to make access to Bradgate Park and Charnwood Forest easier, was opposed by the Leicester Kyrle Society on

\textsuperscript{87}LC, 18 November 1893.
\textsuperscript{88}LC, 9 November, 1895.
\textsuperscript{89}Ranlett, 'Checking Nature's Desecration', pp. 198-201.
the grounds that it ‘would tend to destroy the special rural charm of the district’. Their opposition reflected similar opposition in other parts of the country, in particular the establishment of the Lake District Defence Society in 1883 to fight against the extension of the line from Windermere to Keswick. The national Kyrle Society had earlier supported these efforts in the Lakes. As members of the Leicester Kyrle Society, women were concerned to protect Leicester’s built heritage and rural surroundings from urban and industrial development.

As Meller says, female involvement in the Kyrle Society informed the development of a feminist consciousness as women realised their organising potential and influence. The valuable contribution which women had made to Leicester’s civic life through the Kyrle Society was recognised when in 1898 Edith Gittins was elected President of the society for the coming year and another woman, Miss Ivy M. Wright, became the General Treasurer. Women such as Edith Gittins were not ‘marginalized’ but were deeply involved in the middle-class civic life of late nineteenth-century Leicester. The Society became very successful, lasting for nearly fifty years until much of its work was taken over by other agencies and the Society eventually merged with the Leicester Civic Society. Moreover the emphasis on conservation and improvement looked forward to later developments such as the National Trust which

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90 LC, 4 February, 1899.
91 Ranlett, ‘Checking nature’s desecration’, pp. 201-3.
93 LRO: 17D51/3, 18th Annual Meeting held in the Grand Jury Room, Town Hall, Nov. 10th, 1898. Ivy Mabel Wright (1869-1925), the daughter of a wealthy property owner, was born in London, but by 1881 is recorded as living in Ansty Pastures in Leicester and in 1891 in Regent Road. She eventually married and left the county. (1881 and 1891 censuses).
94 Ellis, Records, p. 148.
was founded in 1895. In 1900 the Leicester Kyrle Society formally affiliated with the National Trust, as the Trust sought advice from kindred organisations in preparation of a register of all places of natural beauty or historic interest.

It is clear that particularly from 1870 middle-class women were becoming integrated into key civic societies. Nonetheless, perhaps because of the unease which some women felt in mixed societies, especially those dominated by men, the last third of the nineteenth century also witnessed the development of women’s social clubs. Such societies provided an alternative and respectable venue for middle-class women to meet together and helped to forge deep, long-lasting friendships within a sociable setting. Women highly valued each other’s companionship and such friendships became, as Levine points out, ‘integral to the networking so characteristic in nineteenth-century feminist circles’.

In 1869 a Ladies’ Reading Society was formed in Leicester to fulfil the need felt for more concentrated study. It lasted until 1930. The Society provided not only a meeting ground for mixing with other women socially, but gave women in Leicester the opportunity for self-education and improvement. It was ‘a small local development of that great stirring of life in the education of women which was such a feature of the second half of the nineteenth century’. Gertrude Ellis, in her history of the society made an explicit connection with the year when the ‘first five’ women met at

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95 Anderson and Darling, ‘The Hill Sisters’, p. 47.
96 Birmingham Daily Post, June 26, 1900.
98 Ibid., p. 109.
Hitchin, out of which grew the first female colleges at Cambridge University.\textsuperscript{100} From the outset it was well-organised with rules and a Minute Book as well as a programme of one subject per session (see Appendix 1). Each member was made responsible for one session during which they prepared a paper on some aspect of that subject. This could take a variety of forms, including recitations, an original paper or extracts from leading authorities on a subject.\textsuperscript{101} The report for the session in 1869 for example, took the Renaissance as its theme and it was studied as it appeared in seven different countries.\textsuperscript{102} As Gertrude Ellis commented, the Leicester Ladies’ Reading Society was ambitious in the planning of its programmes from the outset and when ‘Professor Henry Morley’s University Extension Lectures brought fresh stimulus to serious study in Leicester, we see this reflected in the programmes of the winters of 1873 and 1874.’\textsuperscript{103} The \textit{Leicester Chronicle} reported that the engagement of Professor Morley to give a ‘Course of Ten Lectures to Ladies on English Thought under the Tudors’ was very successful and well attended.\textsuperscript{104} Excluded from the ancient Universities, the women of Leicester were anxious to grasp the opportunities which came their way for self-improvement and education. Indeed Wessel argues that the ‘ladies were aspiring to knowledge, good reading and intellectual discussion in a

\textsuperscript{100} Ellis, \textit{Records}, p. 288.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 286.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}.
more structured and studious way’ than their men, who would also have
been excluded from most University education as Nonconformists.\textsuperscript{105}

In setting themselves such ambitious reading schemes and
education programmes, the women of Leicester were not unusual. Kate
Flint notes that in the absence of formal serious education or at the most
an education inferior to that of their brothers, women set themselves
formidable learning regimes.\textsuperscript{106} She argues that for some women this may
have been, whether sub-consciously or not, a preparation for entry into
public life. Other women like Louisa Martindale, the mother of factory
inspector Hilda Martindale, simply delighted in education for its own sake.
Learning was an enjoyable and satisfying process and many middle-class
women relished the opportunity to acquire more knowledge.\textsuperscript{107} This
seems to be supported by the evidence from the Leicester Ladies’
Reading Society where women enthusiastically welcomed the chance to
improve their education in a relaxed environment.

The Society provided a valued opportunity to develop friendships
and to enjoy a sense of sisterhood. Gertrude Ellis described how ‘the
laying aside of outdoor garments, and settling down to a long afternoon,
with or without needlework for the listeners, gave a pleasant sense of unity
and domesticity’.\textsuperscript{108} For married women with children, it provided a chance
to escape from the pressures of family life, only to return refreshed. One
mother wrote that

\textsuperscript{105} Wessel, ‘The Club’, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{108} Ellis, \textit{Records}, pp. 290-1.
I cannot express all it, the Reading Society, has meant in my life. A busy mother for many years is sorely tempted to put aside any absorbing interests of her own because they seem to clash with the crowding, practical claims on her time and strength. Again and again I have felt absolutely wicked at leaving my family for hours together. But as the years have gone on I have realised that it has been thanks to the compulsory reading that I have been able to keep in touch, intellectually, with husband and children.\footnote{Ellis, *Records*, p. 295.}

Such reasoning might appear to us to be rather conservative. This mother clearly felt that part of the justification for improving her own skills lay in the potential it provided for communicating with her husband. This was not unusual. Reflecting the traditional view of woman’s domestic role, it was a justification frequently given. John Ruskin had commented that ‘A woman, in any rank of life, ought to know whatever her husband is likely to know, but to know it in a different way.’\footnote{Quoted in Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 98.} Even Dorothea Beale, the headmistress of Cheltenham Ladies’ College and sister of Anna Beale, headmistress of Belmont House School in Leicester, felt that sensible reading would allow women ‘to enter into the subjects of study and thought which occupy the minds of their fathers, husbands, sons.’\footnote{Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 98.} As Gleadle points out, many of the new girls’ schools whilst improving women’s education and aiming to reach the standards achieved in boys’ schools, still felt the need to conform to ‘prevailing notions of femininity.’\footnote{K. Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 140.} It was only towards the end of the century that reading came to be justified solely as a means of relaxation and escape.\footnote{Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 100.}
However, whilst not necessarily being feminist in nature, the Society became an important feature in the social calendar of many of the middle-class women of Leicester and helped to re-enforce a sense of a middle-class female community in the town. Gunn argues that the male club provided a 'retreat from women'. In the same way, the Leicester Ladies’ Reading Society provided a sanctuary for women. Flint points out that Emily Davies commented in 1878 that Reading Societies and Essay Societies were not only a means of discouraging a woman’s ‘own idleness and desultoriness’, but membership could also be used as a sign to friends and relations that women needed ‘a little slice of quiet time.’

Over the years, members included members of the Clephan family, the Misses Burgess, Mrs J. D. Paul, Miss Gertrude Ellis, Mrs Bernard Ellis, Mrs Mentor Gimson and Miss Sarah Gimson, Mrs Fielding-Johnson and Miss Edith Gittins. There was a high standard of regularity of attendance. In the days when female education was beginning to flourish at a higher level, the women enjoyed the challenge of ‘producing the ‘paper”’, a short talk on a subject selected by the President. Some of the women, although they experienced great difficulties in writing the paper, especially those mothers with young children at home, nonetheless enjoyed the experience of knowing ‘what the historical and literary student attempts and achieves.’ The all-female atmosphere of this Society appears to have been greatly valued by many women as a comfortable atmosphere in which to develop their knowledge and skills.

114 Gunn, The Public Culture, p. 92.
116 Ellis, Records, p. 291.
117 Ibid., pp. 294-5.
The Belmont House Society [hereafter the BHS] founded in 1886 provided another local space in which a strong female community could flourish. The Society developed from the desire to bring together former pupils of Belmont House School. The sense of friendship within the school appears to have been strong. Isabel Ellis comments on the ‘warm friendship’ which developed between Anna Beale, the principal of the Ladies’ School at Belmont House, New Walk Leicester and one of her teachers, Agnes Kilgour who later became Mrs William Evans. Her friendship with Miss Kilgour ‘was a joy that lasted.’¹¹¹ Both women were pioneers in education for the women of Leicester and united in their ideas about the most effective educational methods. According to Isabel Ellis ‘Many of the leading [female] citizens of Leicester received their early education there.’¹¹² Teachers included Edith Gittins who gave weekly drawing classes at the school.¹²⁰

The School had strong Quaker connections. In 1853 it was taken over by Catharine and Eliza Stringer who had taught at the Mount School in York which educated many female Friends.¹²¹ The Quaker connection continued when the school was taken over in 1870s by Miss Katharine Amos. Pupils included Elizabeth Sturge, one of a group of sisters from Bristol who became active in women’s rights movement.¹²² Thus wider female networks touched upon Leicester and provide evidence that the

¹¹¹ Ellis, Records, p. 265.
¹¹² Ibid., p. 266.
¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 259.
¹²¹ Ibid., p. 254.
middle-class female population of the town was alive to the development of a growing national feminist community.

Anna Beale and Agnes Kilgour became the first President and Vice-President of the BHS respectively until 1891. Originally the Society consisted solely of ‘old girls’, but when the School closed it widened its membership. The meetings were initially held for the purpose of ‘social and intellectual intercourse.’ However the objectives of the BHS soon developed beyond that of a pleasant social gathering. Miss Beale wrote a letter of greeting to her old pupils in July 1886 when they decided to form the BHS, summing up how by coming together socially and intellectually women could prepare themselves for citizenship.

If such Societies train their members to wider interest in business habits, (i.e. the capacity for working pleasantly together in an orderly manner), encourage social intercourse, foster human sympathies and wholesome friendships, they may be a fruitful source of strength and happiness and prepare women to enter with more profit to all upon those wider fields of usefulness now open and opening to them.

…I am sure you will all agree that the aim of all should be that thus uniting yourselves together you may become more worthy citizens, ready to further in your town and country all that would improve yourselves and your neighbours

There was clearly a desire for learning as a fulfilling occupation. Like the Reading Society, the members aimed to improve themselves and to this end Anna Beale and Agnes Kilgour assisted by providing tickets for the Cambridge Extension Lectures. However, the women, aware of their

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123 Ellis, Records, p. 268.
124 LRO: 18DS7/1, Records of the Belmont House Society Minute Book 1886-1903, Miss Beale’s letter to the Belmont House Society (BHS).
duty to others as citizens, valued their education as a tool to help others.

To quote Isabel Ellis,

The real value of membership had proved to consist in the fact that everyone is expected to contribute in some way to the corporate life...The inert are called upon to resign...The aim of education is to learn how to live with, and for, our fellow creatures...Culture is the study of perfection...The pursuit of perfection must be carried on elsewhere than in the study.\(^{125}\)

Drawing on a younger membership than the Leicester Ladies’ Reading Society, the BHS became more outward-looking than the Reading Society. In 1888 Miss Stafford brought forward a motion to ‘extend the work of the Society in a philanthropic direction’ thus aiming to fulfil Miss Beale’s vision that they become ‘worthy citizens’ of Leicester.\(^{126}\) The BHS began holding a regular Girls’ Evening Home for girls under fifteen years of age in Leicester eventually also including older girls.\(^{127}\) The Society then widened its sphere of activities by hosting arts and crafts exhibitions and founding a dramatic society.\(^{128}\) The drama society acquired an enduring reputation for local amateur productions, the journal of the British Drama League noting as late as 1932 that ‘In reviewing the recent history of amateur effort in this city, pride of place must be given to the Belmont House Society.’\(^{129}\) By the turn of the century women were indeed playing a wider and worthwhile role in the public civic and cultural life of Leicester.

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\(^{126}\) LRO, 18D57/1 *Records of the BHS Minute Book 1886-1903*.

\(^{127}\) Ellis, *Records*, pp. 270-1.


4.3 Conclusions

This chapter has shown that middle-class women in Leicester were not excluded from the civic culture of the town, although they played a largely gendered role. In the early part of the Victorian period, women participated in middle-class culture as symbols of civic virtue. Unlike men, who were seen as symbols of authority, women were valued for providing a feminine seal of approval to public life and upholding standards of morality. Women were excluded from male-dominated institutions such as the Literary and Philosophical Society for the greater part of the nineteenth century or were only admitted on terms which were laid down by Leicester’s male elite. However as the century progressed and women played a larger part in various aspects of public life attitudes did begin to relax until in 1886, providing the women were of sufficient social standing, they were allowed to join the Literary and Philosophical Society as full members. At the same time, just as many men preferred the atmosphere within an all-male club, many middle-class women felt more comfortable within the culture of all-female Societies such as the Ladies’ Reading Society. Such groups provided women with the opportunity to make close friendships, to socialize and escape from domestic life as well as providing a comfortable milieu in which to improve one’s education. The BHS became more outward-looking whilst remaining united in its aims, as it developed from an Old Girls’ Society into a broad organisation involved in local philanthropic and entertainment schemes for the benefit of the wider community.
From the outset women were accepted more readily within the Kyrle Society. The culture within the Kyrle Society was more female-orientated and provided many more opportunities to develop traditional ‘feminine’ skills in the public sphere for the benefit of others. As they did so, local women such as Edith Gittins realised their full potential and enthusiastically grasped this chance to become involved in Leicester’s civic life. For women this involved the moral and educational reform of their town, the brightening up of the environment as well as self-improvement. Women were part of a middle-class culture which aimed for ‘nothing less than the pursuit of perfection’.  

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130 Ellis, Records, p. 268.
Chapter 5  Women and Local Government

5.1  Introduction

As Hollis points out and as will be demonstrated of the women from Leicester, when local government women stood for office, whether on the School Board or as guardians, they showed that they were hard-working and diligent and set themselves high standards. In other words ‘they were dedicated social workers’.\(^1\) Nonetheless, as Martin notes when writing about the female members of the London School Board, as women entered this kind of political responsibility in local government for the first time, they faced certain difficulties which arose from the incompatibility between concepts of ‘femininity’ and their entrance into the public life. As the first women to assume roles in local government, they had to negotiate their path into what had been an essentially male environment.\(^2\) Moreover many local government women, particularly before 1894 when the property qualification for Poor Law guardians was removed, came from a different social background from those whom they served. In Leicester, as elsewhere, they were often related to the town’s male civic elite and were frequently Liberal in politics and Nonconformist in religion.

The first opportunity arose for women to become involved in local government when the local franchise was extended to women ratepayers in 1869 (this was later restricted to unmarried women ratepayers in 1872

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following a legal challenge).\textsuperscript{3} Following W. E. Forster’s Education Act in 1870 which allowed directly elected bodies (School Boards) to provide schools in areas where there were insufficient school places for all children between the ages of five and thirteen, most of the larger cities and older boroughs quickly formed School Boards. (The Anglican National Schools Society and the Non-denominational British and Foreign Schools Society continued under the provisions of the Act to maintain grant-aid schools). In Leicester as in other towns and cities women found these a new way in which to extend their philanthropic and educative mission to the poor. Women did not need a property qualification to stand for the School Boards and neither did it matter if they were married.\textsuperscript{4} Triennial elections were held and nationally nine women were among the first to be elected. At each election their number increased so that by 1879 there were forty-one women serving on the local School Boards throughout the country.\textsuperscript{5}

Compared to the School Boards, women arrived onto the Boards of Guardians relatively late. The first woman to be elected in England as a Poor Law guardian was Martha Merrington in 1875.\textsuperscript{6} As Hollis notes, much of the reason for this was technical. Unlike the School Board members, female Poor Law guardians needed to possess a high property qualification in their own right (a minimum of £15 outside London) and married women and dependent daughters were thus effectively disqualified from standing for election. The need to possess a property

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 205-6.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 132-33.
qualification which existed until 1894, when the requirement was abolished, meant that the women who became guardians were from relatively affluent backgrounds and further removed socially from those who were the recipients of relief. After 1894 new guardians often came from a less affluent background and this affected attitudes towards outdoor relief as will be discussed later.\(^7\)

It is thus important to remember that local government women were usually, unlike those whom they served, of necessity middle-class and had access to independent sources of income, since the work was both unpaid and time-consuming.\(^8\) This was reflected in their work. On the School Board, this can be seen in the curriculum as it developed for girls. Martin points out that Clara Collet, who spent some years living in Leicester and became Labour Correspondent to the Board of Trade, in a memorandum to the Bryce Commission in the 1890s supported a class-based system of education which provided mental stimulation for middle-class girls, but stressed that working-class girls should be trained for married life.\(^9\) The presence of middle-class women on the School Boards was ‘shot through with contradictions stemming from the language of gender and class.’\(^10\)

As Poor Law guardians women served on those committees where it was deemed they could best use their ‘social mothering’ skills.\(^11\) Many worked hard to domesticate the workhouse and make life more bearable

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for the old, young children, and the vulnerable in their care. Nonetheless the attitudes of many early female guardians towards the able-bodied poor often seem to us as they did to some of their contemporaries to be particularly harsh, revealing the social divide between those in power and those who needed help. Lewis, however, argues that many late nineteenth-century female social workers, often from a Charity Organisation Society background, viewed their work less as disciplining and controlling the poor, but rather as an attempt to achieve empowerment and social improvement as they aimed to encourage thrift among family members with each family member realising their ‘gendered’ responsibilities. Such attitudes were particularly carried through into women’s early work as guardians.\(^ {12} \)

5.2 Women and the Leicester School Board

In Leicester, as in other Liberal Nonconformist towns, the opportunity to form a School Board was quickly taken up on the voluntary application of the ratepayers.\(^ {13} \) Members were elected through a system of cumulative voting so that minorities were represented.\(^ {14} \) By 1879 Leicester had yet to elect a woman to the local School Board. However, following an increase in Leicester’s population from 95,000 in 1870 to 120,000 in 1879 it was proposed to increase the number of serving

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members on the Board from thirteen to fifteen.\textsuperscript{15} Not long after the decision had been taken to increase the number of members a letter appeared in the local press from ‘A Surprised, If Not an Indignant Leicester Woman’.\textsuperscript{16} In this anonymous letter which noted the success of women in London, an appeal was made for a lady candidate to contest the Leicester elections. The writer of the letter, perhaps aware of the careful path which needed to be trodden in negotiating an opening for women, asked for female representation on the Board, largely on the grounds that Leicester girls needed ‘the sympathetic supervision and helpful care of their own sex.’\textsuperscript{17} As Hollis writes, women ‘played the separate spheres card’ to achieve not only equal rights for women, but to advance the well-being of female teachers and pupils.\textsuperscript{18} The writer also asked whether the men of Leicester were so ‘illiberal in spirit’ that they were ‘fearful of losing any of their ancient supremacy’?\textsuperscript{19}

In the subsequent elections, Mrs Isabella Evans, a Liberal and daughter of Leicester’s Unitarian Domestic Missionary, Joseph Dare, was elected as Leicester’s first female member of the School Board.\textsuperscript{20} She was extremely well-qualified for the job. She had some experience of teaching before her marriage, had been a member of the first committee of Leicester’s School of Cookery and was one of the first five female governors of Wyggeston Girls’ School after it was built in 1879.\textsuperscript{21} Hollis points out that the School Board women were ‘usually the staunchly

\textsuperscript{15} School Board Chronicle [hereafter SBC], 18 October, 1879.
\textsuperscript{16} LC, 6 December, 1879.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Hollis, Ladies Elect, p.187.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} LC, 6 December, 1879.
\textsuperscript{21} SBC, 17 January, 1880.
\textsuperscript{21} I. C. Ellis, Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester (Leicester, 1935), pp. 104-110.
Liberal relatives of prominent Liberal men, invariably suffragist, mostly nonconformist, and at least nominally teetotal. They were drawn from the town’s social and civic establishment. This was mostly true in Leicester as the following brief biographical summary of the women members demonstrates. The next female School Board member to be elected was Mrs Mary Chambers who was a Liberal nonconformist and the wife of a Mayor of Leicester. Mrs James Ellis was formerly Louisa Burgess, herself a Quaker, and wife of a member of the prominent Quaker Ellis family in Leicester. Miss Sarah Gimson, of the Church Party (a group keen to maintain the existing Anglican schools and with links to the Conservative Party) was the sister of the Leicester secularist, J. Mentor Gimson. She was also appointed as a manager of Melbourne Road School in 1893. Miss Annie Clephan, a member of the Women’s Liberal Association and later a member of the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW), whose father had been a prominent member of the Great Meeting, was elected at the end of 1891. A Unitarian with a strong religious faith, before her election she had also had experience in education as a manager of Medway Street School. Finally Agnes Archer Evans was an Australian by birth, a founding secretary of the Leicester and Leicestershire Women’s Suffrage Society and a founder of the local branch of the NUWW.

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22 Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 134.
23 A. Moore, Ellis of Leicester – A Quaker Family’s Vocation (Leicester, 2003), Appendix 1.
25 LC, 6 May, 1893.
27 LC, 10 April, 1886.
The exception to this general analysis was Mrs Mary Saunderson of the Independent Labour Party [hereafter the ILP] who came to Leicester from Hull. She had been involved on the School Board in Hull, but did not remain on the Board in Leicester for very long. In Hull she had become president of a women’s association formed to support the striking dockers and to protest at the actions of the Shipping Federation who were trying to prevent the dockers from forming a trades union. She felt that the time had arrived ‘for women to take their part with men in the struggle for the emancipation of Labour.’ Mrs Saunderson attended her first meeting of the Leicester School Board in January 1895. She was the first member of the ILP (founded in 1893) to be elected in Leicester, reflecting a gradual change in the politics of the town towards the turn of the century. Before this date the working-class vote usually went to the Liberal Party. She had come second in the poll of twenty-two candidates in the election.

