

## Nottingham City's First Women Magistrates 1920

**A**FTER THE SEX DISQUALIFICATION (REMOVAL) ACT was passed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1919 women were at last able to access all aspects of the law as jury members, Magistrates and as legal professionals. Initially, seven women magistrates were appointed nationally in January 1920 and they were charged by the Lord Chancellor with coming up with further candidates. The criteria broadly seem to have been belonging to the women's movement; being over 30; and being politically and socially active.

Nominations were sought from various organisations and in 1920 the Nottingham Women Service Association, and the Nottingham Council of Women (earlier known as the Nottingham Union of Women Workers) wrote to the Lord Chancellor with various suggestions. The Lord Chancellor's Women's Committee came up with a list of 172 names to be appointed across the country including three women who were appointed on 20th July 1920 to sit at the Guildhall in Nottingham City. These were Helena Dowson, Caroline Harper and Mary Ball. All three met the criteria being socially and politically active in the City.



Nottingham Evening Post 20 July 1920

### Caroline Margaret Harper (née Lennox) 1863–1937

**CAROLINE** was the daughter of a clergyman, she married a surgeon Dr Henry Harper and they lived at 5 Regent Street in the City. She was active in the Local Government Association from 1890's campaigning for the political representation of women on civic bodies. In 1910 she became a Poor Law Guardian, in 1918 the vice chair and then in 1925 she became the first woman Chair of the Board of Guardians. In 1916 she was appointed along with Helena Dowson and Mary Ball onto the Anti-Profiteering committee. She also was a member of the Statutory Committee for Mental Deficiency, and Chair of the Ex-Servicemen and War Workers Association. In July 1920 she became the first woman Conservative City Councillor, elected



Nottingham Guardian 2 February 1937

unopposed for Market ward serving from 1920-1937. She was also president of the ward's Women's Conservative Association, a position she held until her death. In July 1920 she was also appointed a Magistrate for the City. In 1931 she was appointed the first woman Sheriff of Nottingham. She had a personal interest and commitment to the Midwives Association, to mental health and to education – she chaired the Education Committee. Caroline was also a keen sportswoman captaining local cricket and golf clubs and at various times she chaired the Nottingham Ladies swimming club. She was described as displaying inexhaustible energy, showing sympathy and understanding and that her work was characterised by earnestness and efficiency. She died from a heart attack at 1 Lucknow Avenue in Mapperley Park aged 74.

## Helena Dowson (née Brownsword) 1866–1964



Photo courtesy of University of Nottingham Manuscripts & Special Collections UMP/4/1

**HELENA**, or Nellie as she preferred, was the only daughter of Anderson and Jane Brownsword. Both parents were active in charity and social works and Helena followed in their footsteps. In 1894 she married William Enfield Dowson – Will- the first son of Benjamin and Alice Dowson and they lived firstly at 10 Mapperley Road and from 1906 in the Park. Helena worked with Alice and her sisters-in-law on various issues, but in particular on women's suffrage. She took over the secretary role of the Nottingham Women's Suffrage Society - the key organising role – from Alice in 1896 and was tireless in campaigning for women to get the vote. She organised and attended meetings, represented Nottingham on the London NUWSS meetings, went to London for demonstrations and marches, spoke at events, organised fundraising events and worked in Nottingham's suffrage shop in Regent's Passage – now gone. In 1911 Nellie and Maud, her sister in law joined the Great Suffrage Pilgrimage as it

passed through Nottingham, on route to London. Helena's work was commended with an illuminated address once the vote was won, by fellow suffragists in Nottingham.

