

Eastbourne Town Hall was only 40 years old when it had its first woman councilor, Miss Alice Hudson in 1919 & subsequent mayor in 1926. This was 2 years before every woman had the vote. Eastbourne has had 15 lady mayors to date, but Miss Hudson holds the distinction of not only being the first one, but also holding the post, 1926-27, 1927-28, 1943-44, 1944-45. She was also mayoress for Mayor Roland Gwynne between 1929 -1931.

Although Miss Hudson was a devoted public servant to Eastbourne she was actually born in Manchester & moved to the town in 1900 when her father retired. He is listed on the 1901 census as a retired East India Merchant (born in Ireland). Her mother was born in Germany. She had 2 brothers & a sister. The family settled at Meads Court, where they seem to continue their comfortable lifestyle continuing to employ 8 servants, including nursemaids, a butler, footmen, cook, etc. Sadly Alice's mother dies suddenly in 1913 & Alice being the only remaining sibling still at home is left to care for her father.

However she doesn't have time to grieve for long as on the outbreak of WWI she joins the Eastbourne branch of the Women's Emergency Corps as treasurer. The end of the war in 1917 sees her as treasurer of the National Union of Women Workers. Then in 1919 she is elected to represent Upperton ward on the town council. In December 1923 she was appointed a Justice of the Peace, being one of the town's first lady magistrates.

In 1924, 3 female councilors were returned. There was an active branch of the WCA (Woman's Citizen Association). Alice Hudson was president of the WCA & also an independent councilor. The WCA's main concerns were 'women's issues' eg medical services & educational opportunities. Alice returned as councilor on 3 occasions for Meads ward, was made mayor, 1927-29 & was made an alderman in 1930.

The National Council of Women arranged a public presentation to her in recognition of her work in various offices & a portrait painted by Mr David Jaggard was accepted on behalf of the town & hung in the council chamber.

The beginning of 1939 & the outbreak of the second world war, saw Alice living at Wootton Manor in Polegate. Meads Court having been sold on the death of her father in 1927. She resigned from the council on account of more pressing duties, & possibly because there had been some controversy about her not living within the borough boundary!! She organized the Eastbourne's Women's Voluntary Services & was a leading figure in the establishment of the Eastbourne & District Nursing Association of which she became president.

In 1944 she moved to the Old Manor House, 33 The Goffs, & was again elected Mayor, she was deputy Mayor the year after, & when the Eastbourne Business & Professional Woman's club was founded in 1947, Miss Hudson was elected first president.

With the start of the National Health Service in 1948 she sat on Eastbourne's hospitals management committee & she was president of the patients association.

During her intensive work as a member of the Town Council Miss Hudson's main committees were Finance, Watch, Buildings, Town Planning, Hospitals, Health Services, Children, Maternity, Public Health, Housing & the Wartime Emergency.

Eventually, in 1952 Alice had to relinquish office as W.V.S. Organizer due to ill health. This was one of her most important roles. She formed the Eastbourne W.V.S at the beginning of the second World War, when Eastbourne suffered disproportionate hardships. It suffered over 90 air raids. Many were serious, 200 people were killed, 1,289 injured, & 1,475 buildings were destroyed or badly damaged. The autumn of 1939 saw the town flooded with evacuees from London but they had to be re-evacuated when France capitulated & invasion was thought to be imminent & the town found itself very much in the front line.

During this period the W.V.S ran canteens, advice centres, distributed ration books, evacuated the civilian population & took on fire watching duties. They dealt with the aftermath of bombing raids, administered first aid & sheltered & re-homed people who were bombed out.

Alice was noted for her gifts as an organizer & administrator, but she was very modest & included in her duties personal front line work with the two mobile canteens during air raids, in which she was an inspiration to her staff. It was for this role that she was awarded the MBE in the New Years Honours List 1946 for services to civil defence.

On the 5th May 1952 Alice was made an Honorary Freeman of the town to which she had devoted 33 years of continuous service.

She died in on the 19th September 1960 at Leaf Hospital, Eastbourne.

Alice Hudson's life was formed by the times in which she lived. She was lucky enough to be born into a comfortable middle class Victorian family in 1877. I have not been able to find what education she received but it appears she could have been home schooled by a German governess.

She was 23 when the family settled in Eastbourne. She was 36 when her life changed quite dramatically with her mother's death & the out break of WWI and the old social order & way of life in England changed forever.

She remained close to her father, who was a respected member of the community & himself a JP & benefactor of the Princess Alice hospital. No doubt she drew inspiration from him & wanted him to be proud of her in return.

She was 42 when she was first elected to the council, this was before woman got the vote, a great achievement in the days when woman had no official voice at all. Within 7 years she had become the first woman mayor of Eastbourne. That she was a woman of deeds, as well as words, she showed by her active work as leader of the WVS during WWII. She was no mere figurehead but a worker in conditions that called for courage & a disregard of self.

Her reserves of energy enabled her to accept another term in the mayoral chair, & it was fitting that that year was the year of victory Undoubtedly Alice Hudson was a woman of her time schooled to believe in service to the community through administrative, charitable & humanitarian work.