Mrs Saunderson soon became involved in the wider politics of Leicester and held radical views. At a meeting of the ILP held in Leicester in 1895 called to discuss a demonstration by the unemployed in the town, she commented that while not advising the unemployed to indulge in violence, ‘she did not blame them if they ran riot, and broke into shops to steal food.’ The Liberal Leicester Chronicle was not sympathetic to her

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29 The Yorkshire Herald and the York Herald, 27 August, 1894.
30 SBC, 6 August, 1892; LC, 12 January, 1895.
31 The Standard, May 2, 1893; Reynolds’ Newspaper, 7 May, 1893.
32 Reynolds’ Newspaper, May 7, 1893.
33 LC, 12 January, 1895.
35 LC, 8 December, 1894.
36 LC, 16 February, 1895.
adoption as a candidate for the School Board, feeling that it was a blatant attempt to split the Liberal vote.\textsuperscript{37}

Mrs Saunderson is ignorant of the condition of Leicester, because she is a stranger. Her experience of the Hull School Board would be of no value, because that Board has not given the people of Hull such good schools as we have. Her idea seems to be to go to the Board to preach Socialism, and to raise the religious question by abolishing Bible teaching altogether. But the School board is not the place to discuss Socialism, and the religious question has been settled.\textsuperscript{38}

Experienced in public life she was not afraid to speak her mind. As the 1890s progressed women gained in confidence when it came to public speaking and questioned decisions made by the male majority. However it was not until 1895 when Mrs Saunderson was elected that we find a woman questioning procedural matters on the Board. At the first meeting of the new Leicester Board in January 1895, she queried the fact that prior to this meeting the former members of the School Board had met and had decided the composition of the committees. Considering that new members had been elected, she felt this was both ‘unconstitutional and undemocratic…She had been used to public work, and never knew anything of the kind to take place before.’\textsuperscript{39} She objected again in July 1895 when the building committee accepted a tender for some work, without discussing the issue with the whole Board saying that she did not understand this procedure and thought that any tender or contract should not be accepted without the knowledge of the whole Board.\textsuperscript{40} However, Mrs Saunderson served on the School Board for less than twelve months

\textsuperscript{37}LC, 1 December, 1894.  
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{39}LC, 12 January, 1895.  
\textsuperscript{40}LC, 20 July, 1895.
before, with no apparent reason, resigning.\textsuperscript{41} This caused some surprise. The \textit{Leicester Chronicle} was somewhat baffled, commenting ‘She started with a most elaborate programme. Has she abandoned that with her seat?’\textsuperscript{42}

An analysis of what Martin terms ‘the sexual division of labour’ amongst the members of the Leicester School Board reveals that the work was ‘gendered’.\textsuperscript{43} In London women dominated the cookery, laundry and needlework sub-committees, but rarely served on the finance or works committees.\textsuperscript{44} It has also been noted that in Liverpool and Manchester women were members of school management and Industrial School committees, but rarely served on the finance and building committees.\textsuperscript{45} Goodman argues that women ‘largely advocated policies which built upon and developed their political and philanthropic activities prior to their election.’\textsuperscript{46} In Leicester women also served the Industrial School and teachers’ committees, performing tasks which drew upon their previous philanthropic experience. When the school management committee appointed a committee of managers for the classes to teach the ‘deaf mute’ children in 1890 seven out of eleven members of the committee were women.\textsuperscript{47} In 1881 Mrs Evans was appointed to sit on the teachers, LRO: 19D59/vi/8, \textit{Minutes of the Leicester School Board 1892-96}, Letter of resignation to the chairman, 19 October 1895, p. 361. She moved back to Hull sometime between 1901 and 1908 where she died at the age of 59, leaving a husband and four adult children, www.ancestry.com [accessed 30 April 2012]. Neither the letter, the \textit{Midland Free Press} nor \textit{The Leicester Pioneer} provide any clues to the reasons for her resignation.

\textsuperscript{41} LRO: 19D59/vi/8, \textit{Minutes of the Leicester School Board 1892-96}, Letter of resignation to the chairman, 19 October 1895, p. 361. She moved back to Hull sometime between 1901 and 1908 where she died at the age of 59, leaving a husband and four adult children, www.ancestry.com [accessed 30 April 2012]. Neither the letter, the \textit{Midland Free Press} nor \textit{The Leicester Pioneer} provide any clues to the reasons for her resignation.

\textsuperscript{42} LC, 9 November, 1895.


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 62.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 62.

\textsuperscript{46} LC, 8 March, 1890.
the Industrial School, the school management and the bye-laws and school attendance committees.\textsuperscript{48} Mrs Chambers was appointed to the teachers’ committee in 1883 and later in 1885 sat on the Industrial School committee.\textsuperscript{49} (The Industrial School for two hundred boys had been established at Desford in 1881). Mrs Ellis likewise sat on the Industrial School committee.\textsuperscript{50} Miss Clephan, on her election, was also appointed to the teachers’ and the Industrial School Committee as was Miss Sarah Gimson.\textsuperscript{51} After 1886 all of the members of the Leicester Board were appointed to serve on the school management, bye-laws and school attendance committees.\textsuperscript{52} It was not until 1895 when Mrs Saunderson was elected that a woman was appointed to the finance and building and sites committees.\textsuperscript{53}

There is little surviving evidence of the early female members of the Board speaking in committees and at Board meetings, but when they did so we do catch a glimpse of their interests and the roles which were assigned to them. Generally the early members of the Leicester Board adopted a ‘low-key’ approach. As the 1890s progress, it becomes apparent that women such as Annie Clephan and Mrs Saunderson were more ‘at home’ with regard to public speaking and their voices become clearer. Apart from Mrs Saunderson, the evidence from their speeches points to interests which fell within the womanly sphere. The women were also remarkably supportive of female staff. Thus one of the first pieces of

\textsuperscript{48} LRO: 19D59/vi/5 Minute Book of the Leicester School Board (1880-3) 3 January 1881, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{49} LC, 20 January, 1883, 7 February, 1885.
\textsuperscript{50} LC, 8 January, 1887.
\textsuperscript{51} LC, 9 January, 1892, 12 January, 1895.
\textsuperscript{52} LC, 23 January, 1886.
\textsuperscript{53} LC, 12 January, 1895.
evidence concerning the work of Mrs Evans was in 1881 when she seconded a resolution moving the appointment of Miss Semphill as examiner of needlework, inspector of infant schools and teacher of needlework to teachers. Tellingly she reported that ‘Having seen more of Miss Semphill’s work than perhaps any other member of the Board, it was only right that she should testify to the value of her services’. When Mrs Evans retired in 1892, the Revd. J. Wood particularly commented on her loss to the Board. She had endeared herself to the teachers ‘especially the female teachers’ of their schools. Mrs Chambers, likewise, on the resignation of Miss McGregor, the teacher of the deaf and dumb class, felt that ‘it would be very nice if all members of the Board would come down before Miss McGregor leaves.’

The Victorian emphasis on the importance of the family unit led to the belief that one of the purposes of mass schooling was to ‘impose an ideal family form of a male breadwinner and an economically dependent full-time wife and mother.’ Rules concerning the curriculum were often imposed by central government. Thus needlework gradually became compulsory for girls in elementary schools and failure to teach the subject became an offence punishable by the withdrawal of a government grant. In 1882 the Leicester Board had to consider that in order for the girls to earn a grant of 4s each from the government it was now necessary that they received forty hours instruction in cookery every year. The female

\[\text{\textsuperscript{54}}\text{SBC, 19 February, 1881.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{55}}\text{LC, 8 January, 1883.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{56}}\text{LC, 12 June, 1886.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{57}}\text{Martin, ‘To Blaise the Trail’, pp. 173-4.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{58}}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{59}}\text{SBC, 14 October, 1882.}\]
Board members did not object to education being divided along gender and class lines. Thus Miss Clephan, one of the more forward-thinking of the lady Board members, approved of the different curriculum for girls.

There was good practical instruction in cookery, which had been going on for some time; in laundry-work rather a new subject; and in sick nursing, which all would allow might be very useful in the home.60

While the girls were being taught sick nursing so that ‘a reserve of women taught to do what is essentially women’s work’ was created for Leicester’s future needs, the boys had the opportunity to learn ambulance skills for the St. John’s Ambulance certificates.61 For women of all classes the assumption was that their greatest strength lay within the domestic sphere. When considering a replacement candidate for Miss Semphill who resigned to work for the London School Board, the Board felt that

None of the offices she filled seemed so suitable to be put under a lady as the inspection of infant schools, as there was a special need for those qualities which nature had given to woman.62

As Hollis notes the women who served on the School Board were ‘strikingly child-centred’.63 The women were particularly concerned with handicapped, neglected and wayward children.64 For example, Mrs Chambers along with her husband and two of her colleagues took a special interest in the education of deaf mutes.65 As noted earlier, all of the women in Leicester, apart from Mrs Saunderson, served on the Industrial School committee. In December 1890 it was Mrs Evans and one

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60 LC, 24 November, 1900.
61 LC, 9 September, 1899.
62 SBC, 23 April, 1881.
63 Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 189.
64 Ibid., p. 190.
65 LC, 26 December, 1885.
of her colleagues who visited the various Industrial Schools, other than Desford, in which Leicester children were now spending their time. They had found the schools to which the children had been sent ‘the best outside their own.’\textsuperscript{66} In addition, in 1892, both Mrs Chambers and Mrs Evans were appointed as managers of the Industrial School.\textsuperscript{67}

This ‘child-centred’ approach was most evident in a speech which Annie Clephan gave at a public meeting in connection with the forthcoming School Board election in 1894.\textsuperscript{68} Speaking of various aspects of the Board’s educational work, she commented that for her the kindergarten was ‘the prettiest and perhaps the most soul awakening of all the work going on in their schools and she considered that it was of the highest importance that this department should be carried out most efficiently.’\textsuperscript{69} With remarkable foresight she continued to express concern that there was too big a gap between the kindergarten and the first standards of the ‘big schools’ where the young children missed their games and they had to expend their superfluous energy in a manner which teachers regarded as naughtiness. She considered that with the work of the two lower standards should be blended something of the games of the kindergarten and if she were returned she would do what she could to bring this change.\textsuperscript{70}

Annie Clephan again expressed her forward-looking approach to education when she spoke to the Women’s Liberal Association about her work on the Board. For her ‘education ought to be arranged to suit the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[66]LC, 20 December, 1890.
\item[67]LC, 12 March, 1892.
\item[68]LC, 24 November, 1894.
\item[69]Ibid.
\item[70]Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
degree of capacity in the child."\textsuperscript{71} She also spoke forcibly at a Board meeting in October 1900 on a report which had been laid before the Leicester School Board on education at the Paris exhibition and the working of French schools. She showed herself to be very up-to-date with educational thinking and was prepared to use her position to attempt to shape policy in Leicester’s schools. For her, four points in the report particularly stood out. Firstly, the universal application of the kindergarten principles i.e. the adoption of Froebel principles; secondly, the different attitude of the Continental countries with regard to manual and technical instruction (in England practical education was seen as an ‘expensive fad’ rather than being valued for its commercial benefits); thirdly the comparatively low importance attached to teacher training in England and fourthly the benefits of smaller classes for both teachers and pupils. She argued that generally England had not yet grasped the value of seeing education as a whole, there was still too large a gap between infant and secondary education and education for most ended too soon. Moreover, there was too much emphasis on theoretical learning, whereas children learnt best through ‘the faculties of sight and touch.’\textsuperscript{72} Arguably the move towards ‘child-centred’ education in the twentieth century stemmed from the earlier concern shown by women such as Annie Clephan.

The non-attendance of children and the age at which they left school were further problems with which the Leicester School Board concerned itself. Martin notes that as far as school attendance was

\textsuperscript{71}LC, 24 November, 1900.
\textsuperscript{72}SBC, 2 October, 1900.
concerned, there was a particular problem for girls. Girls were frequently expected to help out at home with domestic chores or with the child-minding of younger siblings. Girls’ non-attendance was, however, not seen as so much of a problem compared with that of boys who were dealt with more severely by the authorities. Certainly the Board was not always receiving the support of working-class parents over compulsory school attendance. In July 1880 a meeting was held in the Temperance Hall in Leicester to protest against a resolution which had been passed by the Board requiring working-class children to attend school until they had passed the fourth instead of the third standard.

Annie Clephan’s belief that education ended too soon led her to particularly champion the Leicester evening classes. There were eight centres in Leicester and in 1890 there were 450 girls and boys attending them. By 1894 1,400 were in regular attendance which Miss Clephan claimed ‘spoke volumes for their increasing popularity and usefulness’. For her they ‘afforded a greater test of the real value of education than did the day schools.’ She was also aware of the value of female representatives as managers of the centres as an encouragement to girls. When a new code for evening classes was issued which abandoned examinations but relied on inspectors’ reports instead to judge the work accomplished, she appealed especially for the assistance of the lady managers in that way, as it was impossible for their one representative on the Board – even with the hearty and

74 SBC, 17 July, 1880.
75 LC, 24 November, 1894.
76 Ibid.
valuable co-operation of the Board’s inspectress - to do more than very occasionally see the work in progress at each centre.\textsuperscript{77}

Annie Clephan clearly found her work to be fulfilling as she entered wholeheartedly into the challenges which it presented to improve the education for working-class children in Leicester’s schools. By the time she retired from her work in 1900 it was with some justification that the Chairman praised her for her ‘unusual grasp of educational matters.’\textsuperscript{78} Interestingly at the same time her male colleague, Mr Goddard, who was also retiring, was praised for his ‘special knowledge in regard to building construction’ demonstrating the ‘sexual division of labour’ on the School Board and emphasising the women’s ‘child-centred’ approach.

Annie Clephan was not the only female Board member to believe that there needed to be women on the Board to support female teachers and pupils. When Agnes Archer Evans and Sarah Gimson stood for election in 1900 they were asked by the \textit{Midland Free Press} their reasons for doing so and both gave gendered replies. As well as pointing out that she had experience as a teacher herself (at Belmont House School) and that she had sufficient leisure time to devote to the work, Agnes Archer Evans also justified her candidature by stating ‘the fact that I am a woman, and that a certain number of women are needed in all School Boards.’\textsuperscript{79} Sarah Gimson of the Church Party similarly commented that

\begin{itemize}
  \item In the infant schools and in the needlework and household training of the girls there is special work for a woman…I recognise the supreme importance of moral training, and I wish that we could give
\end{itemize}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{77} SBC, 30 September, 1893. \\
\textsuperscript{78} LC, 24 November, 1900. \\
\textsuperscript{79} Midland Free Press, 1 December, 1900.
\end{flushright}
the children such Christian teaching as should bear fruit to good living.\textsuperscript{80}

The women, however, met with opposition from some men to their increased representation on the Board. Some more Radical sections of the press felt that the issue of gender was indeed the reason why women were not represented in greater numbers. When in December 1891 Annie Clephan was selected by the local Liberal Association to stand for election to the School Board as one of the ‘Liberal Nine’ but Charlotte Ellis was rejected in spite of the strong support of the Revd. Page Hopps of the Unitarian Great Meeting, the \textit{Wyvern} reported that

\begin{quote}
Oh man, man how can you be so cruel? The dear ladies had set their heart on having two members on the School Board and you have plonked down your great 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.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

The women on the Leicester School Board were mostly part of a middle-class culture which aimed to improve the lives of the town’s citizens. Women such as Annie Clephan with a genuine interest in education achieved some success. They largely accepted contemporary ideals of femininity and the idea of ‘social mothering’, to which School Board work particularly lent itself, built on their previous philanthropic work

\textsuperscript{80} Midland Free Press, 1 December 1900.
\textsuperscript{81} The Wyvern, 4 December, 1891, quoted in Aucott, \textit{Women of Courage}, p. 54. See also LRO: 11D57/2 Leicester Liberal Association Minute Book, meeting of the executive committee, 13 November 1891 and meeting of general committee, 25 November, 1891.
and at the same time created a path for women to enter the public sphere at a time when they were barred from parliamentary politics.\textsuperscript{82}

However their work on the School Board could be influenced by their own social standing. The emphasis for working-class girls was on the need to acquire practical domestic skills such as needlework, cookery and laundry work. The School Board women themselves would most probably have employed domestic servants to perform such tasks and at worst it is arguable that they had a clear self-interest in working-class girls being educated to be domestic servants. In 1900 the Leicester branch of the NUWW (which drew its membership from women of the same social background and included Annie Clephan) was addressed by a Mrs Nuttall on a scheme to solve the current difficulties of recruiting domestic servants in Leicester and on ways to encourage girls into service.\textsuperscript{83}

The experience which women gained serving on the School Board assisted the cause of middle-class women. They gradually became more at ease with speaking in public and with challenging educational orthodoxy. This was especially true of Annie Clephan who served from 1891 until the School Board ceased in 1900.\textsuperscript{84} After this she continued to pursue her interest in educational matters and in 1907 opened a home for ‘feeble minded girls’ in Leicester as well as becoming chairwoman of the Special Schools committee.\textsuperscript{85} This willingness to speak out was similarly true of Mrs Saunderson. She was apparently the only woman to question

\textsuperscript{83} LRO: 16D58/1, \textit{Annual report of the Leicester branch of the National Union of Women Workers}, (1900).
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}
procedure as well as to break through another barrier and serve on what had been seen as ‘male’ committees. Overall this pioneering group of women were determined to serve and improve their local community in matters of education and at the same time took a significant step towards advancing the entrance of women into the public life of Leicester.

5.3 The Work of Women Poor Law Guardians

Women arrived onto the Boards of Guardians at a later date partly due to a less favourable electoral system. School Board women did not have to be selected by a ward committee and the voting system was both cumulative and unweighted. In the guardian elections women had to face a ward committee and the votes were weighted so that the more property owned, the more votes one possessed. In addition to the difficulties of meeting the property qualification, occasionally women had to face male returning officers and party agents who were hostile to women taking part in public life and searched for reasons to disqualify them. It thus became notoriously difficult to find women to fulfil vacancies at election time and women’s groups frequently complained about the situation. Leicester was no exception in experiencing such difficulties. In April 1889, the Englishwoman’s Review reprinted a letter which the Revd. J. Page Hopps, the minister of the Great Meeting in Leicester, had sent to the local press. In this letter the Revd. Hopps who supported female suffrage and women’s increased representation in public life, expressed some of the

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86 Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 207.
87 Ibid., p. 208.
88 Ibid., pp. 205-8.
difficulties which had stood in the way of finding women who were both willing and qualified to stand for election in Leicester.

It has taken us three years to find one or two ladies who are both financially qualified and willing to undertake the far from agreeable work of acting on the Board of Guardians. Ladies have a natural shrinking from public life. They do not scramble for “honours” as men do. And yet they are sorely needed among the women and children dealt with by the Board.\textsuperscript{89}

In Leicester initial obstacles were encountered particularly with the ward committees. The Revd. Hopps noted that having persuaded Fanny Fullagar to stand ‘after some difficulty’, she was finally accepted by the All Saints’ Ward, but the nomination of Mary Else for Middle St. Margaret’s Ward had been received late by her committee and only after another male candidate made way for her. Consequently the committee refused to accept her nomination and therefore the Revd. Hopps appealed directly to ratepayers not to allow ‘a little bit of “red tape” to keep you back from doing a great service to the town.’\textsuperscript{90} As a result of the election Fanny Fullagar was elected in 1889 as Leicester’s first female poor law guardian and Mary Else, although she was not elected, achieved 1,190 votes despite the opposition of the ward committee.\textsuperscript{91} Although Fanny Fullagar was the first elected female Poor Law guardian for Leicester, she was not the first to stand for election. In 1881 Frances Gill had stood for election in St. Martin’s Ward and received 320 votes. Although this was not sufficient to elect her it was ‘considered a satisfactory result as it is the first time any lady has been nominated in this capacity in Leicester.’\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{89} The Englishwoman’s Review, 15 April, 1889.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} LC, 25 May, 1889.
\textsuperscript{92} The Englishwoman’s Review, 14 May, 1881.
By the 1890s the Leicester Poor Law Union recognised that the property qualification was too high and ought to be reduced. In October 1891 the guardians passed a motion calling on the Local Government Board to reduce the qualification for the office of guardian in Leicester from £30 to £12. Fanny Fullagar, the only woman guardian at this time, supported the motion. The Local Government Board declined to agree, but intimated it would support a £5 reduction. By May 1892, the guardians were also pressing for a one person, one vote system arrangement for the guardians’ elections in the same manner as that used for the Municipal Elections. Eventually the Parish Councils Act abolished the qualification in 1894 enabling the election of guardians on a wider class basis. The old system of voting was also discarded to be replaced by voting by ballot. There were now sixteen wards in the Leicester Union, elections were to be held triennially and three guardians were to be elected for each of the sixteen wards. It was thus made easier for women from a wider variety of backgrounds to stand for election.

Fanny Fullagar served for three years from 1889-1892 as the sole female guardian of the poor. Thereafter female representation gradually increased during the 1890s and particularly after 1894 and then declined as table 5.1 below for the period 1889 - 1904 illustrates.

93 LRO: G/12/8a/26 Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union, September 1890-February 1892, October 1891.
94 LRO: G/12/8a/27 Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union, February 1892-January 1893, May 1892.
95 LRO: G/12/8a/29 , Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union, February 1894-February 1895.
Table 5.1: Number of years during which women guardians served (1889-1904)

As can be seen some of the earliest women became long-serving members of the Board, Fanny Fullagar serving for fifteen years, Emily Bosworth for eleven years and Charlotte Ellis and Marianne Willder for nine years. Both Dr Mary Royce and Mary Ewing died in office. Fanny Fullagar and Emily Bosworth were eventually defeated in the 1904 poll. Charlotte Ellis declined to stand again in 1901. Isabel Ellis attributed this to sleeplessness caused by the ‘grim and depressing experiences’ which she encountered as a guardian and more especially when the Board of Guardians came into conflict with the law over the issue of compulsory
vaccination. It was even feared that this might result in imprisonment.\textsuperscript{96}

The individual social work which women performed with the poor was indeed frequently unpleasant.\textsuperscript{97} However the \textit{Leicester Chronicle} commented in an editorial praising Fanny Fullagar,

A good deal of the business of a guardian of the poor is very disagreeable, and it must be especially repugnant to women, but disagreeable or not it has to be done, and Miss Fullagar is one of those who think that her sex should not shrink from it...There is no doubt that women can be of great service on Boards of Guardians.\textsuperscript{98}

Of the above women all were members of the Liberal Party, apart from Mary Jane Bell, a shoe operative who was elected for the Wyggeston ward in 1904 for the ILP, reflecting the growing strength of the ILP in Leicester after 1893.\textsuperscript{99} They were mostly middle class and of those whose religion it has been possible to trace mostly Nonconformist. Fanny Fullagar was a Unitarian, Charlotte and Helena Ellis Quakers, Dr Mary Royce and Mary Ewing Congregationalists and Sister Dorothy Coy a Wesleyan Deaconess.