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### **NOTTINGHAM SUFFRAGE LEADER HONOURED.**

*“To mark their appreciation of her services to the cause, the object of which has now been secured, friends of the women's suffrage movement in the city and county yesterday [18th July 1918] presented Mrs. W. E. Dowson, of Nottingham, with two large volumes of Japanese painters, with an illuminated address suitably inscribed, and a bronze statuette entitled ‘Sorrow’. The ceremony took place at the residence of Mrs. W. R. Hamilton, Eastdene Alexandra Park, Nottingham, was witnessed by a considerable gathering.”*

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Nottingham Evening Post 19 July 1918

During the 1914-1918 war she organised various fundraising and support for women; she was the Honorary Secretary of the Queen's Work for Women, a member of the Anti-Profiteering committee, set up two 'Baby Welcomes' and a day nursery at the request of the Ministry of Health.

She became a JP in July 1920 and at a conference in Westminster Hall in October 1920 which established the Magistrates Association she was elected to the provisional committee which set the initial objectives and working focus of the MA. Back in Nottingham in 1921 she was appointed Visiting Magistrate to Nottingham Prison monitoring conditions there and established a League of Honour to help with prisoners' mental health and well-being. She also inaugurated women's police court work – being secretary and then Chair. In 1919 she stood unsuccessfully as a Liberal candidate and then became the **first** woman Liberal Councillor in 1920-24 representing the Meadows Ward, campaigning for improved housing and sanitation and the extension of the vote to women over 21 on an equal footing to men and for their representation on civic bodies. She lived at Felixstowe in The Park but from 1930 they bought land and built a house in the Lake District on the edge of Lake Windermere and particularly after her husband's death in 1934 she lived there. Her death was reported in The Magistrate annual report as follows:

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*"Mrs H B Dowson, the first lady Magistrate to be appointed to the City Bench, died on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1964, at the great age of 98 years. In acknowledging the Chairman's letter of condolence, Miss R Dowson, a close relative and herself a Justice on the Bingham bench wrote: She really was a wonderfully active person, and her vitality of mind lasted her 98 years. Her going was quite sudden and unexpected. Many of you will remember the toast proposed by the Chairman to Mrs Dowson as the doyenne of the Bench when she attended the annual dinner of the Justices three years ago. In her earlier days Mrs Dowson had been an active Liberal and keen suffragist."*

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## **Mary Ball (née Brookes) 1866–1946**

**Mary** was born in Radford, Nottingham, the daughter of Edward Brookes, a lace-maker and his wife Mary Ann Leeson, originally from Mansfield. She had ten brothers and sisters, and the older children were brought up by the grandfather, William Leeson in Mansfield. Mary lived with her parents and siblings, according to the 1881 census, at 15 Oliver Terrace, Oliver Street in Radford. Mary is described as a machinist. The 1901 census has her still living with her parents, but Mary is now described as a lace-maker. After her father died in 1904 Mary continues to live with her mother and a brother Richard. She is now described as the head of household and an over-looker lace-maker. Her mother died in 1915 at the age of 88. A year later, at the age of 50, Mary married the widower, Samuel Ball, also a lace-maker and she moved to live with him at 18 Wordsworth Road. Witnesses at the wedding are Thomas Brookes, one of her brothers and Edith Anne Hind, her niece. Mary became the stepmother to adult children – 4 daughters and 2 sons.

Mary became the Secretary of the Female Society of Lace-makers in the early 1900s, a post she held until about 1919. She was also a member of the Advisory Committee of Nottingham Labour Exchange and sat on the Housing Committee as well as being a member of the National Kitchen's Committee. In 1916 she was appointed to the Anti-profiteering Committee working with Caroline

Harper and Helena Dowson. In July 1920 she was appointed a Magistrate and the Nottingham Evening Post (see above) reported that: 'Mrs Ball has been an indefatigable worker in the interests of the women lace workers of the city and her appointment to the bench comes as a well-deserved honour.' She often sat in the Juvenile courts and 'gave invaluable advice to delinquents'.

Mary died in 1946 but I do not know any details about this or where she is buried.

**Unfortunately**, I have not been able to find any image of Mary, but if anyone has a photograph please do get in touch as we would love to see it.

***Miriam Jackson JP, Nottingham Women's History Group.***