

The Story of Elsie Bowerman

Summary

Born on 18th December 1889 in Tunbridge Wells, the daughter of William Bowerman a prosperous draper who invested his money in property and mother Edith. Elsie's father died when she was only five. She lived at 145 London Road, St. Leonards-on-Sea. Emily and her mother were one of the few survivors of the Titanic as they were in the category of "Women and children first" and were able to board one of the lifeboats, later being rescued by the Carpathia travelling the opposite way.

(insert pic of lifeboat)

Whilst at Girton College Cambridge studying Mediaeval and Modern Languages, Elsie became a suffragette being active in protests, marches and campaigns. (insert pic of Girton)

Deciding to become a lawyer at the age of thirty-one, Elsie was accepted as a student by the Middle Temple in 1921 and was called to the Bar in 1924 practicing with the Smith Eastern Circuit.

Elsie Bowerman had a successful career in broadcasting for the BBC and in the USA where she returned in 1946 helping to set up the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Elsie Bowerman died at Princess Alice Hospital Eastbourne after suffering a stroke at the age of 83.

At her funeral the Reverend Cyril Brown said in his eulogy commenting on her academic achievements: "this was surely evidence of her determination to do the best she could and use her gifts for the benefit of her own sex. She was determined that women should have equal opportunities with men and for a time assisted Mrs Pankhurst in the Votes for Women campaign."

(insert article from Sussex Express)

Early Life/Education

At the age of eleven she became the youngest girl to attend Wycombe Abbey a prestigious Church of England boarding school in Buckinghamshire until 1907. After a 'Gap Year' in Paris she studied Mediaeval and Modern Languages at Girton College. It was during that time she became interested in the Women's Movement and joined several societies including the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) becoming active and campaigning.

During the time that Elsie Bowerman was at Girton College, Cambridge there were several societies that Elsie may have been involved in. These were:-

1. Girton College Debating Society – debating issues such as "That Licensing Bill while failing to promote the cause of Temperance violates the principles of equity;"
"That Shakespeare is greatly overestimated."
2. The Girton College Women's Suffrage. One speaker The Hon. Sec. of NUWSS Miss Hardcastle talked about the aims and history of and its relation to the Women's Suffrage Movement and the Higher Education of Women. Another speaker, Miss Stevenson (the Hon. Sec. of the Apprenticeship Committee), talked about and gave examples of co to event that took place during Elsie Bowerman's time at Girton

An example of the times while Elsie Bowerman was at Girton College was an event to raise funds for the Unemployed Fund was a concert in aid of the unemployed. The programme was kept secret entice a larger audience to attend.

Career Highlights

- Became one of the first female practising barristers from 1924 with the Smith Eastern Circuit.
- Member of the WVS from 1938 to 1940 with responsibility for Speakers and the Information. Edited the monthly bulletin.
- From August 1941 to February 1945 – Liaison Office for the BBC Overseas Division North American Service.
- Publications included: “The Law of Child Protection” Pitman 1933 and the “Education Year Book 1934.”

Professional Memberships

- 1920 – 1929 Honary Secretary and Joint Founder of the Women’s Guild of the Internationale.
- British Correspondent of Federation International des Femmes Advocates et Professeurs de droit.
- Member of the Council of Wycombe Abbey School.
- Director of Norland Nursery Training College.
- Honary Secretary of the Union of Girls Schools for Social Service.

Personal History

While at Girton College Elsie passed the Tripo exam as there were no degrees at that time. Girton College was opened in October 16th 1869 in a hired house (Benslow House), Hitchin for six female students. It was moved to Girton in 1873.

(Photo of plaque and of Girton College to be inserted.)

Later on when she decided to become a lawyer Elsie had to pay a £50 deposit and a fee of £50 which was a large sum of money in those days. She was able to do this due to a substantial rental income from numerous properties her father purchased from his lucrative career as a draper. During WW1 Elsie served as an orderly in Russia receiving the Certificate of the Russian Medal for Meritorious Service.

She went on to join the Pankhurst’s to try and prevent post-war industrial unrest and acted as Christabel Pankhurst’s election agent.

Achievements

Elsie was one of the first women barristers achieving a BA Barrister at Law from 1889-1973.

She is reputed to have won a libel action brought by the National Union of Seamen against a communist. This was contrary to her anti-unionist beliefs and therefore a notable achievement.

As a campaigning suffragette Elsie joined WSPU started by Emmeline Pankhurst becoming involved in increasingly more militant methods interrupting political meetings; holding marches and demonstrations. Many women were injured and arrested including Elsie’s own mother Edith who managed to escape unhurt from the infamous “Black Friday” deputation.

A talk by David Clark to the Eastbourne Local History Society entitled Memories of the Titanic uncovered that during the rescue of survivors from the Titanic (not connected to Elsie Bowerman), w a member of the orchestra, a cellist, John Worsley Woodward (known as Wesley) who hailed from

Eastbourne and went down with the Titanic. The orchestra had been ordered to play to keep passengers calm during the evacuation of the ship. A plaque in commemoration is to be found At Eastbourne Bandstand on the seafront.

(insert picture of plaque)

During her career, Elsie Bowerman wrote two books: The Law of Child Protection (1933) and Stands there a School in 1965. This being a biography of Dame Francis Dove founder of Wycombe School. She also wrote an unpublished autobiography "Reflections of a Square" in which she expressed her disappointment that after her generation of feminists working so hard to free women from being sex objects for men's use, the 1960's sexual liberation movement had reduced women again to that role.

Researchers View

This is a very brief synopsis of Elsie Bowerman's life. There is so much more to be researched especially regarding her career at Girton and her decision to study Law and become a Lawyer. I was interested in undertaking Elsie Bowerman's story as I was unable to understand her reason for that as she had studied Languages at Cambridge University previously. One fact that changed this for her was the Sex Disqualification Act in 1919 allowing women to enter professional careers that had been previously barred. They included Accounting and Law. Elsie Bowerman is a 'women of spirit' and I admire her for taking on all the challenges mentioned above. She was a champion for women's causes and committed herself to using her position in society and gift of higher education to encourage women in learning and education to better themselves.

Acknowledgements

Mrs Justice Maura McGowan for allowing me to interview her on 11th July 2017.

Girton College Library and Archives for photograph of 1st Year Student Group 1908

Girton Review for reference to social history between 1908 – 1911

Eastbourne History Society "Memories of the Titanic " talk by David Clark

Extracts and photographs from:-

www.biography.com/news/elsie-bowerman-titanic-biography-facts

www.conservativewomen.uk/content/elsie-bowerman

The British Library for: Sex Disqualification Act information facts to confirm information form websites and Case of Rex v Pollitt, Strudwick and Beech alleged Libel of David Scott link to Archive Microform collection (unused).

The original story of Elsie Bowerman when extracts were used to form a quiz and then for this biography were found in: "Sussex Women" written by Ann Kramer.

Quote from Elsie's diary!

“As one approaches the end of life an unaccountable feeling of melancholy creeps over one. This is not because of any fear of the life to come, rather a joyful anticipation. Life has been so full of surprises that one cannot believe that there are not even greater joys and adventures in store. Here's Au Revoir to all my friends and countless thanks for all their love and kindness which has given me such a happy life in this world – Here's to our next happy meeting in the next one.”