In his letter of 1889 the Revd. Hopps, by arguing that female guardians were needed to work particularly amongst other women and children, pursued women's claim to public involvement through her nurturing domestic nature. By now this had become a common argument.

As Steven King has written

\textsuperscript{98}LC, 5 March, 1892.
\textsuperscript{99} LRO: DE 4731/3 \textit{Poll book with details of the elections to the Leicester Board of Guardians}. 
The rationale of many such women was to extend the boundaries of the domestic, familial and parental, claiming for instance that involvement with women, children and the sick under the poor law was a necessary and natural extension of their domestic roles, rather than trying to subvert the notion of separate spheres.\(^\text{100}\)

During the 1880s and 1890s women’s field of work as guardians in Leicester thus expanded as they set about improving the lot of the old and infirm as well as that of women and children. In doing so they built upon their earlier philanthropic work.

Leicester, like other towns and cities, had a well-established society of ladies visiting the Workhouse long before Fanny Fullagar was elected as the first guardian in 1889 and, as mentioned in chapter three, it was partly the Visitors who paved the way for the subsequent election of female guardians. At a meeting following a recent order from the Local Government Board sanctioning the visiting of Workhouses by guardians as well as by ladies in February 1893, Mr Jones, one of the guardians, commented that he understood from the Master that there were about eighty ladies who regularly visited the Workhouse.\(^\text{101}\) This figure included ‘the Kyrle Society, the Bible women and the Melbourne Hall ‘casual’ party’ and when it was suggested that the Visitors should be supervised, although Charlotte Ellis agreed that some supervision was necessary, she nonetheless reminded the Board

that for at least 20 years there had been a society of ladies who regularly gave their services in the way of visiting the inmates…Mr Stanion thought the resolution unnecessary, and that it would reflect upon that lady members of the Board. They had never heard a word of complaint from the master about the conduct of any ladies who had been visiting the Home during the last 20 years.\(^\text{102}\)

\(^\text{101}\) LC, 18 February, 1893.
\(^\text{102}\) Ibid.
Although the proposal was subsequently dropped, the debate over women visiting the Workhouse raises the question of the degree of hostility which both female Visitors and the newly-elected female guardians still faced from some of their male colleagues. Hollis notes that in some parts of the country women faced hostility from many male guardians and from many staff.\(^{103}\) King, on the other hand, focusing on the experiences of one female guardian in Bolton in particular, argues that what might be interpreted as ‘gender tension’ is capable of many readings and that such hostility as there was seems to have been often ‘muted, ineffective and transient.’\(^{104}\)

In Leicester there are no extant diaries or letters and any degree of hostility can only be interpreted from local Liberal newspaper reports and minute books of the guardians’ meetings. King notes a comment made in March 1892 in Bolton by Mr Fullagar, the brother of Fanny Fullagar in Leicester, in which he warned female candidates not to expect ‘a bed of roses’ nor must they ‘try to boss the show because if they did it would only end in miserable failure.’\(^{105}\) As King notes, advice such as this appears to add weight to the arguments of many historians concerning the experiences of women guardians. Yet in the same month the *Leicester Chronicle* reported that the Mayor of Leicester argued for the election of more female guardians to strengthen the existing Board, noting that ‘Miss Fullagar might be assisted in the work which she had so well begun.’\(^{106}\)

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\(^{103}\) Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, pp. 205-231.


\(^{106}\) *LC*, 5 March, 1892.
June 1893 The Wyvern was praising her for ‘clearing away the jungle of prejudice and distrust, and making a clear and easy way for all succeeding lady guardians.’ At a crowded meeting in the Council Chamber a tribute was paid to Fanny Fullagar by several local ladies and gentlemen who were so impressed by her work that they presented her with an illuminated address, which read:-

Now that your term of office has expired, the undersigned, on behalf of many others, desire to congratulate you as the first woman Guardian of the poor for Leicester. You have proved by an experiment what was advocated as a theory, and Leicester now knows what work there is for women on the Board of Guardians, and how fitting some women are to do it. Receive our heartiest thanks and our good wishes for what we hope will be the many years of humble service in the same womanly sphere.

The Wyvern noted that if anyone pictured Miss Fullagar as

the typical political female, with strident voice and aggressive demeanour, he could not be further wrong. Yet she has firm convictions, and is capable of giving up a great deal in support of them.

It would appear from sympathetic Liberal local newspaper reports such as these that Miss Fullagar had overcome much of the initial opposition there might have been to her election as Leicester’s first female Poor Law guardian and this had been achieved by her not acting in an ‘unwomanly’ fashion.

However other evidence indicates that Miss Fullagar and the other female guardians had encountered some hostility on the Board. A few months earlier in February 1893 The Wyvern had reported

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107 The Wyvern, 30 June, 1893.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
I am told that some of the sterner sex on the Board don’t altogether appreciate the presence of ladies. The wretches! For five pounds, or less, I’d publish the names of these anti-womanists. Let them be thankful that the ladies will condescend to sit on the Board with them.  

Furthermore by January 1895 even *The Wyvern*, the same Radical Liberal journal which had so strongly defended the election of lady guardians had changed its tune, printing a vitriolic comment about them in its column ‘Under the Clock Tower’. The writer objected to women not on the grounds of their sex, but because he felt that they were unduly unsympathetic in their attitudes.

I am very sorry to see the modern tendency to elect women on to Poor Law Boards: for some of these feminine legislators are not possessed of a great deal of what someone has called the milk of human kindness, particularly where their erring sisters are concerned and with whom Boards have often to deal. Then again, a poor married woman, with eight or ten children, who applies for relief, cannot expect much sympathy from old maids who have been nursing tomcats all their lives.

As discussed in chapter three and with regard to School Board women, the involvement of women in philanthropic and social work was often complicated by social class. Summers notes with reference to the lady visitor, ‘although she frequently spoke of herself as contributing a distinctive female element to social work…she offered help and patronage from a social height which precluded any specific sense of female solidarity.’ Eileen Yeo also notes the contradictions inherent in the way women interpreted dominant discourses so as to empower femininity. By doing so, social differences among women were often sharpened: ‘within

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110 *The Wyvern*, 10 February, 1893.
family discourse, women from middle-class and gentry backgrounds could unwittingly use languages of motherhood and sisterhood as instruments of power, and end up constraining the possibilities of other women.¹¹³ The 1894 Act was therefore highly significant because it opened the way for women from a lower social background to take part in local government as Poor Law guardians.

Hollis notes that female guardians, especially those from a Charity Organisation Society (COS) background, were considered to be ‘tough and judgemental’ particularly in the 1880s before more women from a wider background were elected. This was a major contributory factor in the unpopularity of some of the earliest female guardians. Fanny Fullagar vehemently defended the work of the COS arguing that it was the most useful charity in Leicester. In October 1892 at a discussion by the guardians concerning the administration of outdoor relief she expressed the opinion ‘that it was very important that they should work harmoniously with the Charity Organisation Society.’¹¹⁴ As late as 1909 she revealed the lack of understanding between herself and the poor in Leicester when she claimed that the main causes of pauperism were ‘decidedly drink…also gambling, and the introduction of machinery, lax administration of relief, and trade unions’¹¹⁵ Her harsh solution to the problem of deserted wives was to send the wife and children to the Workhouse in the belief that

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¹¹³ E. Yeo (ed.), Radical Femininity – Women’s Self-Representation in the Public Sphere (Manchester, 1998), p. 16.
¹¹⁴ LC, 8 October, 1892.
¹¹⁵ cd.4835, British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, 1909, Appendix no. CXXX, Statement of Evidence by Fanny Elizabeth Fullagar.
men would then be less likely to abandon their home. Hollis argues that ‘All their philanthropic experience notwithstanding, the class, cultural, socio-geographical distance of women guardians from the working poor was never more clearly marked than on matters of out-relief.’ Women such as Fanny Fullagar with a COS background did tend to call for stricter enquiries into applications for outdoor relief.

There was clearly a clash between a nurturing womanly ideology on the one hand and a harsh COS-style ideology on the other. Lewis argues that women such as Octavia Hill and Helen Bosanquet believed they were treating the needs of the poor in a holistic way through changing the habits of the family. The reality of working with the poor could be very contradictory as the evidence from Leicester demonstrates. Occasionally, there were women who denied that pauperism was a moral disease and looked deeper into the true causes of poverty. As early as 1877, women’s consciences had been particularly aroused by Mrs Nassau Senior’s report on workhouse girls. Such women did call for sufficient outdoor relief especially for the elderly and deserving poor. When Dr Mary Royce died in 1892 the chairman of the guardians noted that ‘They all respected her extreme sympathies, because, although they could not always go the full length with them, they were always with the poor.’ The guardians noted that at a recent meeting, when all had been unwilling to help a ‘worthless

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116 cd. 4835, B.P.P.,HC,1909, Appendix no. CXXX.
117 Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 288.
119 Hollis, Ladies Elect, pp. 204-5.
120 By 1909 even Fanny Fullagar looked forward to the day when Old Age Pensions would be provided as mentioned in chapter three.
121 LC, 5 November, 1892.
man’, Mary Royce had begged them “Let us give him another chance”.\textsuperscript{122} Mary Royce’s face-to-face work among poor boys and young men in Leicester as well as her work as a doctor may have led her to have a greater understanding of the realities of poverty.

Some of the men clearly thought that the women were too generous. In 1892 one of the male guardians, Mr Evans, raised the question at a meeting of the Board of whether the ‘lady guardians in particular were given to granting a larger amount of relief than was actually necessary to meet the wants of the people applying.’\textsuperscript{123} Although the question was dismissed by the chairman, there was clearly concern by some male guardians over this issue. Mr Islip also thought that they should be very careful how they administered their outdoor relief. In some cases women who received assistance from the rates were thus enabled to do charring and other work cheaper than their neighbours, and thus they brought down the labour market. Then with regard to deserted women, they were exposed to the risk of collusion with their husbands, and thus of being imposed upon. Some of these cases were no doubt very hard, but in the majority of them he thought it likely that the women knew where their husbands were, and got money from them.\textsuperscript{124}

Hollis notes the difference between the harsher attitudes still espoused by the women guardians in London and the South who were still speaking COS language during this period and those from the more industrial north.\textsuperscript{125} Such a softening in attitudes in Leicester especially towards the elderly poor particularly after 1894 is demonstrated by the following incident.

\textsuperscript{123} LC, 13 August, 1892.
\textsuperscript{124} LC, 8 October, 1892.
\textsuperscript{125} Hollis, \textit{Ladies Elect}, pp. 290.
At a meeting in Leicester in December 1894, when the question of outdoor relief was raised again, Mrs Emily Bosworth in support of a motion that the Board should increase the amount of relief to the elderly to enable them to live out their lives in their own homes, said that she did not believe that they gave old people sufficient money on which to live.\textsuperscript{126} Mrs Bosworth herself came from a different social background than most of the other female guardians. In the 1891 census her occupation is listed as a dressmaker and her husband was listed as a shoe machine operator. \textit{The Wyvern} noted that although she was generally averse to women speaking in public she was not afraid to voice her opinion ‘lucidly and effectively’ when necessary. The newspaper argued that she was possibly the most useful woman on the Board.

Just as there is a special mission for working men candidates on public bodies, so is there a great need of working women, and Mrs Bosworth will not, we are sure, mind us calling her a working woman. The unfortunate people of the weaker sex, who have to seek the aid of the Board, are glad to have one of their own sex to pour out their troubles to, and they are still more glad when they can find one who does not belong to the “fine lady” class. We have known women who would rather face masculine enquiry than submit to the want of sympathy which they suspect, if they do not experience, at the hands of the \textit{genus} “lady”. There is nothing “starchy” about Mrs Bosworth. She is a homely, approachable sort of woman, whom no one would ever fear to confide in, and her value on the Board is all the greater on this account.\textsuperscript{127}

Mrs Mary Ewing was also sympathetic to the plight of the elderly. When concern was expressed by Mr Stanion that such a resolution would make people less thrifty and more idle and indolent, Mrs Ewing replied ‘that there was no fear that the anticipation of 4s. per week would make people

\begin{footnotes}
\item[126] LC, 1 December, 1894.
\item[127] \textit{The Wyvern}, 1 April, 1898.
\end{footnotes}
idle and look forward to the time when they would be able to claim that sum.\textsuperscript{128}

In 1895 female guardians were still popular with the electorate. If the tide was beginning to turn against the earliest female guardians, this was not yet apparent. The women who were elected in 1895 were very successful in the polls. Fanny Fullagar and Mrs Emily Bosworth both topped their polls out of five and seven candidates respectively in Newton and St. Margaret's Wards; Mrs Ewing and Charlotte Ellis came second out of six candidates in Latimer and Belgrave Wards and Mrs Marianne Wilder was third out of five in De Montfort Ward.\textsuperscript{129} It was not until 1904 that both Fanny Fullagar and Mrs Bosworth were defeated in the polls.\textsuperscript{130} The Liberal newspaper \textit{The Leicester Chronicle} felt that they owed their defeat at this election to a particularly vigorous campaign by the Labour Party who made allegations, which were ‘tinctured with more imagination than accuracy’, and particularly directed against Fullagar and Bosworth concerning the treatment of the poor by female guardians in general.\textsuperscript{131}

Considering Mrs Bosworth’s background and approach, it may be that she suffered at the polls through association with Fanny Fullagar.

How successful were the women guardians in achieving their goal of domesticating and reforming the Workhouse? King argues that we should beware of unfavourable broad generalizations drawn from the experiences of a few prominent national activists. It is more appropriate to

\textsuperscript{128} LC, 1 December, 1894.
\textsuperscript{129} LRO: DE 4731/3 Poll Book with details of elections to Leicester Board of Guardians.
\textsuperscript{130} LRO:DE4731/3 Poll Book with details of elections.
\textsuperscript{131} LC, 2 April, 1904.
use ‘local yardsticks’ by which to judge the contribution they made.\textsuperscript{132} Digby is quite positive in her assessment of the achievements of women guardians in spite of the ‘more moralistic’ approach of the earliest female guardians, arguing that it was women who led many of the changes in policy towards the young, old, sick, handicapped and fallen.\textsuperscript{133} Hollis recognises their concern and their achievements particularly in domesticating the workhouse, the ‘extended household’.\textsuperscript{134}

The female guardians in Leicester had some success particularly within those areas which can be considered to be an extension of domestic social concern. Women guardians pursued a gendered mission, arguing that there was plenty of work to do without, as Fanny Fullagar commented, ‘in any way usurping the man’s part. The men had plenty to attend to as Guardians which women could not do, and the best plan was to share the work, each taking the part most suited to them.’\textsuperscript{135} Once elected, as was true of the women sitting on the School Board, they served on those committees which were considered to be most appropriate for their sex. Thus in April 1896 when the women were assigned to various committees no women sat on the finance or the building committees, but they did serve on the Cottage Homes, grocery, religious services, midwifery, boarding out and lunacy committees.\textsuperscript{136} These were the areas where it was felt that women could make their greatest contribution.

\textsuperscript{132} King, Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920, pp. 16-19.
\textsuperscript{134} Hollis, Ladies Elect, pp. 247-82 & p. 286.
\textsuperscript{135} LC, 5 March, 1892.
\textsuperscript{136} LRO: G/12/8a/31, Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union March 1896-March 1897.
Concern for elderly people within the workhouse was one area where women guardians particularly devoted their energies. Thus one of the earliest projects which Fanny Fullagar pursued on her election as a guardian was the initiation of a type of occupational therapy scheme for old people in the Workhouse. This was along the lines of the Brabazon schemes introduced by Lady Meath in 1882. In June 1890, Miss Fullagar requested that the Ladies Visiting Committee, headed by Mrs J. Ellis, be allowed to extend the scope of their activities from merely reading to the old and infirm to teaching them to knit and sew and other types of fancy work to relieve the boredom of their lives. The House Committee readily agreed to the scheme. By November 1890 Fanny Fullagar reported to the committee that the scheme had been running for three weeks and they met on a Wednesday afternoon and spent about an hour and a half with their pupils. Mr Lambert had provided a list of one hundred and forty potential inmates, out of which they had initially selected seventeen candidates and fourteen women had volunteered their services. The Leicester Workhouse Brabazon Society continued to run very successfully for several years with Fanny Fullagar acting as the Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. In 1897 one of the men involved in the Brabazon scheme, Richard Wilson, won a prize for fancy knitting at a national competition. The money raised that year allowed them to buy small presents at Christmas and Easter and to purchase a piano for the men’s Imbecile

137 Hollis, Ladies Elect, pp. 280-1.
138 LC, 14 June, 1890.
139 LRO: G/12/8a/26, Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union, Sept. 1890-Feb. 1892.
140 LC, 20 November, 1897.
Ward. As the tenth annual report confirmed the scheme was making steady progress

both as regards the quality of the work and the funds gained at the annual sale. As a proof of the humble way in which the committee began, it was stated that the first sale only realised £2, but since then there had been a steady increase until last year £50 was cleared…This year the committee hope to purchase another piano (the fourth) for the women’s infirmary.141

The above report confirms Hollis’s point that some of the Brabazon scheme work was excellent. As in other parts of the country goods were sold and the money spent on treats, pianos being particularly popular.142

Fanny Fullagar continued to be involved in the Brabazon Society after she ceased to be a guardian in 1904.

The Brabazon scheme was not the only way in which women engaged with the older inhabitants of the Workhouse. In August 1892, the chairman of the House Committee, Mr Newbury, at a meeting of the Board moved that

the thanks of the Board be given to Dr Mary Royce for her gift of a bagatelle board and chess and draught boards for the use of the inmates. He wished to publicly acknowledge their appreciation of the efforts of the ladies to make the Workhouse as comfortable for the old people as it was possible to do143

It was also a woman-led initiative which led to the establishment of a library at the Workhouse. After Fanny Fullagar’s successful earlier appeal in 1891 for books for the Cottage Homes, in 1893 she appealed through a letter to the newspapers for newspapers, periodicals and books for the library at the Workhouse.144 Fanny had taken the time and the trouble

141 LC, 1 December, 1900.
142 Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 281.
143 LC, 20 August, 1892.
144 LC, 26 August, 1893.
personally to visit the Workhouse at Nottingham and having seen the efforts which were being made there, she felt that more could be done in Leicester.

Besides having a plentiful supply of books, papers, &c, one lady goes often to teach the tiny children to sing, and a gentleman once a week to instruct any young lads who are waiting there to be drafted off to “the schools”, as ours do before being sent to the Cottage Homes. Also one lady who had a nice garden, made 40lbs. of rhubarb jam which she meant to give her old people in the infirmary. If such things can be done in Nottingham, why not in Leicester?\textsuperscript{145}

In spite of her strict COS views, here Fanny Fullagar’s actions show a concern for the aged poor.

A further area of concern for the women guardians lay with the young mothers who were in their charge. At a time when illegitimacy was high, middle-class women often tried to rescue these girls from both moral and physical danger.\textsuperscript{146} In September 1892 Mary Ewing gave notice to the Board that she planned to propose an application to the Local Government Board for the establishment and maintenance of a home for young mothers on discharge from the Union, for at least one week free of charge, to enable them to find work and seek a fresh start ‘under the kindly supervision of those who seek their well-being.’\textsuperscript{147} A few months later she was one of a group of women involved in the establishment of Leicester’s ‘Workhouse Aid Society’ which aimed to help the young mothers when they left the Workhouse by providing them with new clothes and helping them to find employment.\textsuperscript{148} After her sudden death in 1896,

\textsuperscript{145} LC, 26 August 1893.
\textsuperscript{146} Hollis, \textit{Ladies Elect}, pp.267-271.
\textsuperscript{147} LC, 24 September, 1892.
\textsuperscript{148} LC, 18 February, 1893.
the chairman of the Leicester Board of Guardians commented that 'the necessity for lady guardians was now generally recognised, and Mrs Ewing was one of those who did her share of the particular work which those ladies were best fitted to carry out. She did it quietly, but she did it well'. She was by all accounts, therefore, a local example of what Digby has described as a woman who used ‘so-called ‘female’ client-centred skills rather than what were then considered ‘male’ management skills…it was quiet work by ladies, or those adopting the demeanour of ladies.'

Maternity provision within the Leicester Union was another area which clearly fell within the tasks deemed suitable for women guardians on the Board. During 1894 it fell to a Committee, consisting of the five female guardians of Leicester, to investigate the manner in which the parish midwife discharged her duties and to make any suitable recommendations. In November the women presented the Board with the first full report of their investigations. They had unanimously concluded that more time and attention ought to be given in each case both to the mother and child, and after taking Medical opinion and conferring with the Relieving Officers, we have come to the conclusion that in a large Union like Leicester, the entire time of the midwife should be at the service of the Board.

They recommended that a fully trained certificated midwife be employed for £45p.a., although this recommendation was later raised to £65 after they found it difficult to find someone who met their requirements. The

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149 *The Woman’s Signal*, 6 February, 1896.
other guardians, after further consideration, approved the report and appointed Miss Lily Masters in 1895. Negrine argues that ‘The guardians’ priority with economy seems apparent in their preference for midwives’.\textsuperscript{153} However, whilst it cannot be denied that economy was indeed a consideration for the Board, the female guardians who presented the report were concerned with more than this. Their second report of February 1895 noted that

> After careful consideration of the matter, we feel thoroughly convinced that it would not only be more economical, but better in every way to have a fully trained certificated Midwife. If the cases were undertaken by Medical Men, not only the expense would be considerably increased but the nursing and after care of the mother and child would be no better than it is at present, as it would have to be left to untrained, ignorant (though perhaps kind) neighbour, who would not be able to spare the time to do all that is requisite, and who would know nothing of the modern and what is now considered the safe and proper treatment of such cases.\textsuperscript{154}

Unfortunately the guardians then entered into a lengthy battle with the Local Government Board who insisted that Miss Masters only attend cases with a doctor. The Ladies’ Committee showed that they had some considerable appreciation of the realities of working-class life by emphasising the importance of both ante and post-natal care and of the mother’s well-being by urging the Local Government Board to reconsider. They accepted that a doctor was required for difficult cases, but still felt that since the employment of Nurse Masters

> The care and attention devoted to each individual case has been all that your Committee could have wished...We are therefore of the opinion that in view of the assistance rendered to these poor people before and after the Confinement by the Nurse, help which could

\textsuperscript{154} LRO: G/12/8a/29, \textit{Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union}, Feb. 1894-Feb. 1895.
not be given by any Doctor, that the arrangements made fully meet all that is necessary.\footnote{LRO: G/12/8a/30, Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law Union, March 1895-Feb. 1896.}

Eventually in 1896 Nurse Masters resigned after the insistence by the Board that a doctor attend all maternity cases meant that she had little work to do. The Midwifery Committee subsequently felt it to be unnecessary and too costly to appoint the services of a trained midwifery nurse at £65p.a. as well as a doctor and therefore proposed to use ‘respectable women with sufficient knowledge of nursing to follow medical instructions’, even though they were convinced that this would lower standards.\footnote{LRO: G/12/8a/31, Minute Book of the Leicester Poor Law union, March 1896-March 1897.} Throughout the committee of ladies insisted that they were correct in their judgement that it was in the best interests of the mother and child as well as making more economic sense to pursue the path they had chosen. This incident illustrates the conflicting interests with which the female guardians found themselves presented. Whilst being aware of the interests of the ratepayers, they also held as a high priority the welfare of the women on outdoor relief who required the maternity services of the Union to the extent that they were prepared to challenge the ruling from the Local Government Board.

