



Middlesbrough's
Inspiring
Women:
The Early Years

Rekindle Research

A hundred years have passed since Ellen Wilkinson was elected as Middlesbrough's first female Member of Parliament. This booklet celebrates her achievement as well as recognising the contributions made by many other women to Middlesbrough's early development. Some of these women are well known, others less so, all deserve recognition as they helped to form and shape the town.

They made contributions to Middlesbrough's political, educational, health and welfare systems and its cultural life. This was a time when women had few legal rights and were not encouraged to participate in public life. The women's sphere was thought to be the home, caring for and supporting her husband.

Yet, these women overcame many barriers to have their voices heard. They used their talents for the good of others rather than having them suppressed by traditional views. All were heroines. We hope this booklet helps to give them the praise and recognition they so richly deserve.

Middlesbrough's Origins and Women's Lives

Middlesbrough had an astonishing growth, its population exploding from 25 in 1830 to 90,000 by 1900. Services we now take for granted: housing, medical care, welfare and education hardly existed and lagged behind working people's needs as the town grew. Courageous and determined women made significant contributions to these areas despite the social and political barriers they faced.

Here are some of their stories.

'Red Ellen' Wilkinson (1891-1947), The Mighty Atom.

100 years ago, she became Middlesbrough East's MP, declaring "What a town to have the privilege of fighting for". As the first female Labour Party MP she led the way for other women to follow. She burned with a desire to improve people's lives as a trade union representative & City Councillor before becoming an MP.



Her achievements were immense, leading the famous Jarrow March to London in 1936 and later becoming the first female Minister of Education in 1945. Her work was sadly cut short by her untimely death in 1947. How much more could she have achieved had she lived?

Other women fought to improve conditions for hard-pressed Middlesbrough people. **Alice Schofield-Coates (1881-1975)** became Middlesbrough's first female councillor in 1919 with **Marion Coates-Hanson (1870-1947)** the second. **Lady Anne (Annie) Gilzean-Reid (1843-1895)** was active in the Women's Liberal Association. Middlesbrough born **Bertha Quinn (1873-1951)**, a fascinating firebrand, was imprisoned and force fed in the campaign for female suffrage. She enjoyed a reputation for being outspoken in the face of injustice.

In nursing and health, we celebrate **Sister Mary Jacques (d.1878)**, who set up a badly needed cottage hospital in Middlesbrough, one of the first in the country. Also, **May Hedley (1853-1925)**, **Dr. Minnie Levick (1871-1961)**, **Dr. Grace Dundas**, **Lady Sarah Calvert (1872-1927)** and **Edith Carter Owen (1872-1951)** who were all committed to ensuring the townspeople had nursing and child welfare facilities.

Dr Maud Chadburn (1868-1857) became one of the country's first female surgeons, eventually co-founding a hospital for Women and Children with an all-woman staff, giving female doctors opportunities to develop their skills.

**Sister Elizabeth
Anne Purvis
(1852-1928)**



The ‘Northern Nightingale’ in her distinctive purple cape, was a familiar figure in Middlesbrough homes. In 1890 she became Superintendent of the Middlesbrough District Nursing Association founded by May Hedley. In her nearly fifty-year career, Sister Purvis and her team made over 5000 home visits. The workload was overwhelming.

In 1913, with Dr Minnie Levick she opened a Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic on Cannon Street, overcoming initial suspicion from local women. Eventually, demand led to a second clinic opening in 1914. She recognised the vital importance of raising the status of nursing, campaigning for its recognition as a profession. This was finally achieved in 1921.

Following the Forster Education Act (1870) schools had to be quickly developed. In 1873, five **Faithful Companions of Jesus** nuns came to Middlesbrough. It must have been an unnerving experience for them living in Temperance Place surrounded by thirty inns and beer houses. Local reports described it as:

“a low neighbourhood where scenes of drunkenness and fighting were of nightly occurrence”

Despite initial resistance to their work, the nuns persevered, establishing several schools and continued to be active in Middlesbrough's education for 135 years.



Our women are well represented in Arts and Entertainment. Footballing heroine, **Winnie McKenna (1897-1971)**, played during and after World War One and was one of the best female players in the country.

The Newcastle Evening Chronicle in 1918 declared: 'See Winnie McKenna at centre; she is as good as any man'.

Florence Easton (1882-1955)

Also known as the “*Slaggy Island Songbird*”, her glorious voice took her from South Bank to the New York Metropolitan Opera House. She was one of the most versatile singers of the time.

Florence sang with Caruso and later taught at Julliard School of Music.



Naomi Jacob (1884-1964)



Naomi taught at St Hilda's Primary School in Snowdon Road. She campaigned for women's rights and was a militant suffragette. Her novel, *The Beloved Physician*, is thought to be based on her experiences in Middlesbrough.

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