Hollis writes that ‘Another group of inmates that had reason to bless the arrival of women guardians were the feeble-minded.’\footnote{Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 276.} In Leicester this became the particular concern of Charlotte Ellis who drew the matter to the attention of the Leicester Board when she pressed for improved accommodation and special training for the ‘imbeciles’ and epileptics. She was requested to enquire further into the matter, receiving reports from
other Boards on their policies. From this the Board began to look for suitable sites on which buildings could be erected to house this particular group and eventually in July 1898 a site was purchased in North Evington. Charlotte Ellis showed that she was capable of considerable forward thinking at a time when epileptics were still considered by some to be possessed, by claiming that it was also in the best interest of this group to be separated from the ‘imbeciles’.

One could not estimate how painful it must be for epileptics who were sane part of their time to be mixed up with those who were not of sound mind, and for this and other reasons she hoped that the Board would adopt the report of the Committee.

The well-being of children in their care was another area where women focused their energies. Thus the Cottage Homes at Countesthorpe were of particular interest and concern. King points out that in Bolton female guardians actively inspected cottage homes and dominated the sub-committees that established and equipped them. They were instrumental in arranging leisure activities for the children as well as the occasional treat. This aspect of work also particularly appealed to some of the women guardians in Leicester. Childcare was a particular concern for Mary Bosworth, Marianne Willder and Helena Ellis, who sat on a Committee of twelve from 1897. The Superintendent of the Cottage Home’s Report for 1899 for example stated that

The Band of Hope Entertainments have been regularly kept up during the past winter, and have been much appreciated. Mrs Willder, who has taken a keen interest in this matter, has been

\[158\] LC, 2 July, 1898.
\[159\] LC, 12 February, 1898. See also Hollis, Ladies Elect, p. 278.
\[161\] Ellis, Records, p. 314.
instrumental in securing a variety of lecturers to conduct the meetings, which are always thoroughly enjoyed by the children.¹⁶²

When Charlotte Ellis wrote to the *Leicester Guardian* in 1901 to encourage the electorate to vote for more Liberal women candidates, she especially focused on the women guardians’ work at the Cottage Homes:

> the pains which they take to place the girls in service, to fit them with clothes, to see the mistresses and show their constant interest in these young girls is most admirable. If a girl leaves her first place, they visit her, and if a fresh situation is not to be found immediately, they arrange that she goes for a week or more to a respectable lodging, to obviate a return to the Workhouse, the Workhouse Aid Association often giving some help in the cost. Mrs Bosworth and Mrs Willder know who are the bright girls in the schools and who are sickly and feeble, needing tender care.¹⁶³

It was precisely the need for more women to undertake such nurturing work which made women more politically aware and focused some women guardians on the necessity of extending the Parliamentary franchise to women so that they might have the greatest possible influence on policy. At a meeting of the Leicester Women’s Liberal Association in 1894, Charlotte Ellis said there was more local government work ‘especially fitted for women than four women can do thoroughly’ and hoped their number would be increased. At the same meeting, Miss Logan declared that ‘the refusal to extend the Parliamentary franchise to women was not only unjust but unwise. Their help was necessary in settling all special questions affecting women and children.’¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² LRO, G/12/8/1-4 *Cottage Homes Committee Minute Book* 1897-1900.
¹⁶⁴ LC, 13 October, 1894.
5.4 Conclusion

The women who served on the School Board and as Poor Law guardians built on their own experiences in philanthropy and that of previous generations of women in Leicester as they aimed to improve the lives of others in Leicester through the new opportunities which presented themselves in local government from 1870 onwards. They largely accepted prevailing notions of femininity and domesticity and used the contemporary ideal of ‘woman’s work’ to involve themselves in a public way in the middle-class improving culture of the town. Whilst believing that both men and women had a role in both public and private life, they viewed men and women as ‘essentially different, although equivalent and complementary’ reflecting at a local level the views of more famous feminists such as Frances Power Cobbe and Anna Jamieson.¹⁶⁵ In spite of the contradictions which could result between women’s nurturing role and COS-attitudes, the early female pioneers in local government in Leicester had some success in pursuing child-centred educational policies and in domesticating the workhouse.

The Leicester women who became members of the School Board and stood as guardians in the late nineteenth century largely came from similar backgrounds and shared common aims. They were mostly middle-class, well-educated, usually Liberal and Nonconformist and involved in a variety of overlapping organisations. Steven King traces the presence and development of a self-conscious feminist movement in Bolton in the 1890s and argues that the existence of such a group can be inferred from a

variety of overlapping interests in which the Bolton activists were involved. Similarly Moira Martin states of the women who served as guardians in Bristol between 1882 and 1914 that ‘there was a high degree of cohesion within this female elite which found expression in shared ideals and common associations.’ Similar conclusions can be drawn for the Leicester women whose shared interests and experiences had long-term effects on their own and other’s perception of women’s role in society. They became more attuned to the fact that for women to influence policy especially with regard to issues affecting women and children they needed to acquire the Parliamentary franchise and full citizenship. As well as serving in local government, many of the women later became involved in politics as members of the Women’s Liberal Association and some such as Fanny Fullagar and Charlotte Ellis joined the Leicester branch of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. It was this increased political awareness among women in Leicester which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 6  Women and Party Politics

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the involvement of middle-class women in Leicester in political parties. The focus of the chapter will fall mainly on the Liberal Party, although I shall also discuss the Conservative Party and the Primrose League because a Leicester Habitation of the Primrose League existed from 1885 and by the 1890s it could boast a substantial membership. The position of women within the emerging Independent Labour Party [hereafter the ILP] in the late 1890s will also be briefly discussed, as the growth of the Labour movement pointed the way to future political developments in Edwardian Leicester. Liberalism and Nonconformity had dominated the politics of Leicester since the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, and ‘Radical Leicester’ was known as the ‘capital of dissent’. Liberalism was the main political force within the town until at least the 1880s. The Conservatives, by contrast, made little impact in the town, their strength lying in the county. However following the Corrupt Practices Act in 1883 which made the payment of canvassers illegal as well as the widening of the electorate in the 1884 Reform Act, the Leicester and Leicestershire Conservative Club was established as well as the Leicester Habitation of the Primrose League and the Conservatives attempted to broaden their appeal to include Leicester’s working-class electorate. As Walker notes, it was largely for practical reasons that women were drawn into party politics as parties increasingly needed to

make use of women’s potential as unpaid workers and canvassers, following the passage of the above two Acts.²

Walker also notes that although women within the Liberal party were confined to female-only organisations, this could nonetheless awaken and foster a feminist awareness for some. As far as the Conservative party was concerned, women were admitted to the Primrose League in 1884 and confined to the Ladies’ Grand Council, but it was at ground level in the mixed-sex Habitations where women developed their greatest sense of political identity.³ The ILP, although it nominally supported women’s membership on equal terms as men, was still in reality a largely masculine organisation as will be demonstrated in Leicester.

Women’s greater involvement in party politics in the late nineteenth century thus served to heighten their sense of political awareness and responsibility and proved to be highly significant for the Victorian development of the campaign for female suffrage in the 1890s. In Leicester the participation of women in the Women’s Liberal Association [hereafter the LWLA] made many more aware that to have real influence especially for women and children, they needed to have the Parliamentary franchise. From the outset, female enfranchisement and party politics were closely entwined. Within the Primrose League as women proved their usefulness as unpaid party workers, a fact acknowledged by men and by women’s organisations from other parties, arguably prejudice

3 Ibid., p. 166.
against greater female involvement in public life was gradually diminished and women themselves grew in confidence in the public sphere.

6.2 The Leicester Women’s Liberal Association

In this section I will explore the LWLA at a local level, including, as far as can be ascertained from the sources, details of membership, their relationship with the local male Liberal Association, how they envisaged themselves as part of public life and how this dictated the part which they played in local public life and their attitude towards female suffrage. The sources used include newspaper reports drawn from a largely sympathetic press, the minute books of the Leicester Liberal Association which have survived and provide a male perspective of the Ladies’ Association and reports sent to the National Women’s Liberal Federation and which were published in the *Summary of Federation News*. Unfortunately the minute books of the LWLA have not survived.

As mentioned above, it was the passage of the Reform Act of 1884 and the Corrupt Practices Act which provided the catalyst for the formation of the earliest Women’s Liberal Associations. Party organisers needed to develop a network of unpaid workers and they therefore made use of the electioneering skills of women.\(^4\) In addition the Conservatives had achieved some success by harnessing the support of women in the Primrose League since 1884 and the Liberal Party also needed a local constituency organisation having lost the support of the Unionists at a local level following the split over Home Rule in 1886.

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In 1887 the Women’s Liberal Federation [hereafter the WLF] was formed and by 1892 it consisted of about 75,000 members with 360 local branches.\(^5\) The LWLA was formed in November 1890.\(^6\) It was thus not in the first wave of associations to be formed. The impetus for forming an association in Leicester appears to have begun in March 1890. A lecture had been held at the Liberal Club during which Mrs Eva McLaren, who was part of the Progressive faction of the WLF, spoke on ‘Women and Politics’.\(^7\) She had campaigned for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, worked with Caroline Ashurst Biggs and Laura Ormiston Chant to promote the return of women as Poor Law Guardians as well as becoming a vice-President of the British Women’s Temperance Association. From the outset she worked to promote women’s suffrage in the WLF.\(^8\) The all-female audience included Mrs Evans, Mrs A.H. Paget, Mrs Windley who was the wife of the Mayor, Mrs Stanyon, Miss Gittins, Miss Collett and Miss Ellis. It was the first time that such a Liberal club meeting had been held in Leicester and the object was to hear a lecture that was ‘purely educative’ from someone with experience of work in public life. The speech was designed to encourage the middle-class women of Leicester to form a Liberal Association and to press for enfranchisement not only for themselves but for ‘women who were less well off than themselves and to whom the question of the vote was a vital one because the laws of the


\(^6\) The Leicester Daily Mercury, 8 November, 1890.

\(^7\) Supplement to the Leicester Chronicle, 22 March, 1890.

land were bad and unjust towards women.’ Indeed it was their ‘duty’ to use their influence both inside and outside the home.\(^9\)

The timing of the foundation of the LWLA, its affiliation with the WLF and the progressive stance which it adopted from the outset fits in well with a pattern that has been noted elsewhere, that the earliest associations were not established in places where Liberalism was strong.\(^10\) Considering the reputation of Leicester as a town where radical Liberalism was a powerful force, the establishment of the LWLA at a relatively late date should therefore not surprise us, a fact acknowledged by Mr W. H. McLaren when he addressed the new association at its first meeting in November 1890 at the Temperance Hall. It had been said, he believed,

that Leicester being such a Radical place a Woman’s Liberal Association was not necessary. But that raised the question – why are Women’s Liberal Associations needed? He believed they were required in every place, no matter how Radical, for the sake of the women, and that the main and far and away the chief object of them was to educate the women of the constituencies in politics. Those associations should have distinctly in view the redress of those grievances under which women suffered, and there was no grievance anything like so great or acute as their total exclusion from the Parliamentary franchise.\(^11\)

It is more accurate to see the timing of the establishment of the LWLA as part of a deliberate push within the WLF by the progressive wing from 1890 to aim for the adoption of women’s suffrage as a policy and to achieve the election of the radical Countess of Carlisle as its President.\(^12\)

It has been shown that once the Countess of Carlisle joined the WLF’s

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\(^9\) Supplement to the Leicester Chronicle, 22 March, 1890.


\(^11\) The Leicester Daily Mercury, 8 November, 1890.

\(^12\) Masson, ‘For Women, For Wales and For Liberalism’, pp. 66-7.
executive committee in 1890 she became an increasing force for change, pressing for the right to achieve female suffrage. Out of her own personal wealth which she used to pay organisers, she established forty WLAs in the north.¹³ There would have been little opposition to this radical policy in Leicester. In November 1890 *The Women’s Penny Paper* published a letter which Lady Carlisle had written to the Leicester Provisional Committee declining to become their President ‘because I note that your Association is not founded on the principle of demanding Woman’s Suffrage urgently and fearlessly along with other Liberal reforms.’¹⁴ However, on receipt of this letter the Leicester Provisional Committee ‘expressed themselves as being in sympathy with my [Lady Carlisle’s] views on the Suffrage, and… renewed their invitation to me to be their President.’¹⁵ This time Lady Carlisle agreed.

In February 1891 Lady Carlisle herself addressed the Leicester Liberal women at their invitation at the Co-operative Hall.¹⁶ In a rousing speech she referred to her belief that there were now in Leicester about one hundred and fifty Liberal women workers and that if they were indeed ‘Radical Leicester’, they would be pursuing the same goals as herself. She outlined their aims and denied in the face of some criticism that she had put the rights of women before the current situation in Ireland. However she believed that women’s suffrage should be in the programme of the WLF because the time had come to move beyond simply performing

¹⁴ *The Woman’s Penny Paper*, 22 November, 1890.
¹⁵ *Ibid*.
¹⁶ *The Leicester Daily Mercury*, 17 February, 1891.
philanthropic deeds – women needed the vote. She praised the LWLA because it had not been founded merely in response to a request from an M.P. ‘tottering in his seat’ who required support on the ground. Indeed she suggested that in Leicester the men were resentful of the women’s help. (Although there appeared to be no overt hostility from the men, it is clear, as will be discussed later, that Leicester Liberal men were by no means always supportive of the women.)

The broadly sympathetic *Leicester Chronicle* commented on the adoption of Lady Carlisle as the association’s President noting that she would exact hard work from the new LWLA. The newspaper, however, also made the point that in a town where most of the population were working people ‘a feminine toying with politics among a few well-to-do ladies…would not be recognised by them in any way.’¹⁷ The *Chronicle* also warned that although Lady Carlisle had told them that they could be useful ‘without engaging in that troublesome electioneering work of canvassing’, the Conservative women had been very useful as canvassers and Liberal women should do the same, especially in the county where the Primrose League was a force.¹⁸

Martin Pugh has noted that by the time of the 1892 general election each association had been organised to work on behalf of the Party, being placed under the leadership of the local Party agent. They were usually responsible for running a committee room as well as canvassing.¹⁹ There is little evidence that the LWLA, however, was mobilised in this way,

¹⁷LC, 21 February, 1891.
¹⁸Ibid.
¹⁹Pugh, ‘The Limits of Liberalism’, p. 58.
perhaps indicating a certain degree of unwise complacency in a Liberal stronghold. From the outset, however, the LWLA expressed a wish which it communicated to the Leicester Liberal Association ‘that sympathetic relations might exist between the societies.’ Nevertheless throughout its history the LWLA does appear to have maintained an independent stance whereby its primary intentions were the duties, rights and education of women and through women, the well-being of the wider community.

Although no rule books have survived, a statement issued to the *Leicester Chronicle* in October 1890 outlined the Leicester Association’s aims and objectives. The independent and feminist stance taken by the LWLA from the outset is clear. Although it would apply for affiliation to the WLF, it would ‘reserve to itself liberty to select its own aims and methods’ Neither would the LWLA necessarily support candidates for election simply because they were Liberals. Indeed it aimed to stand ‘aloof from the actual work of elections, municipal or parliamentary.’ The statement emphasised their interest in questions affecting the ‘health, morals, employment and right government’ of the community as well as their desire ‘to promote a more intimate feeling of sisterhood among women the wide world over’. Women believed that their influence could be harnessed for the good of women within the entire community and this objective could be achieved if the vote was granted to women on the same terms as men. Within the LWLA a powerful feminist culture can thus be

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20 LRO: 11D57/2 Leicester Liberal Association Minute Book, meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 3 November, 1890.
21 *LC*, 18 October, 1890.
identified as women came together to press for the suffrage. The provisional Executive Committee of the new Association included Annie Clephan of the Leicester School Board and daughter of a past chairman of the Leicester Liberal Association; Miss Collet (probably Caroline who taught at Wyggeston Girls’ School, as her sister, Clara Collet, had left Leicester by this date); Mrs T. B. Ellis, the Misses Ellis (Belgrave) and Miss Kate Ellis; Miss J. C. Evans; Mrs S.A. Gimson, the wife of the local engineer Josiah Gimson; Miss Gittins (probably Edith, rather than her sister Catherine, although this is not stated) and Mrs Windley. Fanny Bolus, a Unitarian and secretary of the Leicester branch of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage, became the secretary of the LWLA alongside Miss E. K. Adderley.

The history of the LWLA during the 1890s reveals how the women envisaged their role. They were defined by their gender, rather than by allegiance to their party, although the broad tenets of Liberalism were close to their hearts. They wished to use their influence to promote the well-being of the wider community especially through service to women as well as the education of women. Their achievements were soon acknowledged by the local Liberal party which noted in April 1891 that this meeting desires to express its appreciation of the work undertaken by the Leicester WLA in the endeavour to educate the women of Leicester on political and social questions.25

A report of the same date reveals this interest in ‘women’s issues’. As well as a resolution in support of female suffrage which Miss Gittins and Miss

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25 LRO: 11D57/2, Leicester Liberal Association Minute Book, Meeting of the Executive Committee, 6 April, 1891.
Bolus were empowered to present to the WLF, short addresses were
given on the following subjects: ‘Trades Unions for Women’ by Miss Pegg;
‘The Parliamentary Control of Women’s Trades’ by Miss Isabel Evans;
‘Women’s Suffrage’ by Miss Gittins; ‘Women Guardians’ by Miss Charlotte
Ellis and ‘Technical Education for Women by Miss Windley. These themes
of female suffrage, participation in public life and concern for the well-
being of working-class women were prominent in the WLF during the
following years. The LWLA believed that it was their duty particularly for
the sake of all women and children to press for greater female involvement
and influence in public life and this required the Parliamentary franchise.

Practical concern for matters which especially affected women and
children continued throughout the 1890s. At the seventh annual meeting
in 1898 it was reported that due to their desire to combat ‘excessive infant
mortality’ in the town, the Association had printed a large number of copies
of the paper entitled ‘How to feed and clothe the baby’ written by an
eminent Leicester physician and had placed them in the hands of
Registrars to distribute when parents registered a birth. In November at
a local meeting, the women were addressed by Miss G. E. Southall of
Birmingham who spoke on the subject of ‘Children and the Public House’.
Following the address, a unanimous resolution was passed urging
magistrates to take steps to warn licensees against supplying children with
alcoholic drinks.

26 WLF - Summary of Federation News [hereafter SFN], March, 1898.
27 SFN, December 1898.
Nonetheless, although matters which concerned women remained prominent, as the decade progressed there was a shift of emphasis as the women also listened to addresses on broader political issues. The women of the LWLA were moving beyond concerns which fell within the traditional feminine sphere. Thus, for example, in November 1893 Miss Gittins spoke on ‘Home Rule’, Miss Hawley on the ‘House of Lords’ and Ellen Robinson of Liverpool, the prominent Quaker peace activist, on ‘Arbitration better than Arms.’ They were aware that they were treading new ground. In March 1896 the LWLA was addressed by Mrs Osler of Birmingham, the niece of the radical Leicester M.P. Peter Taylor, who spoke ‘on the first six months of the present Government, touching chiefly on foreign politics.’

At the November meeting in 1898 Dr Charles Reinhardt discussed ‘The Duties and Hopes of Liberals’ as well as the manifesto of the Czar of August 1898 which led to the calling of the Hague Conference of 1899. Following this the LWLA passed a resolution ‘strongly supporting the Czar’s manifesto which was carried unanimously.’ The WLF were among the most vociferous critics of the Boer War. On this issue the LWLA followed the leadership and supported the peace movement. Both Catherine and Edith Gittins reported to the LWLA on discussions taking place on the issue within the national WLF.

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28 SFN, November, 1893.
29 Ibid., March 1896.
30 Ibid., November 1898.
32 SFN, March 1899.
As has been pointed out, one of the main differences between the Liberal women and the Primrose League was the Liberals’ push for female political power as voters, candidates and makers of policy. However, this was not the case for all Liberal women. Between 1887 and 1892 a split over the question of suffrage between the moderates and the progressives had gradually developed. As the Countess of Carlisle indicated in her Leicester speech, the moderates felt that Liberal women should concentrate on the Irish Question whereas the progressives wished to draw attention to women’s rights. Eventually in 1892, after the annual council of the WLF adopted an amendment calling on the executive committee to promote the enfranchisement of women, the moderates decided to stand down and not seek re-election. They left the organisation and established the less radical Women’s National Liberal Association. The split within the Liberal women’s organisations lasted until 1919. Hirshfield argues that it was not only the suffrage issue which divided the two sides, but that the WNLA women possessed a deeper sense of loyalty to the party leadership. They were more content to play a subordinate role to the male leaders. The result of the split was to push the women of the WLF further towards female suffrage and less towards working for their Party.

That the LWLA was committed to a progressive stance on women’s rights and suffrage, there appears to be little doubt, an analysis supported by the timing and circumstances of the foundation of the local

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36 ibid., p. 178.  
organisation. As Hirshfield notes, the WLAs in urban areas and larger towns usually stayed with the progressive WLF rather than join the moderate WNLA. Their leaders were usually prominent women within the local community who had campaigned for other issues such as Temperance or who had experience on School Boards, as Poor Law Guardians or in philanthropic organisations in the town.\textsuperscript{38}

There was clearly strong support for women’s suffrage within the LWLA when in April 1891 Laura Ormiston Chant lectured to the association on the issue. The chairwoman Mrs Windley, argued that suffrage ‘was only on the side of reasonable justice’.\textsuperscript{39} In June 1891 a report in the \textit{Women’s Gazette and Weekly News} further confirmed the progressive position taken by the LWLA.

At a recent meeting the following resolution passed with only one dissentient: “That the Leicester WLA, believing that the exclusion of duly qualified women from the Parliamentary franchise is unconstitutional, unjust, and detrimental to the welfare of the nation, respectfully urges the Council of the WLF to supplement their theoretical support of women’s suffrage by earnest, practical endeavour to gain for it a place on the Liberal programme.”\textsuperscript{40}

The question of female suffrage was again discussed by the association in April 1892 when Parliament was debating extending the franchise to women who already had the vote in municipal and County Council elections.\textsuperscript{41} The suffrage issue continued to preoccupy the women of the LWLA throughout the 1890s. In 1896 at the summer meeting when the main business was to hear reports from the local association delegates to the WLF meeting in London, Miss Gittins declared that for her ‘the most

\textsuperscript{38} Hirshfield, ‘Fractured Faith’, p. 177.
\textsuperscript{39}\textit{LC}, 25 April, 1891.
\textsuperscript{40}\textit{Women’s Gazette and Weekly News}, 15 June, 1891.
\textsuperscript{41}\textit{LC}, 30 April, 1892.
important question of all was with regard to women’s suffrage, which was a vital matter for all women to consider.\textsuperscript{42}

Although the women of the LWLA were adopting a radical position on the question, enthusiasm for female suffrage was not immediately forthcoming from the local male Liberal Association. Throughout most of the 1890s the men prevaricated on the issue and the women continued to pressurize them. In November 1891 the Liberal men split over the degree to which they should support the nomination of women to the Leicester School Board as discussed in chapter five. In July 1891 it was reported that the men had received a letter from the Women’s Suffrage Society asking the association to pass a resolution in favour of the extension of Parliamentary franchise to women, but ‘it was resolved to take no action in the matter’.\textsuperscript{43} Five years later in April 1896 at the request of the LWLA the Leicester Liberal Association again discussed what attitude should be taken with reference to female suffrage. Again after a general discussion it was resolved ‘that this meeting is not prepared to take any action in the matter.’\textsuperscript{44} In 1897 after Sir Israel Hart, the President of the Leicester Liberal Association, received a letter from the women asking him to put forward a motion in favour of women’s suffrage at the National Liberal Federation meeting, he reported that he ‘would not pledge the Association either for or against’, but promised to raise the issue with the men.\textsuperscript{45} Finally the question was referred to the Executive Committee and subsequently to the General Committee, and in November 1897, at a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{42} LC, 18 July, 1896. \\
\textsuperscript{43} LRO: 11D57/2 Leicester Liberal Association Minute Book, 14 July, 1891. \\
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 13 April, 1896. \\
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 17 May, 1897. 
\end{flushleft}
meeting of the General Committee, Mr Patey moved and Miss Gittins seconded ‘that the Parliamentary Franchise be granted to women on the same terms as it is now granted to men.’ This time the motion was carried by a good majority.

The pressure which the LWLA placed on the local party to pass a motion in favour of female suffrage reflected the growing demand for the vote among WLF members nationally. In November 1896 the LWLA successfully hosted the annual conference of the Midland Union of Women’s Liberal Associations at which several local women, including Annie Clephan, Charlotte Ellis, Fanny Fullagar and Mrs Willder spoke. During a discussion on women’s suffrage ‘Miss Gittins of Leicester, then proposed that Parliamentary candidates who are opposed to the political enfranchisement of women should not receive political support from women.’ This was an on-going question within the WLF as several members realised the unacceptability of working for Liberal candidates who did not support woman’s suffrage. Although the proposal was lost on this occasion, it again demonstrates the radical and feminist stance taken by members of the LWLA and was eventually adopted by the WLF at a national level in 1902.

Although it is difficult to ascertain precise figures, the LWLA in the late nineteenth century appeared to flourish. At a meeting in November

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46 LRO: 11D57/2, Leicester Liberal Association Minute Book, 19 November, 1897.
48 SFN, December 1896.
49 Ibid.
By the time of the annual summer meeting in August 1897 at Belgrave House, ‘over eighty sat down to tea and many members joined the party later.’ In 1899 ‘about one hundred and twenty sat down to tea and a much larger number later on listened to the reports of the delegates to the WLF Council meetings.’ When Mrs Osler the President addressed the annual meeting of the LWLA in February 1897 she acknowledged their strength and announced that although they had been kind enough to re-elect her as their President for another year, she felt that this was the last time she would address them in that capacity.

This was because it seemed to her that where she was most needed at the present time – when Liberalism was not in such a very flourishing condition - was not in a healthy, strong, and vigorous association as theirs, but in some weak and flickering association where the members were few, where the leaders were discouraged and where a few brave spirits were trying hard to keep alive the torch of Liberalism.

Her optimism about the strength of Liberalism in Leicester was, however, somewhat misguided. During the late 1890s, in the face of growing local support for the Labour movement and astute campaigning from the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party began to show signs of decline from which it never fully recovered in the twentieth century.

6.3 The Leicester Habitation of the Primrose League

Although the Liberals were clearly a powerful presence in Leicester in the second half of the nineteenth century, it would be a mistake to believe that the Conservatives were completely absent. In 1886 a rather...
sneering report appeared in the Liberal paper, the *Leicester Chronicle*,

warning of the arrival of the Primrose League.

The members of the Liberal Association will need a strong tonic to
strengthen their nerves, for let it be told in a stage whisper,
accompanied by slow music, that a Habitation of the Primrose
League has been inaugurated in the town, with the usual
accompaniment of knights, dames, and associates.\(^55\)

The Primrose League had been founded in 1883 by Lord Randolph
Churchill. The League adopted pseudo-mediaeval names so that
members could be recruited as Knights, Dames or associates. Associates
paid a lower joining fee and were often drawn from the working-classes.
Women were admitted to the League in 1884. The ruling Grand Council
was an all-male institution until after the First World War, but Conservative
ladies established for themselves the Ladies Grand Council in March
1885. The Ladies Grand Council was an aristocratic organisation
consisting mainly of a wealthy elite. It was subordinate to the male Grand
Council but chose its own President and Vice-President and had control
over its own funds.\(^56\) However, the local Habitations, unlike the local
Liberal associations, were mixed-sex and also less socially exclusive.

In the early years of its presence in Leicestershire, the Primrose
League was much stronger in the county than in the town. There are
many reports of events taking place in the *Primrose League Gazette*
especially in the Loughborough area, Charnwood Forest, Market
Harborough and Ashby.\(^57\) However, by the time the Leicester Habitation

\(^{55}\) LC, 20 February, 1886.


\(^{57}\) *Primrose League Gazette*, 1886-1892.
held its fifth annual meeting at the Co-operative Hall in April 1890 it was reported that 456 members had enrolled in that year and that the Habitation now consisted of 49 knights, 36 dames and 1145 associates. During a speech by the Ruling Councillor the women were especially thanked for their assistance. Pugh argues that from existing evidence women were not ‘merely passive footsoldiers marshalled under male leadership’ in the local Habitations, but played an active though not a militant part in politics at a local level. Walker also notes the positive role which the women of the Primrose League played in the Habitations. Indeed in more rural areas they were often instrumental in establishing Habitations as such activity became an extension of the normal duties of the gentry. The Leicester Habitation included several members of the local county gentry, including Squire and Mrs de Lisle and Miss Herrick of Beaumanor Hall near Woodhouse Eaves. Although it held meetings in Leicester the Primrose League drew its membership from a wider geographical area within the county. The women of the LWLA, on the other hand, resided largely within the town. By the time of the seventh annual meeting in 1892 it was reported that the Leicester Habitation consisted of between 1,700 and 1,800 members. The local Primrose League members were optimistic that in spite of Leicester being a ‘Radical stronghold’, they would at least be able to reduce the Liberal majority at

58 LC, 19 April, 1890.
59 Pugh, The Tories and the People, p. 50.
the next election, though they might not yet be in a position to elect a Conservative member of Parliament.\footnote{Leicester Daily Mercury, 8 April, 1892.}

A report in \textit{The Primrose League Gazette} for 1891 indicates that the Party realised the value which women could bring in fighting for the Unionist cause. It argued that the League had been able to make good use of women not only because social events were crucial to its success and women were ‘naturally at home’ here, but also those women who had joined had ‘invariably remained women in all things…Nothing offends the average man… more than a masculine woman…they have remained thorough women and their having done so is the secret of their power.’\footnote{Primrose League Gazette, 16 May 1891.} As the 1890s progressed the Primrose League had increasing success in Leicester and arguably much of this success was due to the influence and organisational skills of women. Indeed the real turning point for the Leicester Habitation seems to have been from September 1895 onwards when Mrs Rolleston was listed for the first time as being the Dame President and her husband John Rolleston, the Unionist candidate for the Borough, became the Ruling Councillor.\footnote{Ibid., 2 September, 1895. According to \textit{The Annual Register} (1920), pp. 187-88, in 1897 John Fowke Lancelot Rolleston was knighted.} John Rolleston was well-liked in his own right, the \textit{Gazette} noting in 1898 that he was ‘one of the most popular and active members of the Grand Council’.\footnote{Primrose League Gazette, 1 July, 1898.} In 1896 \textit{The Wyvern} noted, however, that Mrs Rolleston had ‘done so much useful work in connection with the town, that she has made herself a prime favourite
Accomplished as a violinist and a writer, Mrs Rolleston herself displayed leadership qualities as she wholeheartedly supported her husband in his battle to be elected as a Conservative M.P. for Leicester. In July 1895 at the annual general meeting she unveiled a new Habitation banner ‘alluding in a characteristic speech to the statesmanlike qualities of the late Earl of Beaconsfield.’ The Habitation meeting that September ‘furnished ample testimony of the interest which Mrs Rolleston evinces in the Unionist cause, and of the loyal assistance rendered to her husband in the gallant fight for the borough.’ In March 1898 at a ‘record ward meeting’ held at the invitation of Lady Rolleston to listen to speeches and musical items

The chairman expressed the great appreciation of all present of the graceful compliment paid them by their Dame President, and invited those beyond the pale of the Primrose League to enrol themselves under her banner, and engage in the unselfish and patriotic duty of stemming the tide of prejudice, ignorance and infidelity.

Social events were an important feature in the calendar of the local Habitations and helped to galvanise support for the cause. The role of women in organising and patronising such events was crucial. The annual Ball according to the Leicester Chronicle in 1897 ‘was the most numerously attended function of its kind that has taken place in the town for some time past.’ In February 1898 ‘at the invitation of Lady Rolleston’ a concert was held in the County Schools, Holy Bones in

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65 The Wyvern, 21 February, 1896.
66 Ibid.
67 Primrose League Gazette, 1 July, 1895.
68 Ibid., 2 September, 1895.
69 Ibid., 1 April, 1898.
70 LC, 27 February, 1897
Leicester.\textsuperscript{71} When ‘a very successful dance’ was held in February 1900, ‘the arrangements were admirably carried out by the ward secretary, Mrs A. C. Cockshaw’\textsuperscript{72} Likewise in March 1900 at a smoking concert and social evening which included a programme of songs and recitations, Sir John Rolleston expressed especial thanks to Mrs Cockshaw noting that ‘It was not the first meeting of the kind of which the success was due to her energy.’\textsuperscript{73} In August 1901 the Gazette reported on a social outing to Belvoir Castle organised by Mrs Cockshaw, ‘the whole affair going off without the slightest approach to a hitch.’\textsuperscript{74}

Thus the Primrose League drew a large number of women into its ranks and became identified as an organisation which attracted female volunteers. League activities in Leicester appealed to women and made use of organisational skills and experience which they had acquired. These included, for example, arranging fetes and teas.\textsuperscript{75} Women’s duties were to educate themselves and others in political matters and to assist men in leading the country rather than to challenge them. Mrs de Lisle who spoke at the tea, concert and dance event for the Primrose League which took place at the Masonic Hall in Leicester in October 1890, summed up her own position with regard to political affairs.

She was brought up not to belong to either party – to learn the good in both; but now she had married a husband who was a Tory, she of course was on the Tory side. She did not believe in women

\textsuperscript{71} Primrose League Gazette, 1 March 1898.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 2 April, 1900.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 1 May 1900.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 1 August, 1901.
\textsuperscript{75} Walker, ‘Party Political Women’, p. 178.
taking an active part in politics, but there was a great deal they would do quietly and unobtrusively\textsuperscript{76}

Mrs de Lisle adopted a stance which was far removed from feminist politics – she claimed that her opinions were decided by her husband and that her influence was to be indirect. Yet in her role as the wife of an M.P. and a member of the county gentry, she was prepared to speak in public on behalf of her husband. The Primrose League offered women the chance to gain experience in public speaking. For some this prospect may have seemed daunting, but others had no qualms about taking the public platform and excelled at the art.\textsuperscript{77} One such woman was Mrs Bennie, the wife of the Rector of Glenfield, near Leicester, who spoke ardently against the threat of Socialism at the same meeting of the Leicester Habitation arguing that ‘Socialism was on the increase because those who had power and money were not Christian enough’.\textsuperscript{78}

It is not surprising, therefore, that the value of such female volunteer workers as Lady Rolleston and Mrs Cockshaw was recognised by Sir John Rolleston when he was elected M. P. for Leicester in 1900.\textsuperscript{79} On his election he commented that in a Borough

with a population of 220,000 people, mainly of the pronounced type of radicalism… the work of the League during the contest, and especially that of the ladies, doubtless made a considerable contribution to the successful result.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{76}LC, 25 October, 1890.  
\textsuperscript{78}LC, 25 October, 1890.  
\textsuperscript{79}Apart from the Conservative William Unwin Heygate who was elected from 1861-5 following a Liberal split, Sir John Rolleston was the only Conservative M.P. returned for Leicester after the Corporation was reformed in 1835. www.paoyeomanry.co.uk/PM/LYpre1900.html. [accessed 8 June, 2012].  
\textsuperscript{80}Primrose League Gazette, 1 November, 1900.
Although the election of a Conservative M.P. was largely the result of the changing politics of Leicester, as the ILP grew in popularity during the 1890s and took votes away from the Liberals, his comments do acknowledge the valuable work which the women performed and that they were probably more willing to engage in ‘that troublesome electioneering work of canvassing’ than the WLA.  

Martin Pugh argues that although the Primrose League cannot be considered to be a suffragist organisation, in the long run it helped rather than hindered the cause of female enfranchisement by gradually undermining assumptions about women’s involvement in politics.  

Phillipe Vervaecke also argues that ‘the extent of female participation in the League and the wide range of political work performed by Primrose Dames proved a powerful instrument for female enfranchisement.’ Nonetheless in the early years the ruling Grand Council and the Ladies Grand Council generally advised the Habitations to bar suffrage as a subject for discussion. Nevertheless it was debated at local habitation meetings. At the seventh annual meeting of the Leicester Habitation in 1892, the assembled company were addressed by Mr Anthony, representing the Grand Council. In his speech he ‘spoke in favour of any alteration of the franchise being extended so as to include the enfranchisement of women’ In 1899, however, the Gazette, perhaps aware of the divisiveness of the suffrage issue, was still reminding its

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81 LC, 21 February, 1891.  
82 Pugh, The Tories and the People, p. 66.  
84 M. Auchterlonie, Conservatives Suffragists, p.48.  
85 Leicester Daily Mercury, 8 April, 1892.
readers that in spite of efforts made by the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies to obtain support within the League ‘women’s suffrage is a question altogether outside the province of the Primrose League and cannot be taken up by habitations and Divisional Councils as bodies.’ Nonetheless three years earlier Mrs Rolleston, wearing a different hat, had presided at a local Suffrage Society meeting held in the Co-operative Hall in Leicester which had been addressed by Mrs Fawcett. Mrs Rolleston was clearly pro-suffrage before the turn of the century and after 1900 more Conservative women became active in the suffrage campaign. Neither could those suffragist activists in the Habitations work in the end for M.P.s who refused to accept the enfranchisement of women.

The Leicester Habitation of the Primrose League in the 1890s clearly benefitted from having not only a popular Ruling Councillor, but also a strong-minded and committed Dame President in Lady Rolleston. Such leadership was invaluable and there was a distinct improvement in the fortunes of the Leicester Habitation when looking through the reports in the *Primrose League Gazette* from the mid-1890s onwards. Furthermore the efficiency of women such as Mrs Cockshaw working at a local level to organise social events lends support to Pugh’s analysis that Primrose League women were active and useful workers in local politics. Leicester is a good example of how effective women could be in fighting for the Conservative cause even in ‘unpromising’ Radical towns and

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86 *Primrose League Gazette*, 1 August, 1899.
88 Pugh, *The March of the Women*, p. 112.
From the wider perspective of ‘Women’s Rights’, Lady Rolleston was (regardless of differing advice from the Gazette) amongst a group of women in Leicester, most of whom were Liberal, who led the way in fighting for female suffrage. It was, however, arguably the useful and loyal contribution which local Primrose League women made to the Party at ground level rather than their campaigning for the franchise that gradually shifted the tide of opinion in favour of votes for women amongst Conservative men in Parliament in the 1890s.

6.4 The Independent Labour Party (ILP)

During the 1890s significant changes began to occur in local politics as the ‘golden age of Leicester liberalism’ came to an end, heralding later developments during the Edwardian period. A branch of the Socialist League which had links with the hosiery industry was the first socialist organisation established in the town in 1885. Within the boot and shoe industry, industrial relations became strained during the late 1880s and 1890s due to wider social and economic developments and the generally good relationship between local Liberal manufacturers and the working-class workers deteriorated. Following a visit by Keir Hardie a branch of the ILP was formed in Leicester in 1894. The local ILP was rather masculine in its outlook, however, to the extent that it held its meetings in the local

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Labour Club from which women were apparently barred. Lancaster notes the strength of the ILP-Trades Council alliance which formalised socialism in Leicester and saw the end of ‘gender free’ informal meetings at places such as ice rinks and on country excursions. It was thus more difficult for women to feel part of the organisation, although there was a Women’s auxiliary branch. At this stage only a few radical Leicester women felt that the greatest hope of achieving the vote lay within the ILP.

In January 1895, the secretary of the local women’s auxiliary branch of the ILP, Mrs Mary Saunderson, who was also a member of the Leicester School Board, delivered a powerful lecture entitled ‘Women and Modern Civilization’ in the lecture hall of the Labour Club to which, on this occasion at least, women were evidently admitted. The chair was filled by the vice-President, Alice Hawkins, who later founded the Leicester branch of the WSPU and was already active in Trade Union politics as a member of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives. Lancaster notes Mrs Saunderson’s belief that the ILP hindered the chances of a ‘feminist dimension’ developing in local socialism, because it ignored any influences which were considered to be irrelevant to the ‘Labour Question’. She expressed more hope of the ILP for it nominally supported their cause, but as she pointed out she was nonetheless cautious ‘since women were not allowed to become members of the

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96 June Hannam notes that although at a national level the ILP did not have separate women’s organisations women’s groups were formed at a local level. See J. Hannam, ‘‘To make the world a better place’: Socialist Women and Women’s Suffrage in Bristol, 1910-1920’ in M. Boussahba-Bravard (ed.), *Suffrage Outside Suffragism*, p. 163.
Labour Club’. She therefore urged women to emancipate themselves, and ‘get rid of the pernicious notion that a woman had no business meddling in public affairs’.

Mrs Saunderson appeared to place some of the blame for their lack of progress on women themselves stating that ‘They must realise their duties to their children and their fellows and claim their rights as human beings and citizens, not to be content to be classed along with ‘paupers and lunatics’.

As a socialist she thus shared with some Liberal suffragists an ideology which argued the necessity of the vote for women to achieve social reform.

One way in which women found a voice in Labour politics was through the local press. Although official newspapers were still controlled by men, the 1890s saw the development of women’s columns, providing women with a space in which to discuss a range of issues concerning women and raising their profile in the local press.

Hunt and Hannam point out that in the local press such columns proliferated, most of the writers using a pseudonym. The Pioneer in Leicester which was established in the early 1890s by Tom Barclay, had a regular weekly women’s column, established at the end of the Victorian period and written by ‘Lydia’ from June 1902. The identity of ‘Lydia’ is unclear although Whitmore suggests that she was a collector of laundry accounts, working.

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99 The Leicester Pioneer, 19 January, 1895.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
to support younger siblings. She has been tentatively named as Agnes Clarke, a local novelist who later became involved in the suffragette campaign.

From the outset, ‘Lydia’ stated her position clearly. Her column was not to be devoted ‘exclusively to chit-chat on dress’, yet neither would the subject be taboo. In recent times, ‘Lydia’ pointed out, we expected to see a woman who was keen on female suffrage,

rigid in the ramparts of a masculine collar, her hair brushed tightly back from her forehead, possibly that her brow might present a bold front, such as would make the ‘lords of creation’ tremble for their strongholds. But the whirligig of time spins round so rapidly, that today so-called ‘advanced’ women adopt what yesterday they scorned.

A range of subjects of interest to women was discussed, although she did not mention useful household tips, unlike ‘Iona’ who later wrote a woman’s column in the Labour Leader between 1906 and 1909. ‘Lydia’s’ target audience was the modern middle-class socialist woman. By discussing a variety of issues of concern to women and by recognising that women often had different interests from men, ‘Lydia’ hoped to attract women to reading the ‘Woman’s Column’ in the Pioneer. Women columnists recognised that often women did not have the same amount of time as men to read the newspapers or to attend political meetings and this was one important way to reach out to them. For example, as well as the suffrage question at home which featured prominently, ‘Lydia’ also drew to the attention of newspaper readers the recent developments regarding the

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106 Whitmore, Alice Hawkins, pp. 60 and 65.
108 The Leicester Pioneer, 21 June, 1902.
110 Ibid., p. 175.
enfranchisement of women in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{111} She discussed the importance of educating working women on questions of hygiene and sex, rational dress, wife-beating and the life of George Eliot.\textsuperscript{112} Although a separate women’s column gave women some space to discuss issues in the press, it nonetheless raised the uneasy question of women’s place within the wider socialist movement for some activists who feared that by implication women were marginalised.\textsuperscript{113}

Hannam points out that although socialists spoke the language of equality in the 1880s and 1890s, in reality in the Victorian period class issues were prioritised over those of gender.\textsuperscript{114} The example of Leicester appears to support this analysis. Although the rules were relaxed on occasion, women were officially barred from the Labour Club. Mrs Saunderson of the ILP was thus driven to voice her opinion that the ‘feminist dimension’ was marginalised, because the Party was concerned primarily with the class struggle. Eventually in the Edwardian period the local Suffragette, Alice Hawkins, who had been a member of the ILP from the outset, left the Party because it disapproved of her more militant tactics.\textsuperscript{115} Rather the growing politicization of socialist women in Leicester appears to have found its roots within the Leicester Co-operative Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Society which established a branch of the Women’s Co-operative Guild in 1896. Subsequently, through the influence of Mrs Margaret Macdonald, the local branch of the Women’s Labour League

\textsuperscript{111} The Leicester Pioneer, 12 October, 1902.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 30 August, 1902, 8 November, 1902, 22 November, 1902.
\textsuperscript{113} Hunt and Hannam, ‘Propagandising as Socialist Women’, pp. 172-180.
\textsuperscript{114} Hannam, ‘To make the world a better place’, p. 158.
\textsuperscript{115} Aucott, Women of Courage, Vision and Talent, p. 118.
was formed in 1906.\textsuperscript{116} It was also in 1906 that Leicester’s first Labour M.P., Ramsey Macdonald was elected and over the next two decades Liberalism in the town gradually declined.

6.5 Conclusions

As far as the women of Leicester were concerned Liberalism was the dominant force throughout the Victorian period, a fact recognised by the Leicester Habitation of the Primrose League. From its formation in November 1890 the LWLA proved itself to be a radical organisation, on the progressive side of women’s Liberal politics. Its membership consisted of radical women renowned locally for their public work in local government, campaigning and philanthropy. In their concern for working-class women the women of the LWLA argued for the necessity of female influence in the public sphere to achieve social reform. At the same time it was acutely aware of a ‘sense of sisterhood’ amongst themselves which it valued highly. The Association attracted national speakers who advocated female suffrage, a cause with which the local association strongly agreed. It was some time, however, before the association could also command the support of the local Liberal men on the question of female suffrage, although the men did acknowledge the good which the women were doing in educating their less privileged sisters in social and political matters.

However, a Leicester Habitation of the Primrose League was in existence at this time and it would clearly be a mistake to ignore the

\textsuperscript{116} Whitmore, Alice Hawkins, chapter one.
Conservative presence particularly during the 1890s in what was known to be ‘Radical Leicester’. Women such as Lady Rolleston and Mrs Cockshaw were of great value to the Party because of their organisational and social skills, as Sir John Rolleston acknowledged in 1900 on his victory in the General Election. During the 1890s the ILP in Leicester was still in its infancy and as far as it was concerned gender issues took second place to the class struggle. Women such as Mrs Saunderson had to fight an up-hill battle for their voices to be heard. However the existence of the fledging ILP should not be ignored as the Liberal ascendancy in Leicester particularly in working-class wards gradually came to an end towards the turn of the century, changing the political map of Leicester for ever.117

Gradually the boundaries between the public and private spheres for women were becoming more indistinct as women were demonstrating through their public work that they were conscientious, dedicated citizens who deserved to be enfranchised. Pugh argues that with regard to advancing the suffrage cause ‘the most blatant Trojan Horses…were the new party political organisations for women’.118 In Leicester, Liberalism had long been the most powerful force and the WLA had close overlapping ties with the NUWSS from the outset. However within the Primrose League a clearly discernible change in the fortunes of the Party can be seen especially from the mid-1890s onwards – a change which was acknowledged to be due largely to the women. Although the brief success of 1900 did not lead to a strong long-term Conservative presence

118 Pugh, The March of the Women, p. 70.
in Leicester, the organisational and social skills of women convinced some that women’s enfranchisement was long overdue. The development of the suffrage movement in late nineteenth century Leicester will be discussed in chapter seven.
Chapter 7  Women and the Victorian Suffrage Movement

7.1 Introduction

It is the purpose of this chapter to analyse the nature and extent of the emergence of the suffrage movement in Leicester during the second half of the nineteenth century and to assess how far the local movement reflected developments at a national level. It has been pointed out by June Hannam that studies of the suffrage movement at a local level are valuable partly because they can serve to challenge existing interpretations but also because it was in the localities that most suffrage activists developed a political identity.¹ The local branch became the focus for suffrage activity and in several cases, as Hannam notes, women built on existing friendship networks which had developed in other social and political causes. The local branch of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage [hereafter the NSWS] which came to be established in Leicester during the 1870s displayed these typical characteristics and drew together many of the women discussed in previous chapters. Several of those members of the Leicester Society whom it has been possible to identify were involved in other causes and organisations within the town where they had developed contacts with like-minded women. Nonetheless, whilst it is also true that it was within Leicester that most of the women involved in early suffrage activity developed a political consciousness fuelled by contacts within local societies and campaigning

groups, women were not insular and some local activists also embraced to some degree the wider suffrage community.

The membership of the Leicester branch of the NSWS was largely middle-class. It was quite different in character from the Women’s Social and Political Union [hereafter the WSPU] in which female members of the Boot and Shoe Workers’ Union became involved in the Edwardian era.\(^2\) Whitmore, however, in writing about Alice Hawkins and the more militant WSPU in Leicester downplays the achievements of the earlier Victorian supporters of female enfranchisement. He argues that in the face of male fear and prejudice ‘what chance had the annual Women’s Suffrage Bill, with its threadbare arguments and antique air, of enlisting support and commanding attention? The answer, quite simply, was none at all.’\(^3\) Whitmore is not the only historian to adopt a rather dismissive tone towards the Victorian campaign. Leah Leneman notes that Diane Atkinson has described the national Victorian campaign as ‘tiny’.\(^4\) Yet as Leneman points out in Scotland alone between 1867 and 1876, some two million signatures were collected. She also observes that by the early 1870s there were committees of the National Society in towns and cities throughout Scotland and in many English towns. I shall argue that whilst it was true that women did not achieve the Parliamentary vote on the same basis as men until 1928 and progress was slow, it is nonetheless mistaken and does these women an injustice to dismiss their persistence in first

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 30.
raising and then keeping the issue alive in the face of intransigence. Moreover, as has been noted, nineteenth century activists were campaigning on several fronts and progress was achieved more quickly in some areas than others. This more positive view has recently been put forward by Martin Pugh who has argued that the progress made by the suffragists was more subtle than appears at first sight. Women had made substantial inroads into public life particularly through their involvement in local government and through greater participation in political parties. Both of these had helped to obscure the boundaries between the separate spheres, breaking down male prejudice and allowing women to gain in confidence. Pugh notes that by the time Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman received a deputation of suffragists in May 1906, he had ‘frankly accepted that they had now established their case and effectively won the argument of principle.’

7.2 The Suffrage Campaign in late nineteenth-century Leicester

It was in 1866, when John Stuart Mill and Henry Fawcett presented the first Ladies’ Petition to Parliament, that we can see the beginnings of the interest in the suffrage campaign which was to grow substantially during the nineteenth century in Leicester. Four of the Ellis sisters of Belgrave Hall, Eliza, Charlotte, Isabella and Margaret, signed this petition. Hannah Lucas, the sister of Samuel Lucas who was married to Margaret

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Bright Lucas, who knew the Ellis sisters possibly persuaded them to sign. Although only four Leicester women signed this first Petition, by June 1868 when P. A. Taylor, the M.P. for Leicester and husband of Clementia Taylor, presented a second Women’s Suffrage Petition, 516 citizens of Leicester had been persuaded to sign. In 1871 Leicester developed its own first regional suffrage committee following those already established in London, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh and Manchester in 1867 and 1868 and subsequently in other towns and cities in England and Scotland which together became the NSWS. Although not at the forefront of the developing suffrage campaign, Leicester thus did not lag far behind.

A significant moment for the emerging movement in Leicester appears to have occurred in March 1870 when the local press reported on a lecture delivered in the Town Hall by the Revd. W. H. Macdonald from Aberdeen on ‘Education for all Women – the Franchise for some Women’ to an ‘attentive and appreciative audience’. The Revd. Macdonald read a copy of a Petition in favour of Jacob Bright’s ‘Women’s Disabilities Bill’ which was going through Parliament and hoped that, as in Manchester and Salford, the people of Leicester would sign. At this stage the suffrage campaign in Leicester was largely led by prominent local male supporters. Until the 1880s and 1890s local women appear to have rarely made public speeches on the issue although they frequently appeared on the platform

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9 The Englishwoman’s Review, 1 October, 1868.
11 LC, 5 March, 1870.
alongside more well-known speakers who visited the town or supported motions put down by others. The following year the Revd A. F. Macdonald from Leicester\textsuperscript{12} delivered a lecture on woman’s suffrage. In this speech he outlined his arguments in favour of a limited franchise for women. He was claiming the vote, not for all women but for ‘householders, ratepayers, freeholders and women conducting business on their own account’. He did not propose, however, that it would be wise to give married women the vote continuing ‘Woman’s main sphere, of course, is home.’ However he argued that some women already took part in political affairs as churchwardens and members of the School Board and there was a female monarch. Moreover he pointed out that some of the finest minds in the country were denied the vote such as Miss Martineau, Miss Power Cobbe and Miss Florence Nightingale. Women needed the vote not only for their own protection, but to improve the whole community since woman is ‘a refiner and purifier’.\textsuperscript{13}

The arguments which the Revd Macdonald used at this early point in Leicester were characteristic of the more moderate ones presented throughout the campaign both nationally and locally. A wide range of ideas in favour of the suffrage were adopted by nineteenth century suffragists, some moderate and some more radical. Christine Bolt argues that such ideas can be divided into three categories: political and

\textsuperscript{12} The Revd. Archibald Forbes Macdonald was the minister of the Christian Free Church in Narborough Road, Leicester, (Street, Alphabetical and Trade Directory of Leicester, (Leicester, 1870)).

\textsuperscript{13} LC, 1 April, 1871.
explanatory; socially reassuring; and threatening or dismissive.\textsuperscript{14} The arguments outlined by the Revd. Macdonald in this important lecture in Leicester reflect aspects of the first two of these categories. From the liberal standpoint of equality before the law and human rights, it made no sense to deny female ratepayers the vote on the same conditions as men. However, as Bolt points out, the attempt to adapt what was essentially the ideology of classic liberalism to the demands of feminists was potentially fraught with difficulties because classic liberalism was still an essentially masculine creed which never challenged women’s place in society. Women were still associated ‘with the subordination of self rather than competitive individualism.’\textsuperscript{15} John Stuart Mill had argued for equal opportunities for women on the grounds that men and women shared certain human characteristics and it was therefore unjust to deny women the vote. Nonetheless, Mill still anticipated that women’s main sphere of activity would be domestic, especially after marriage and motherhood.\textsuperscript{16}

Neither, as a moderate, did Macdonald claim the vote for married women. This was not unusual. For reasons of expediency it seemed to many suffragists that it was unwise to claim the vote for married women who were covered by the common law doctrine of coverture. It was felt by many moderates that success would be more likely to be achieved quickly if the campaign concentrated on widows and spinsters. This tactic was to

\textsuperscript{15} Bolt, p. 36-7. See also B. Caine, English Feminism 1780-1980 (Oxford, 1997), pp.102-108.
\textsuperscript{16} S.S. Holton, Feminism and Democracy – Women’s Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 9-10.
result in much disagreement within the movement over the years.\(^\text{17}\) The Revd. Macdonald then pointed out that some women such as Florence Nightingale already took part in public life, presumably to reassure his audience that there would be no ill effect should such exemplary women be enfranchised.\(^\text{18}\) Women needed the vote to protect themselves, implying that no man could offer them the same kind of protection, but at the same time enfranchising women would benefit the entire community. This latter argument made use of the widespread belief that women possessed special natural qualities which made them morally superior to men and by virtue of this fact it would be unwise to deny them at least a limited franchise.

Helen Taylor expressed similar sentiments in a speech given in Leicester in the Temperance Hall in March, 1878 when she addressed the argument that women would be ‘unsexed’ by having the vote.

The suffrage would not make women masculine, but bring into public affairs the feminine element. If they raised the women they would also raise the men.\(^\text{19}\)

This argument is characteristic of what has been termed ‘the essentialist case for feminism’.\(^\text{20}\) It emphasised rather than the denied the sexual difference between men and women and stressed the benefits which would be brought to bear on political life by including the skills, attributes and moral superiority of women. A more caring, moral state would be created and as Holton further argues it was in the area of social reform

\(^\text{18}\) Caine, English Feminism, p. 88.
\(^\text{19}\) The Leicester Daily Mercury, 22 March, 1878.
\(^\text{20}\) Holton, Feminism and Democracy, pp. 11-17.
where men and women’s spheres could be argued to mostly overlap. It was in this area where women could develop to the greatest extent their ‘innate nurturant capacities’. This argument for the feminisation of the state was to be used by suffragists from the nineteenth century onwards. It was an ‘outward-looking’ concept of the home which provided feminists with an argument for entering the wider world of politics without forgoing their more traditional domestic duties. It was thus a ‘socially reassuring’ argument.

The lecture which Revd. Macdonald gave in 1871 proved to be an early turning point for the suffrage campaign in Leicester, because just three months later the town’s first committee was formed as a branch of the London National Society with Revd. Macdonald as the first Honorary Secretary. There were five other men besides Revd. Macdonald and five women, including Miss Gill, probably Frances Gill, a teacher of music in Leicester, who later became the Society’s Secretary; Mrs Macdonald; and Mrs Mary Livens who had campaigned in Leicester against the Contagious Diseases Acts. In 1872 when the suffrage movement split over whether to offer support to those campaigning against the Acts, Leicester, like most other provincial societies, allied itself with the Central Committee for Women’s Suffrage. This was the larger of the two organisations with a London-based national central committee as opposed to the alternative smaller, London-only organisation. The larger organisation still retained those activists who fought for the repeal of the

21 Holton, Feminism and Democracy, p. 16.
22 The Englishwoman’s Review, 1 July, 1871.
23 S.A. van Wingerden, The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928 (Basingstoke, 1999), p.34; The Englishwoman’s Review, 1 April, 1872.
Contagious Diseases Acts.  
Leicester’s decision to remain with the Central Committee thus reflects the strength of local feeling against the Contagious Diseases Acts.

The supporters of women’s suffrage in Leicester continued to hold public meetings throughout the 1870s. As Holton has pointed out, such meetings had long been part of an established ‘constitutionalist’ practice, designed mainly to educate public opinion.  
Leicester was one of the towns targeted by the national leadership of the NSWS as a place where potential supporters might be won.  
Prominent national figures came to address the citizens of the town and speakers included Lydia Becker, Margaret Bright Lucas, Caroline Ashurst Biggs (who as we have seen had strong family links with Leicester), and Helen Taylor.

At a borough election meeting in East St. Mary’s Ward in February 1874, the Liberal candidates Mr P. A. Taylor and Mr McArthur addressed a meeting of electors where ‘the room was crowded to excess.’  
Peter Taylor, the M.P. for Leicester, was well-known for his very radical views being described once as ‘anti-everything’.  
He was married to Clementia Taylor at whose London home the London National Society for Women’s Suffrage had been formed in 1867. It was during this meeting to support her husband that Clementia Taylor, herself a radical Liberal, brought her own personal influence to bear and rose to speak ‘amidst loud and long-

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24 Levine, Victorian Feminism, p. 65.
26 Levine, Victorian Feminism, p. 65.
27 LC, 14 March, 1874 and 22 March, 1878.
28 Ibid., 7 February, 1874.
continued plaudits. As well as being at the meeting to support her husband, she used the occasion to fight for women’s right to vote. During her speech she congratulated those men who had been enfranchised by the 1867 Reform Act, but pointed out the injustice of women being denied the vote on the same terms as those men who had recently gained the suffrage. She noted that women felt keenly this injustice and expressed the hope that women too would be granted the vote. Amidst loud cheers she urged all those who supported the cause to attend a forthcoming meeting at the Temperance Hall. It was, of course, generally considered to be daring and unwomanly for a woman to speak in public at this time, but this did not deter many of the more notable early women suffragists and Clementia Taylor was evidently well-received in Leicester.

In March 1874 a large public meeting was held in the Temperance Hall after which several new members were recruited to Leicester’s existing committee. Thus at a local level the presence of well-known national figures to encourage those interested in the female suffrage issue was significant. Mrs Livens now agreed to act alongside the Revd. Macdonald as Secretary. Other new members included Mrs and Miss Burgess, (members of Leicester’s Quaker community), Miss Mary Carter, Miss Royce (probably Mary Royce, a teacher and Leicester’s first qualified female medical doctor), Mrs Chattaway, and the Revds Isaacs.

30 LC, 7 February, 1874.
31 LC, 28 March, 1874.
33 The Revd. A. A. Isaacs was the Vicar of Christ Church in Leicester, (Post Office Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland (Leicester, 1876)).
Wood,34 Mackennel,35 Evans36 and Coe,37 the clergymen who represented the Anglican, Congregational and Unitarian communities of Leicester.

The rapid growth of local interest and support for female enfranchisement in the 1870s prompted one local liberal paper to express some concern over the issue in 1875. In an editorial, it supported the rights of women who were householders or ratepayers to gain the municipal and parliamentary suffrage. However, it felt that the franchise should not be granted indiscriminately because large numbers of female municipal voters are manifestly unprepared to play their part therein with even an average degree of intelligence and common sense; being easily misled by gross misrepresentations and erroneous impressions…Besides which, it is doubtful whether coming in contact with the rough of political life is calculated to improve the womanly character. It is, indeed part of that unsexing process which renders some individuals of the opposite sex “strong-minded.” When women stand on the platform as political speakers, or take in hand the pen as political controversialists, they pass out of their proper domain, we think, to one neither desirable for them nor becoming their sex.38

Here the Chronicle was clearly expressing the fears of many men that by entering the public sphere women would lose their feminine nature.

Nonetheless support for the campaign grew in Leicester during the 1870s. One of the most significant early male supporters of women’s

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34 The Revd. Joseph Wood was the minister of Wickliffe Congregational Church in Seymour Road, (Commercial and General Directory and Red Book of Leicester (Leicester, 1875)).
35 The Revd. A. Mackennel was the minister of Gallowtree Gate Congregational Chapel, (Commercial and General Directory and Red Book of Leicester (Leicester, 1875)).
36 The Revd. W. Evans was the minister of Dover Street Baptist Chapel, (Post Office Directory (Leicester, 1876)).
37 Pastor Revd. C. C. Coe was a minister of the Unitarian Great Meeting in East Bond Street, (Street Alphabetical and Trade Directory of Leicester (Leicester, 1870)).
38 LC, 17 April, 1875.
suffrage in Leicester was the Revd. Page Hopps, the minister of the Unitarian Church. He adopted a more radical stance than the Revd. Macdonald. In a speech at the Mayor’s Parlour in May 1880, where he addressed the audience as chairman, he said that he regarded the present situation as a remnant of feudal customs in antiquated times when men exercised their assumed sense of superiority, and treated women somewhat as chattelled goods...It was said that the proper place for women was at home, but it was no less the right place for man when he had nothing else to do...Besides a man would find his wife but a sorry companion were she wholly ignorant of the great subjects of the day, and unable to enter into conversation about them.\footnote{LC, 15 May, 1880.}

Page Hopps challenged the notion which Macdonald had held that the home was the only suitable place for a woman. Moreover, although he did not specify this, he appeared, by implication, to be supporting the right of married women to the franchise. It was important for a successful marriage for a wife to be able to converse with her husband on equal terms and to be well-informed. Similar arguments had earlier been used to justify the education of women, since through education women would be better suited for life as a middle-class mother and wife.\footnote{Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, pp. 30-1.} Page Hopps noted that of the 2500 eligible women householders in Leicester, after deducting 600 of them as having died, married or moved, the rest were visited in March and 1500 had signed a Petition in favour of reform, indicating substantial local backing and organisation. Indeed support for this Petition was ‘very remarkable’ and was noted as such at a national
level in the *Englishwoman’s Review*.\(^4^1\) Leicester was thus a place where the campaign to increase support for female suffrage was likely to prove to be fruitful.

At this point in the development of local suffrage activity, as well as at a national level, women inevitably had to rely on male assistance and backing. Gleadle points out that in Bristol men such as Matthew Davenport Hill and Francis Newman from Unitarian and radical circles played a leading role in the formation of the Women’s Suffrage Society.\(^4^2\) Olive Banks notes that the men who were activists in the women’s movement were far more likely to be freethinkers than the women, and where they had a positive religious affiliation half, as was the case with Page Hopps, belonged to the Unitarian church.\(^4^3\) She also notes the gradual decline in male support over time as it became less necessary for women to have a male spokesman.\(^4^4\) Again this is supported by evidence from Leicester as men gradually withdrew from chairing suffrage meetings over the next two decades and prominent local female activists became more assertive, assuming leadership roles.

Although local women do not appear to have spoken publicly about the issue until the 1890s, there is a small amount of evidence that some politically active women felt strongly enough about issues to write to the local newspapers. Sarah Pederson argues that during the period 1900-14 women must have felt particularly strongly about issues such as the

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\(^{41}\) *Englishwoman’s Review*, 15 March, 1879.
suffrage to identify themselves in the pages of the local newspapers. By
doing so, a woman was stepping outside of her sphere. Frances Gill, as
the Honorary Secretary of the local branch of the NSWS was a particularly
early, local example in this respect. Moreover, she was quite indignant at
the suggestion made that she may have resorted to using a ‘nom de
plume’. In November 1883 she wrote to the *Leicester Mercury* concerning
a letter which had been signed from ‘An Earnest Woman’. She wrote that

> Having been several times asked if I had written the slip bearing the
above title, permit me space to affirm that I did not do so. I always
put my own name to whatever I write about town matters. Nor
indeed do I think it bears much trace of feminine origin. ‘Earnest’
though I most certainly am ‘in season and out of season’ on the
subject of women invariably exercising the electoral privileges they
have already, in the hope of thereby gaining the Parliamentary
franchise to which they have not yet attained, and which I for one
ardently desire.

The first letter which Miss Gill appears to have written to the *Leicester
Chronicle* was on March 17, 1877 in support of a proposed music school
for Leicester and the possibility of a musical section of the Literary and
Philosophical Society. However most of her correspondence was in her
capacity as a representative of the movement for female suffrage in
Leicester. She publicised forthcoming meetings organised by the local
branch, such as the one in November 1882 at which Margaret Bright
Lucas and Catharine Osler were due to speak making the point that unlike
demonstrations in some other towns, gentlemen were not to be
excluded.

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46 *Leicester Mercury*, 2 November, 1883.
47 *LC*, 17 March, 1877.
48 *LC*, 21 October, 1881.
In December 1880 she reported on her attendance as a representative of Leicester at the Great Women's Demonstration in Nottingham. This meeting was in the same vein as the Great Demonstration of Women at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester earlier in the year. As little had been achieved by petitions and public meetings, it was felt that the time had come to step up the pressure by a mass demonstration of many women to show the strength of feeling and their solidarity.\textsuperscript{49} The powerful effect which the Nottingham meeting had on Frances Gill becomes apparent from reading her report to the newspaper. The long report clearly conveys her heightened sense of sisterhood in fighting for the cause, her enthusiasm at being given the opportunity to hear several well-known female speakers and her amazement at the numbers who attended the meeting.

I went to Nottingham on Tuesday last, and found to my astonishment, even the ladies' room at the station full of excitement about this great meeting... While, the chairwoman, John Bright's sister, was opening the meeting, while Viscountess Harberton, with silvery voice and gracious smile, was finding excuses for our hereditary legislators withholding the suffrage privilege from women, in the fact that those they knew cared no more for anything than 'canary birds', while Jessie Craigen, the working woman and the orator, born to move her audience to laughter and tears at will, was asserting with stentorian voice, and also with questionable taste, that at creation 'we' came into the world and not 'he' alone, an overflow meeting of 1000 women was being held below, from which many were turned away. It was addressed by Miss Caroline Biggs...Miss Helen Taylor...and Miss Lydia Becker.\textsuperscript{50}

As Levine points out, this meeting in Nottingham was just one example of the energetic organisation displayed by the NSWS in organising large public meetings, petitions and demonstrations which aimed to show the

\textsuperscript{49} van Wingerden, \textit{Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain}, pp.49-51.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{LC}, 11 December, 1880.
strength of feeling on the subject.\textsuperscript{51} Frances Gill’s eye-witness account provides clear proof of that strength of desire amongst local activists for the suffrage and of the effect which orators such as Jessie Craigen could wield on them.\textsuperscript{52} The national organisation achieved some success in galvanising its local supporters by holding demonstrations and public meetings.

However, in the immediate aftermath of the failure to include women’s suffrage in the 1884 Reform Act, there followed a short period of disillusionment. Membership of the suffrage societies declined.\textsuperscript{53} Enthusiasm does appear to have briefly waned in Leicester. After 1883, there was no further mention of Frances Gill and the local newspaper briefly reported her death in October, 1885, an event which may have exacerbated the decline of the suffrage movement in Leicester in the mid-1880s.\textsuperscript{54} However, it would be easy to be too negative about the situation. As Pugh has argued, and as has already been demonstrated in Leicester, women were making headway elsewhere in public life in local government and within the women’s auxiliaries of the political parties.\textsuperscript{55} Furthermore as Levine has noted, there were few years when Parliament did not discuss women’s suffrage.\textsuperscript{56}

In Leicester there were no more local meetings advocating women’s suffrage until Mrs Henry Fawcett addressed the Literary and Philosophical Society on the subject of ‘The Social Progress of Women’ in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Levine, Victorian Feminism 1850-1900, p. 65.
\item \textsuperscript{52} For Jessie Craigen see Holton, Suffrage Days, chapter 3.
\item \textsuperscript{53} van Wingerden, The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928, p.55.
\item \textsuperscript{54} LC, Births, Deaths, Marriages and Obituaries, 17 October, 1885.
\item \textsuperscript{55} M. Pugh, The March of the Women (Oxford, 2000), pp. 70-8.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Levine, Victorian Feminism, p. 76.
\end{itemize}
Much of the local effort to recover the earlier enthusiasm appears to have come from the Revd. Page Hopps, who chaired the meeting. At this point the prominent local female suffrage leaders had yet to come to the fore. In this speech Mrs Fawcett argued that the women’s movement must be seen as a direct outcome of the democratic movement and that women as intelligent human beings were entitled to the same rights of liberty and self-government as men. Female suffrage was thus viewed by Mrs Fawcett as part of the inevitable tide of political progress.

The following February a further meeting was held, this time in the Temperance Hall, at which Mrs Fawcett spoke again, along with Mrs Ormiston Chant and Miss Florence Balgarnie as well as Councillor Wright and the Revd Page Hopps. This meeting had some success in encouraging local activists and was an important turning point for the Leicester organisation as the local movement now began to recover momentum. On March 5, 1887 the Chronicle reported that

As a result of the very successful public meeting at the Temperance Hall, on February 11, when Mrs Henry Fawcett so ably advocated the cause, it has been decided to reorganise a local branch of the society. A meeting was held to appoint a committee, and the following have agreed to act: - Dr Blunt, Revd. J. Page Hopps, Mr S. Lennard, Mr A. Pochin, Mr William Wright, Miss Beale, Miss Bolus, Miss J. Ellis, Miss M. Ellis, Miss Gittins, Miss Kilgour, with power to add to their number. The subject is now more widely understood in its bearing on social and moral questions, and it is believed that many will be anxious to support it on these grounds, as well as because all taxpaying citizens should be represented.
In 1888 the NSWS split over the question of whether to allow the women’s sections of the political parties to affiliate with the suffrage society. The re-formed Leicester society as well as Edinburgh, Nottingham and Bradford joined the Central National Society. This was the larger of the two societies which resulted from the split and it was the one which agreed to allow the affiliation of women’s party political organisations. From this point onwards the character of the women’s suffrage movement in Leicester changed as it became more woman-led, the growing impetus for reform often coming from within the Leicester Women’s Liberal Association (LWLA). The links between the LWLA and the local Suffrage Society, were particularly strong at this stage as was the case in other towns and cities. Several women belonged to both organisations, including Edith Gittins, the Ellis sisters, Fanny Fullagar, Fanny Bolus and Agnes Kilgour who later became Mrs Agnes Archer Evans.

It was at the local Liberal Club that Edith Gittins delivered a lecture on the subject of women’s suffrage in April 1890. There was a large attendance at this at this lecture, the audience consisting mainly of women. It is noteworthy that not only did a woman, Fanny Fullagar, occupy the chair, but Edith Gittins was supported on the platform entirely by women, including Mrs Evans, Miss Clephan, the Miss Ellises and Mrs

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63 The Women’s Penny Paper, 16 March, 1889.
64 Pugh, The March of the Women, pp. 11-12.
65 Hannam, “I had not been to London” – women’s suffrage – a view from the regions, pp. 230-233.
66 Aucott, Women of Courage.
67 LC, 19 April, 1890.
Windley. The women of Leicester were becoming more confident both as public speakers and as assertive leaders of the local movement for women’s suffrage. Similarly at a meeting of the local branch of the Women’s Suffrage Society at which Dr Kate Mitchel, the temperance activist, gave an address on ‘The Electoral Duties of Women’, the chair was taken by Mrs Stanyon and once again she was supported on the platform entirely by women. A further example of this developing confidence and female consciousness occurred in April 1891 when Laura Ormiston Chant spoke to the LWLA on the subject of ‘Woman’s Suffrage’. This time Mrs Windley took the chair and yet again was supported by other women. Men such as Page Hopps continued to attend meetings and sometimes presided, but by the 1890s women predominated in numbers and were now more willing to take on the leading public roles. This appears to support both Hannam’s analysis that it was in the localities that most activists developed their political identity and Olive Banks’ argument that over time men were required less frequently as figureheads.

In her speech in April 1890 Edith Gittins dealt with the usual arguments used by opponents of female suffrage. She argued that to deny women the vote because they were not wise enough or were politically unaware was illogical. Men had been granted the vote because they possessed a property qualification which about 800,000 women in the United Kingdom also possessed and thus these women should therefore

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68LC, 19 April, 1890.
69LC, 3 May, 1890.
70LC, 25 April, 1891.
71Hannam, “I had not been to London”, pp. 226-245; Banks, Becoming a Feminist, p. 107.
also be entitled to vote in parliamentary elections as a matter of justice and right. Moreover women were not ‘inferior subjects, to be governed wrongly or badly as the race of men might decree.’ Edith Gittins did not mention in this speech the sex-specific characteristics of women which Helen Taylor had used in Leicester in 1878, arguments which were commonly employed by suffragists throughout the late nineteenth century to justify the vote and which Holton describes as the ‘essentialist’ case for the right to vote. Holton argues, however, that one must not oversimplify the distinction between the ‘humanist’ and the ‘essentialist’ case for the vote although the ‘essentialist’ argument was being used more frequently. Both arguments were used throughout the nineteenth century and the ‘humanist’ case was not abandoned in favour of the ‘essentialist’ case as the example of Edith Gittins demonstrates.

Edith Gittins alluded to the struggle of earlier women when she commented that ‘The least they could do was to make ready to reap the harvest of which their forerunners painfully sowed the seed’. Her own feminism had been fuelled by her consciousness of earlier campaigns and struggles in which women had played a prominent role as well as women’s current involvement in political auxiliaries and work within local government in Leicester particularly since the 1870s. The willingness of women to be more assertive in their demands as the 1890s developed is further demonstrated by Edith Gittins’s encouragement to others to refuse help to any Parliamentary candidate who was opposed to their enfranchisement as discussed in chapter six.

72 LC, 19 April, 1890.
73 Holton, Feminism and Democracy, p. 17.
It is worth noting at this point that by now some local women were beginning to widen their sphere of contacts and influence. The contacts between national and local leadership were a vital element in the spread of the campaign. In April 1891 Helen Blackburn wrote to Fanny Fullagar, enclosing some leaflets for circulation and asking that although Miss Fullagar herself was not resident in the Harborough division of Leicester, it would be most valuable if she could draw the issue to the attention of the candidates, Colonel Hardy and W. Logan.\(^74\)

Edith Gittins, in particular, was becoming more well-known outside of her local community both as a leading advocate of women’s suffrage and as a member of the LWLA. In April 1890 *The Women’s Penny Paper* reported on the annual meeting of the Women’s Suffrage Society held at the Westminster Town Hall. It commented that ‘Looking round among the audience we noticed a great number of well-known faces, including those of …Miss E. Gittins (Leicester).’ In 1892 she was addressing meetings at a national level and by the end of 1892 she was listed as a member of the national committee of the Central National Society.\(^75\) At a ‘very largely-attended and enthusiastic meeting’ held in Piccadilly in March 1892 in support of women’s suffrage, she addressed the audience alongside more famous speakers such as Mrs Fawcett and Mrs Wynford Phillipps, the wife of Mr J. W. Phillips M.P., the member for mid-Lanarkshire and herself a member of the Women’s Suffrage Committee, who was described by the *Women’s Penny Paper* as ‘a very brilliant and eloquent speaker. She has

\(^{74}\) The Women’s Library, 9/01/0033, Helen Blackburn to Miss Fanny Fullagar, 20 April, 1891.

\(^{75}\) *The Woman’s Herald*, 19 November, 1892.
already done yeoman’s service in the cause.⁷⁶ It is probable that Edith Gittins cemented her contacts with the wider suffrage movement on the occasions when national leaders came to address local meetings. Mrs Wynford Phillips visited Leicester in November 1891 when she spoke at the Co-operative Hall and Mrs Fawcett addressed meetings in the town on three occasions in 1886, 1887 and 1896.⁷⁷ Edith Gittins was also called upon to speak at regional conferences of the Women’s Liberal Association and used such occasions to fight for the cause. Thus in 1897 she can be found addressing the annual meeting of the Midland Union of Women’s Liberal Associations. As regards the suffrage, she considered that it was a perfectly scandalous idea that women should be called upon to contribute to the expenses and maintenance of a member of Parliament who did not in the least represent them, and to the expenses and the salary of the officer whose business it would be to put all the men’s names on the register, and to keep the women off.⁷⁸

A month later, chairing a meeting of the Birmingham WLA in 1898 in the absence of Mrs Osler, Edith Gittins expressed her strength of feeling over the question of women’s suffrage. She was outraged at the treatment they had received in the House of Commons, (i.e. the talking out of the 1897 suffrage bill), and considered it to be ‘a proper subject for righteous indignation’.⁷⁹ However she was always a constitutionalist. She later disapproved of the more militant tactics of the WSPU, believing that the

⁷⁶ Hearth and Home, 3 March, 1892. See also The Woman’s Herald, 7 March, 1891 and The Women’s Penny Paper, 8 November, 1890.
⁷⁷ LC, 11 December, 1886, 12 February, 1887, 28 March, 1896.
⁷⁸ LC, 4 December, 1897. As well as speaking on the suffrage, Edith Gittins also moved a resolution in favour of establishing State training colleges for elementary school teachers.
⁷⁹ LC, 29 January, 1898.
methods employed by the WSPU would link ‘women with feeble violence and hysteria’.\textsuperscript{80}

Her own attitude towards the suffrage campaign can be demonstrated through one of her own poems entitled ‘A Fable, for Suffrage and Other Reforms’.

“No!” said the paving-stone.

“Please!” pleaded the fungus roots.

“I can’t be disturbed,” said the paving-stone.

“Sorry!” said the fungus roots.

“Be quiet”, said the paving-stone.

“But we’re alive” said the fungus roots.

“What’s that?” growled the paving-stone.

“We must grow; make way please,” cried the fungus roots.

“Nonsense,” said the paving-stone. “What can you do? - weak, soft things like you! Here I am at the top, and here I stay. It is an excellent arrangement. Be content and don’t push. You make me very uncomfortable,”

“We are in the great plan of things as well as you, and we must push,” said the funguses.

And it is on record that they moved the paving-stone.\textsuperscript{81}

Edith Gittins’s older sister, Catharine, was also a member of the Leicester Women’s Suffrage Society. However, although she was initially a Liberal eventually her Liberalism ‘became ardent Socialism and Pacifism’.\textsuperscript{82} Catharine is a local example of the many feminists whose emancipation required the denial of imperialism since militarism implied

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{80 Quoted in Whitmore, \textit{Alice Hawkins}, p. 44.}
\footnote{81 LRO: \textit{In Memory of Edith Gittins 1845-1910 – A selection of her short poems, hymns and writings} collected by M. C. Gittins, (Leicester, 1921).}
\footnote{82 Ellis, \textit{Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester}, (Leicester, 1935), p. 144.}
\end{footnotes}
the subordination of women. Hirshfield has argued that the Boer War altered the political consciousness of many Liberal women at a local level and served to heighten their awareness of the pressing need for the parliamentary franchise. At a national level the war also influenced the passage of the Cambridge Resolution which denied Federation help to anti-suffrage Liberal candidates.\(^\text{83}\) The subject of imperialism and war was raised in the local newspaper The *Leicester Pioneer* (the newspaper of the ILP). In June 1902 it reported on a lecture given at the Secular Hall by the Secular Society’s secretary, F. J. Gould (who was also moving towards Labour) on 'Women and Militarism'. Gould noted that while he sympathised with the women’s suffrage movement he could see little prospect of women obtaining the suffrage

so long as the country is possessed by the spirit of Imperialism. Imperialism must mean war and the rule of war means the keeping of women in the background. For this reason, the women who wish for the suffrage should strenuously support the Peace movement. Womanhood can never triumph in a world of khaki and gunpowder.\(^\text{84}\)

It is unclear exactly when Catharine Gittins firmly committed herself to Socialism, but as a pacifist it is known that she supported tax-resistance on the grounds that although she paid municipal rates she wished to decline to pay Imperial taxes because she had no say in the spending of them.\(^\text{85}\) By 1900 Catharine Gittins was tentatively linking Socialism and Pacifism when at the annual garden party of the LWLA she

made allusion to the presidential address of Lady Carlisle, who expressed herself strongly in favour of a magnanimous and


\(^{84}\) *The Leicester Pioneer*, 13 September, 1902.

\(^{85}\) *The Times*, 9 May, 1901.
conciliatory settlement of the South African question. She contended that the war was entirely unjustifiable, and might have been averted, and that it was promoted chiefly in the interests of the capitalists.86

By 1900, as Rubenstein argues, the women’s suffrage movement, far from being seen as a ‘backwater period’, had witnessed increased support and steady although limited achievement.87 Martin Pugh has also challenged previous negative assessments of the Victorian suffragist movement, particularly the analysis which claims that the movement went into decline during the 1890s.88 He argues that nationally much of the argument in favour of the suffrage had already been largely won by the turn of the century and argues that the Pankhursts’ claim that the Victorian suffragists had been too patient was essentially propagandist, a reason used to justify their more militant tactics. Evidence of an apparent decline in the number of petitions presented to Parliament during the 1880s and 1890s is not clear-cut as this was easily reversed in 1892 when almost 250,000 signatures were collected.89 Pugh also questions Hollis’s claims that the parliamentary vote owed little to women’s local government work. Rather such work had ‘a politicizing effect’ on women and gradually undermined conventional assumptions about the unsuitability of the female temperament and intellect for political work.90 During this period although little progress was made via the parliamentary route, suffragists were making progress towards achieving their goals through the new party political organisations for women as well as breaking down barriers

86 LC, 14 July, 1900.
87 D. Rubenstein, Before the Suffragettes – Women’s Emancipation in the 1890s (Brighton, 1986), chapter 9.
88 Pugh, The March of the Women, chapter 3.
89 Ibid., p. 65.
90 Ibid., pp. 70-78.
towards women’s public role by taking part in local government work. By
the time of the 1897 vote in Parliament which recorded a pro-suffrage
majority, the achievements of the Victorian suffragists in gaining support
for their cause compared with John Stuart Mill’s amendment thirty years
earlier were evident.\footnote{Pugh, \emph{The March of the Women}, pp. 78-81.}

I would argue that the evidence from Leicester supports Pugh’s and
Rubenstein’s analysis. As the previous two chapters have shown the
involvement of local women in political auxiliaries and in local government
had an empowering effect for women’s participation in the public sphere.
The momentum for franchise reform grew in Leicester particularly from
1887 until by the time the older suffrage societies were re-united as the
National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies in 1897 [hereafter the
NUWSS], Leicester was one of the first societies to affiliate to the new
organisation and was listed in the first annual report in 1898.\footnote{The
Women’s Library, 6B/106/2/NWS/B2/1, \emph{The First Annual Report of the NUWSS}, 1898.}
During the 1890s the local women’s suffrage movement continued to gain in strength,
although nationally the campaign had seen a series of setbacks in
Parliament. It was a vibrant organisation with a strong leadership and
united many local women who were involved in a variety of other causes
and campaigns within the town. At the annual meeting of the Leicester
Society for Women’s Suffrage in 1894 it was reported that the Society was
‘in a flourishing condition.’\footnote{LC, 17 February, 1894.}

Indeed it was recognised by the national leadership that Leicester
was a place where local support was likely to be forthcoming. Thus in
March 1896 Mrs Fawcett was in Leicester rallying local supporters in preparation for the re-introduction of a Bill for female suffrage by the Conservative M.P., Faithful Begg. With regard to the Parliamentary suffrage

she hoped they would memorialise their members in the borough and county to be in their places on that day and support the Bill, and to watch carefully their actions in all questions that affected the interests of women.  

Leicester’s local M.P.s, both of whom were Liberals, were divided on the issue of female suffrage. Henry Broadhurst opposed this Bill whereas Walter Hazell voted in favour. At the end of the meeting, Mrs Rolleston, presiding, signed a memorial on behalf of the meeting and ‘earnestly trusted that they would be able to give their support to the second reading of the Parliamentary Franchise (Extension to Women) Bill. Eventually Faithfull Begg’s Bill passed its Second Reading in the Commons with a majority of 71 in February 1897 and the Bill passed into the Committee stage. Unfortunately as a result of procedural and delaying tactics by the opposition, the Bill was again lost. Pugh nonetheless describes this vote as ‘the real breakthrough’ for women’s suffrage because it demonstrated how much support for the cause had grown over the previous decade. In Leicester there is ample proof that this was indeed the case.

Although most of the members of the Leicester Women’s Suffrage Society were either members themselves of the LWLA or had close family links with prominent male members of the Liberal Party, it would be

94 The Wyvern, 27 March, 1896.
95 http://hansardmillbanksystems.com/commons/1897/feb/03/parliamentary-franchise-extension [accessed 09 May 2012].
96 The Wyvern, 27 March, 1896.
97 Pugh, The March of the Women, p. 80.
misleading to state that this was always true. The example of Mrs Rolleston provides evidence of support for the suffrage movement within the local Conservative party. In her speech at the Co-operative Hall in Leicester in March 1896, Mrs Fawcett had acknowledged that from the outset the movement had been supported by both men and women from both political parties. Furthermore as far as the local Conservative Party was concerned, it is striking that in March 1897 one member, Mr Edwin de Lisle, felt obliged to resign from the local Primrose League in protest against the stance taken by them towards the subject of women’s suffrage. He felt that to give women the vote would ‘involve most cruel consequences’ and the ‘subversion of Christian society.’ It is also interesting to note that from its previous position twenty years earlier in 1875 when the Liberal Leicester Chronicle felt that women should not be granted the vote indiscriminately, by 1897 the newspaper also appeared to have hardened its position, perhaps in the face of evidence that now the movement was gaining support and the argument was gradually being won. Noting the ‘courage’ of Mr de Lisle’s decision, the editorial commented that

We do not know that we go as far as the last statement [i.e. regarding the subversion of Christian society], but firmly believe that the majority of women do not desire the franchise, would not use it if they possessed it, and that if they did the results would not necessarily be beneficial to society. Women as a rule have a rooted objection to be called upon to give a vote even in local elections, and it arises from a constitutional indisposition towards politics.  

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98 LC, 20 March, 1897.
99 Ibid.
As well as evidence of support for female enfranchisement within the Conservative party, Rubenstein argues that as the number of organised women grew during the 1890s, there was an increase in interest from working-class women, indicating that the movement was broadening its support and gradually ceasing to be an almost exclusively middle and upper-class concern. During the late 1890s there are some indications that this was beginning to happen in Leicester and was a sign of how the movement was to change during the Edwardian period. For example, Agnes Clarke, (described as either a factory operative or a keeper of laundry accounts), is recorded as being a member of the Leicester Women’s Suffrage Society in 1896 when she seconded a motion in favour of women’s suffrage at the meeting in March 1896 which was addressed by Mrs Fawcett. Agnes Clarke had received a good education however, although the family had been poor. In the early twentieth century she and her sister, Bertha, both joined the WSPU.

The question of the representation and the franchise was frequently commented upon by ‘Lydia’ (possibly identified as Agnes Clarke) in the woman’s column of The Pioneer thus attempting to reach out to women who were not yet to some degree politicised. In July 1902, ‘Lydia’ noted that the Coronation procession in Leicester was to have been interesting, attractive and ‘of a thoroughly representative character’. As ‘Lydia’ wrote, however, ‘Mark you that thoroughly representative; and yet, looking

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100 Rubenstein, Before the Suffragettes, p. 148.
101 Whitmore, Alice Hawkins.
102 LC, 28 March, 1896.
103 Aucott, Women of Courage, pp. 45-50; see also Whitmore, Alice Hawkins, pp. 60 &65.
104 The Leicester Pioneer, 5 July, 1902.
through the order of the procession, I could not help asking, “Where do the women come in?”105 She also supported those who wished to see at least a limited franchise for women rather than waiting until there was full adult suffrage for all. In September 1902, commenting on the defeat at the TUC of a motion that the franchise be extended to women on the same terms as men because this would only enfranchise rich women and ignore the poor, ‘Lydia’ argued that ‘Surely it were better to enfranchise a few women rather than none, for is not half a loaf better than no bread?’106 This issue was to prove a thorny question for socialists during the next few years as they struggled over whether to prioritise class or gender. Keir Hardie supported a limited franchise arguing that women must be removed ‘from the sphere of ‘idiots, lunatics and paupers’, and to recognise that, woman though she be, she is a human being who may become a citizen.”107 On the other hand, others feared that by concentrating on even a limited women’s suffrage, attention would be drawn away from class oppression and that enfranchised middle-class voters would be more likely to vote against Labour.108 In her column ‘Lydia’ prioritised gender over class.

7.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the suffrage movement in Leicester had made much progress by the turn of the twentieth century in terms of the number of supporters although with regards to winning the argument some had yet to

105 The Leicester Pioneer, 5 July 1902..
106 Ibid., 13 September, 1902.
be convinced. The progress made becomes clear if one compares the situation at the time of the first petition signed by the four Ellis sisters in 1866 with that of 1897 when the suffrage societies were reunited as the NUWSS. The question of female suffrage was being discussed within the Liberal, Conservative and Socialist parties by the turn of the century both at a national and a local level. It is a mistaken belief that all of the progress and argument towards achieving the vote was made during the Edwardian period by more militant suffragettes. The Leicester Women’s Suffrage Society had gained support in terms of numbers and was described as ‘flourishing’ in 1894. There is also some evidence that it was broadening the base of its support. Even before the establishment of the local branch of the WSPU in April 1907, Sir John Rolleston had presented a petition in support of female suffrage from women workers in Leicester to the House of Commons in March 1904.\textsuperscript{109} Leicester had been one of the first societies to join the NSWS in 1871 as well as the NUWSS in 1897 and throughout this period was seen as a town where support would be forthcoming, as is witnessed by the number of prominent speakers who visited during this period. The movement had the support of many of the town’s most active middle-class women, the majority of whom were also involved with the Liberal Party, as well as several local clergy, in particular Nonconformist ministers.

The interplay between local and national figures demonstrates how women developed support for the cause. Local women’s networks were not confined to Leicester. Rather it can be seen that the presence of

national leaders of the movement as local orators was crucial in encouraging support for the cause within the town as well as helping some of Leicester’s more prominent leaders to move beyond the local stage. From as early as 1866, Quaker networks had influenced the Ellis sisters to support the Ladies’ Petition to Parliament. For Frances Gill, hearing Jessie Craigen speak and the experience of attending a demonstration in Nottingham was clearly inspiring. Edith Gittins became ‘well-known’ outside of her immediate vicinity and Helen Blackburn made use of her local contact with Fanny Fullagar to urge her to encourage the local candidates in the Harborough division of Leicester to lend their support to the cause.

In addition women clearly had gained in confidence as the nineteenth century drew to a close. This is evidenced by the gradual decrease in their dependence on men as chairmen and speakers at public meetings. This was, of course, not solely due to their campaigning for the vote as over the course of the century women had campaigned for other causes pertinent to both themselves and to the less fortunate. They had also begun to be involved in local government as well as in local women’s party political organisations. The cumulative effect of this increased public activity particularly in the area of social and moral reform was to politicise more women and gradually to dispel the fears of others that women would become ‘unsexed’ by stepping outside of the domestic sphere. Instead the distinction between public and private had become indistinct as women had argued that their ‘feminine’ influence was needed to improve society as a whole. As Pugh argues by the early 1900s they had thereby
diminished the 'novelty in the idea of a parliamentary vote for women.'

Locally the period from 1887-1900 in particular cannot be seen as a failure. Arguably by the early 1900s because of the campaigning of the Victorian suffragists, there was a broad-based support for female suffrage upon which the Edwardian suffragettes built.

\[110\] Pugh, *The March of the Women*, p. 78.
Conclusion

This thesis focuses primarily upon a small group of particularly active women in Leicester. However, it has shed further light on the debate about women, citizenship and the public sphere in Victorian Britain. Megan Smitley has pointed out that the ideology of ‘separate spheres’ was still ‘a potent philosophy’ during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She argues for the existence of ‘a feminine public sphere’ distinct from the male public sphere where women mirrored the public activities of their male kinsfolk in a network of reforming, charitable and political organisations.¹ This research supports Smitley’s statement that the ideology of ‘separate spheres’ was a persistent undercurrent in the lives of middle-class men and women throughout the nineteenth century despite the growing opportunities opening up to women in the public sphere as women gained limited local voting rights.

However this is not the complete picture. Towards the end of the century leading local women such as Edith Gittins were increasingly beginning to work alongside men within the same organisations performing tasks on a ‘non-gendered’ basis and ‘separate spheres’ was slowly becoming eroded. In Leicester this is most obviously seen within the mixed-sex Kyrle Society where although some women did still work on a ‘gendered’ basis, some were also assuming important leadership and representative roles. As has been noted in chapter four, in 1898 Edith Gittins was elected President of the Society.

‘Separate spheres’ ideology elicited a range of responses from local women. Some women argued for the Parliamentary vote on equal terms as men because women were not ‘inferior subjects’ and shared with men common human characteristics. These women challenged ‘separate spheres’ directly. Other women reworked the dominant gender ideology to endorse their wider activism in the public sphere, particularly in the fields of social and moral reform. They therefore emphasised women’s role as moral guardians, and stressed their domestic virtues and duty to serve their fellow men. Active women and their supporters in Leicester, as elsewhere, thus emphasised a woman’s nurturing, mothering role arguing that such qualities in the public sphere were necessary for the benefit of society.² By doing so they carved out a public role for themselves in philanthropic, campaigning and local government organisations.

The study provides further confirmation of general trends which have been noticed in other towns and cities.³ The centrality of religious dissent, in particular Unitarianism, Quakerism and Congregationalism, for the growth of women’s activism can clearly be seen in Leicester in this period. Close family and friendship ties in religion were important locally because they helped to forge a sense of belonging and purpose in a community which was intent on reform. Strong religious ties nationwide were also important for the spread of feminist ideas and for women’s eagerness to see political reform. The connection between the commitment to social and moral reform and religious motivation has

² S. S. Holton, Feminism and Democracy – Women’s Suffrage an Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 10-16.
hitherto been underestimated. Spirituality was the bedrock of women’s conviction that it was their duty and mission to improve society and save souls.

The mission of middle-class women to reform the poor was, however, always complicated by their class. Middle-class women were particularly keen to inculcate the virtues of self-help for the benefit of the poor as well as for the good of society. Middle-class women considered themselves to be educators and ‘mothers’ to the working-class poor. Strict enquiries were made to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor before charity was dispensed. This can be seen particularly with regard to some of the early female Poor Law Guardians where there was a clash between a nurturing womanly ideology on the one hand and the application of strict Charity Organisation Society ideology on the other. In such instances class attitudes clearly triumphed over those of gender and a middle-class view of pauperism which displayed little understanding of the true causes of poverty was apparent.

This thesis takes issue with those historians who have emphasised the essentially masculine nature of the urban public sphere.⁴ Women did not lay claim to citizenship through participation in the rites of civic culture, but through their involvement in a network of philanthropic, campaigning and local government organisations as well through civic societies such as the Kyrle Society. It was through their involvement that particularly after 1870 these women gradually became recognised as leading citizens in their own right by their contemporaries, becoming less dependent on men

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for support and more feminist in their outlook. Recently Kathryn Gleadle has suggested that women living in the period from 1815-1867 were ‘borderline citizens’, whose status as political actors was ‘fragile and contentious’.\textsuperscript{5} Arguably during the second half of the nineteenth century women crossed over that border at least at a local level as they gradually achieved limited voting rights through the Municipal Franchise Act of 1869 and the Local Government Act of 1894.

However in asking the question of how far over the border they had travelled, it cannot be denied that their position as leading Leicester citizens with a greater role in public life was not universally welcomed. Progress towards changing the attitudes of men in Leicester could be slow. In the urban public sphere, especially before the 1890s, women in Leicester were accepted most readily by men when they performed ‘gendered’ tasks. Furthermore, it is clear from the evidence from local obituaries that the ‘ideal nineteenth-century woman’ was represented as pursuing her public role within gender norms. She thus acted in a ‘quiet, unassuming’ manner, was never ‘unwomanly’ but was ‘of quiet and modest disposition’, ‘unostentatious’, ‘homely’, her work characterised by ‘sweetness and light’.\textsuperscript{6} Active women were no doubt aware that in order to negotiate the public sphere successfully, they still needed to take into account this underlying and persistent ‘separate spheres’ ideology.

A related theme is women’s conception of themselves as citizens. In Leicester women citizens claimed entrance into the public sphere and

\textsuperscript{5} K. Gleadle, \textit{Borderline Citizens – Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain 1815-1867} (Oxford, 2009).

\textsuperscript{6} LC, 5 November, 1892 & 8 February, 1896; \textit{The Wyvern}, 1 April, 1898; \textit{The Englishwoman’s Review}, 15 October, 1894; \textit{Leicester Daily Post}, 22 September, 1917.
enfranchisement not only in terms of their rights, although this aspect is
not denied. As has already been indicated, women also sought to fulfil
what they considered to be their social responsibilities especially to other
women, children and the vulnerable by participating in the public sphere.
They therefore had a highly-developed sense of duty. Jane Rendall notes
that mid-Victorian suffragists such as Julia Wedgwood sought to be
counted as citizens ‘as much from our need of being awakened to higher
duties as from a demand for extended rights’. This research supports
Rendall’s analysis of middle-class women’s perception of themselves as
citizens. Citizenship was seen not only as a right but also in terms of duty.
Furthermore the urge to reform was two – pronged. As well as as aspiring
to reform others, women aimed to improve themselves.

This study has clearly identified a group of middle-class women
who were intent on reform, who had a strong sense of duty and were
increasingly recognised by others as leading citizens. As their ‘feminist
consciousness’ developed at a local level, they were encouraged to press
for full citizenship on the national stage. The women who dominate this
study were mostly the relatives and friends of the male, Liberal,
nonconformist elite who governed Leicester for most of the nineteenth
century and have been identified by Dinah Freer. The importance of the
Women’s Liberal Federation in advancing the cause of women’s rights is
also supported by this study. Leicester, like other cities such as Bristol,
clearly possessed a strong and progressive Women’s Liberal Association

7 J. Rendall, ‘Citizenship, Culture and Civilisation: The Languages of British Suffragists, 1886-1874’,
in C. Daly and M. Nolan (eds.), Suffrage and Beyond – International Feminist Perspectives (New
8 D. Freer, ‘The dynasty-builders of Victorian Leicester’, Transactions of the Leicestershire
led by prominent local women from a range of philanthropic and local government organisations. It was largely due to the pressure exerted by this organisation that attitudes often held by Liberal men towards the Victorian women’s suffrage campaign were changed. At the same time it should not be forgotten that grassroots activism by women within the Conservative Party convinced some Conservative men by the end of the century that the time had now arrived to give women the vote.

It is known that in the Edwardian period Leicester had a relatively strong and active Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). It is also known that some women belonged to both the Leicester branch of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the WSPU. However, the evidence presented in this thesis shows that local Victorian women had already made considerable head-way in the decades since the 1866 women’s suffrage petition in changing local opinion about women’s suffrage. It was the Victorian suffrage campaign which laid the foundations upon which the Edwardian suffragettes built.

Local studies are valuable because it is easier to demonstrate the forces behind the development of grassroots women’s activism through a local lens. It is also possible to trace the effects and the importance of outside influences on that development. This study of Leicester has added to the body of knowledge about women’s involvement in the public sphere in the late nineteenth century. It has supported previous findings about the nature and the extent of that involvement particularly in larger towns and cities by highlighting the centrality of religious dissent and Liberalism

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9 R. Whitmore, Alice Hawkins and the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Leicester (Derby, 2007).
for women’s activism. It has argued that women were an integral part of Leicester’s middle-class reforming public culture and contributed to the building of a middle-class identity in the town. This thesis has also highlighted Victorian women’s sense of duty and responsibility which encouraged a belief that it was necessary for the good of society as a whole for women to take part as citizens in public life. This is what Miss Beale meant when in 1886 she urged her old pupils from Belmont House School to become ‘Worthy Citizens’.
### Appendix One: *Reading Society programme, 1898 – 1899*

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<td>8</td>
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<td>The War of the Spanish Succession</td>
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<td>at the death of Louis XIV</td>
<td>Mrs Bernard Ellis</td>
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Appendix Two: **Biographical Notes**

**Anna Chrysogon BEALE (1834 - 1917)**
Anna was the sister of Dorothea, who established the Cheltenham Ladies College where Anna herself taught from 1862. In 1876 Anna moved to Leicester where she became headmistress of Belmont House School. Anna re-joined her sister in Cheltenham in 1891 but not before forming the Belmont House Society in 1886. A strong believer in women’s suffrage, Anna, together with her friend Agnes KILGOUR were active in the Leicester Women’s Suffrage Society and in 1887 were joint honorary secretaries.²

**Fanny BOLUS (1841 – 1930)**
A committed Unitarian and active proponent of women’s suffrage in Leicester, she was the honorary secretary of the Leicester branch of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage as early as 1881. In 1886 she had become the founding honorary secretary of the Leicester Women’s Liberal Association (LWLA) and in 1897 became the founding treasurer of the Leicester branch of the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW). She was naturally self-effacing, but ‘reliable, discreet and well-informed’. She spent the last twenty-five years of her life living in Sidmouth, Devon with Caroline Collett.³

**Emily BOSWORTH (1847 – 1929)**
Emily was a founding member of the LWLA and in 1892 was elected as a Poor Law Guardian for St. Margaret’s Ward, a position she retained until 1904. She was the first Leicester married woman from a working class background to be elected to the post. Emily also became a member of the NUWW soon after its formation in 1897.⁴ She was described by The Wyvern as a ‘homely, approachable sort of woman’ who when necessary could voice her opinion ‘lucidly and effectively’.

**Annie CLEPHAN (1854 – 1930)**
Annie was a dedicated member of the Unitarian Great Meeting who devoted herself to a wide range of public and philanthropic works. She was a member of the Leicester School Board (LSB) from 1891 to 1900, when it ceased to exist. Annie Clephan was always keenly interested in the children of the special schools and was President of the Special School Committee for several years.⁵ She herself opened a school for feeble-minded girls in 1907.⁶ She was a life-long member and eventually president of the LWLA and in later life, an executive committee member of the NUWW and its president from 1913 – 1919. She was then vice president from 1919 until her death in 1930.⁷ She was described as an effective speaker and a ‘lady of high character’.⁸ At her death she was described as a ‘well-known local worker in social welfare’.⁹

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³ Ellis, Records, pp. 136-138.
⁵ *The Leicester Advertiser*, 19 July, 1930.
⁸ *The Wyvern*, 3 December, 1897.
⁹ *The Leicester Advertiser*, 19 July, 1930.
Charlotte ELLIS (1836 – 1917)
One of seven daughters of the leading Leicester Quaker and Liberal businessman, John ELLIS M.P. and his wife Priscilla, Charlotte was probably the most well-known of the sisters. Although she was described as a ‘woman of quiet and modest disposition’ she took an active part in the public life of Leicester in the late nineteenth century. She was a founder member of the Leicester branch of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and a founder member of the LWLA. In 1892 Charlotte was elected as a Leicester Poor Law Guardian a position she held until 1901, when she declined to resubmit herself for re-election after suffering from sleepless nights during the vaccination controversy.

Agnes ARCHER EVANS nee KILGOUR (1848 – 1924)
An Australian by birth, Agnes first came to prominence in Leicester through her friendship with Anna BEALE and her association with Belmont House School and the Belmont House Society (see above). Agnes briefly left Leicester in 1891 to take up a position at Cheltenham Ladies College but returned to Leicester in 1895 to marry the recently widowed William EVANS. Agnes was a LWLA Committee member in the late 1890s and with Catherine GITTINS was the co-founder in 1897 of the Leicester branch of the NUWW. She became its secretary (1897), president (1906 – 1911) and vice president (1916 – 1918). As well as her involvement in educational matters and politics, Agnes was a leading member of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, becoming its first woman president in 1913, and the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society.

Isabella EVANS (1837 – 1894)
Isabella was the daughter of Joseph DARE, the Domestic Missionary of the Unitarian Chapel in East Bond Street, Leicester. In 1879 she became the first woman to be elected to the LSB and stood until 1892 when she was forced to stand down because of ill health. She was responsible for the introduction of the kindergarten system to elementary schools in Leicester and was credited with recognising that ‘the natural conditions and surroundings of child-life are not desks and forms, but open air and sunshine’. In 1878 she became one of the managers of the Wyggeston High School for Girls and took an active interest in the Leicester School of Cookery. She was one of the first women in Leicester to give health lectures and was connected with the District Nursing Committee. It was reported on her death in the Englishwoman’s Review to which she was one of the earliest subscribers that ‘All Mrs Evans’ work, whether in public or private was characterized by sweetness and light’.

Mary EWING (1825 – 1896)
Mary was a leading member of the LWLA and of the local campaign to abolish the Contagious Diseases Act. She was a strong supporter of women’s suffrage, and a Poor Law Guardian from 1892 until her sudden death in 1896. Quiet and unassuming she was described as ‘most assiduous in her attention to the work

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10 The Leicester Daily Post, 22 September, 1917.
11 LRO: DE2340/1 Leicester COS Minute Book (1876-1881); LC, 18 October 1890.
12 Ellis, Records, p 57.
14 Leicester Daily Post, 23 May, 1894.
15 The Englishwoman’s Review, 15 October 1894.
16 LC, 10 March 1883
17 Ibid., 1 February, 1896
which specially fall to the lot of lady guardians'. At her funeral service it was reported that she was greatly admired and loved for her combination of ‘gentleness and strength’ and her willingness to persevere with her ‘duties’.

**Fanny FULLAGAR (1846 – 1918)**

A member of the Unitarian East Bond Street Chapel, Fanny was at the forefront of women’s activities in Leicester towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century in spite of Isabel Ellis noting her natural reluctance to chair a public meeting. She also possessed a good sense of humour, not being averse to a joke against herself. She was a founder member of the LWLA. In 1889 she became the first woman in Leicester to be elected as a Poor Law guardian – standing as the COS candidate. As a guardian she rarely missed a meeting and focused much of her attention on the work of the Brabazon Society. She was also a vice-President of the NUWW. She actively supported the Discharged Prisoners’ Aid Society and the Nurses Institution. Towards the end of her life she became a strong supporter of the N.S.P.C.C to which all subscriptions were sent at her funeral.

**Edith GITTINS (1845 – 1910)**

Edith, a talented artist and poet, first came to prominence in Leicester in 1880 when, with Alfred PAGET, she founded the Leicester branch of the Kyrle Society. A life-long Unitarian who spent the whole of her life in Leicester, she attended the East Bond Street Chapel and was a Sunday School teacher at the chapel from 1862 to 1902. She believed strongly in women’s suffrage and was also one of the founder members of the LWLA. Edith regularly addressed both local and regional meetings on female suffrage. She was a founder member in 1897 of the Leicester branch of the NUWW and was one of its vice presidents from its inception until her death in 1910. She was also a prominent member of the Leicester Society of Artists. Her funeral eulogy spoke of how she had given her utmost to the town and Leicester people were proud of her. Although described by some as impetuous and restless she was nonetheless enthusiastic and energetic, possessing ‘amazing energy’. Underpinning her active public life was her religious faith and more specifically the ‘interpretation of God’s hand in the phenomena of society’. Edith Gittins realised that ‘every social problem was a challenge to theology’. At her death she left £500 to the Treasurer of the Borough of Leicester for the erection of a public drinking fountain, to be called ‘Ethelfloeda’s Fountain’ (a militant Christian and daughter of Alfred the Great) to be placed at the junction of High Street and Silver Street. It was eventually erected in Victoria Park and later moved to the City Rooms.

**Mary Catherine GITTINS (1840 – 1930)**

Mary Catherine (known as Kate) was the elder sister of Edith GITTINS (see above). Although born and educated in Leicester, she moved in her twenties to

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18 LC, 1 February, 1896.
19 LC, 8 February, 1896.
20 Ellis, Records, pp. 141-142.
21 Ibid., 25 May, 1889.
22 LRO: 16D58/1, Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950, (1897).
23 The Wyvern, 30 June, 1893; Ellis, Records, p. 142.
24 Ellis, Records, pp. 147-149; LRO: 16D58/1, Annual reports of the Leicester branch of the NUWW 1897-1950, (1897).
25 Leicestershire Mercury, 13 August, 1910.
26 Ibid.
live and work in Birmingham as an art teacher. She returned to live in Leicester in 1900 with her mother and sister in Salisbury Road. A committed Unitarian, she was like her sister a fervent supporter of women’s suffrage. Although initially a Liberal, she eventually became a socialist and a pacifist. She also undertook national responsibilities by becoming the honorary secretary of NUWW from 1899 to 1918 becoming one of its vice presidents from 1916 up until her death in 1930.28

Mary LIVENS (1821 – 1891)
Mary, a Congregationalist and a Londoner by birth, moved to Leicester in c.1860. She was one of the founding Committee members of the Leicester branch of the NSWS in 1871. She appeared on various public platforms at suffrage meetings in Leicester in the 1870s and early 1880s and in 1883 chaired a meeting of Leicester branch of the NSWS.29 Mary Livens was a leading member of the campaign to abolish the Contagious Diseases Acts becoming the secretary of the Leicester branch of the Ladies’ National Association in 1872.30 A woman who believed firmly in one’s ‘Christian duty’ to help others, she was also instrumental in the foundation in Leicester in 1878 of a Rescue Home for young destitute girls who might be in danger of falling into prostitution.31

Dr Mary ROYCE (1845 – 1892)
Dr Mary ROYCE, a Congregationalist, trained as Leicester’s first female medical doctor in London qualifying at the age of 44. She had previously worked amongst the poor in the Sanvey-gate and Church-gate areas of Leicester, holding a religious and educational class for about one hundred young men which later became the Royce Institute. She was a member of the LWLA and in 1892 was elected as a Poor Law guardian in Leicester. She died suddenly of erysipelas in November 1892 following a visit to a sick patient in the Workhouse Infirmary. She was described as unostentatious and quiet, preferring the outside world to be unaware of the work which she carried out amongst the poor.32

Mary SAUNDERSON (1849 – 1908)
Mary SAUNDERSON moved to Leicester in 1894 and was immediately voted on as the Independent Labour Party candidate for the LSB33. She played an active role its work, including working on the hitherto male- only finance and buildings committees, before inexplicably resigning and ceasing all activities in 189534.

Susan THEOBALD (1833 – 1907)
Mrs Susan Theobald was born in Ireland moving to Leicester with her parents as a teenager. She was one of the earliest pioneers of the temperance movement and spoke passionately and eloquently on the evils of drink especially amongst women. She could reportedly speak for up to two hours on the subject and retain the attention of the audience.35 She lectured on the subject not only in Leicester but also throughout the country and in Ireland and America36. She established a home at Matlock in 1864 for inebriate women and in the mid-1870s opened

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29 Aucott, Women of Courage, p. 147.
31 LC, 20 April, 1878.
32 LC, 5 November, 1892.
33 LC, 1 December 1894.
34 LC, 8 February 1896.
35 LC, 2 March 1861.
36 LC, 2 March 1861.
Tower House in Avenue Road, Knighton, Leicester - a home for “Inebriate women of the upper classes”.37 She was also an active member of the campaign to abolish the Contagious Diseases Act.38 Until the Christmas before her death she used to drive around Leicester in a small pony cart. In politics she was a staunch, but not active Conservative and regularly attended St. John’s Church in Albion Street.39

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38 LC, 10 March 1883.
39 *The Leicester Advertiser*, 23 March 1907.
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