

## **GUARDIANS OF THE POOR: A PHILANTHROPIC FEMALE ELITE IN BRISTOL**

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This study examines the entry of women into one sphere of local government, the administration of Poor Relief. Being a Poor Law Guardian was an elected position which was open to certain middle and upper class women from 1869 and to women in general after 1894. The work was unpaid and in that sense similar to much work undertaken in the voluntary sector. As Guardians women had responsibilities for the poor of the Union, but were also expected to safeguard the economic position of those who paid the poor rates. Prior to 1894, when the property qualification for public office was abolished, only those women who held property in their own right could stand for election as Guardians of the Poor and even after this time the majority of women Guardians were middle class. Thus, this examination of the role of women Guardians in Bristol in the period 1870 to 1914 is essentially an exploration of a female elite.

For many women, working as Poor Law Guardians was a continuation of their philanthropic work in the community and a development of their particular role within the private family. In some cases women had a background in political activism, both in terms of party politics and campaigns for the vote for women. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the local administration of the Poor Law became the nexus of women's activities with regard to charity, local government and suffrage. An examination of the role of female Guardians of the Poor demonstrates the complex networks which linked these women.

### **BRISTOL WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN POOR LAW POLITICS**

As several historians have demonstrated, Bristol played a key role throughout the nineteenth century in a number of radical campaigns, with leading Quaker and Unitarian families being particularly supportive of such causes.<sup>1</sup> Political, philanthropic and religious activities frequently overlapped and men and women of different persuasions worked together for the abolition of slavery or in support of political rights for women. Similarly, the desire to improve the character and circumstances of the Bristol poor was an ideal which inspired a range of charitable endeavours and specific forms of political action.

As Patricia Hollis states, 'Bristol possessed one of the most impressive women's movements in the country'.<sup>2</sup> A key factor in the success of the movement for political reform was the number of women who were already entitled to vote in local elections and to stand for office. Although women were unable to vote in parliamentary elections, in 1869 the

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<sup>1</sup> See J.Hannam's and Madge Dresser's essays in M.Dresser & P.Ollerenshaw (eds), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Bristol, 1996); P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987); H.Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City, 1870-1914* (1976) and E.Malos' essay in I.Bild (ed) *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol, 1983)

<sup>2</sup> Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.156

municipal franchise was granted to female ratepayers and the first female Guardian was elected in London in 1875.

In January 1881 a meeting was held in Bristol to consider what action should be taken locally to secure the election of women Guardians. Dr John Beddoe of Clifton had previously written a letter to the Bristol press making the case for women Guardians and the local branch of the newly formed Women Guardians' Society had issued a pamphlet listing the principal reasons why it would be beneficial to have female Guardians. Ladies, it was claimed, had relevant experience of visiting the poor and of household management, they were better suited to dealing with the particular needs of pauperised women and children and they had the leisure to undertake this work. John Beddoe had earlier dismissed the claim that women might be over-indulgent at the expense of the rates, by reminding his readers that the ladies were also ratepayers.

Several meetings in support of women Guardians were held throughout the country and in January 1882 Lewis Fry held a drawing room meeting at his home, Goldney House, Clifton, which was attended by the Bishop of Bristol, several clergymen and numerous women, such as Mary Clifford, Lady Harding, Miss Elliott and Miss Fry. Despite the support of influential men and women, there was still considerable opposition to the idea of women Guardians and when Miss Ball stood as a candidate for Westbury on Trym in 1881 she was defeated. The following year a leaflet was published in Clifton entitled 'Why women should not be elected as Guardians'. One of the arguments against women Guardians was the problem of discussing 'cases of vice' in the presence of ladies. The double standard with regard to middle and working class women was criticised in the *Englishwoman's Review* which claimed that the only indecency was that of female applicants for relief being required to discuss their personal circumstances and their sexual history in front of men.<sup>3</sup>

Women had been members of Bristol School Board since 1877 and Mark Whitwell and Lewis Fry, leading members of the Board, were key supporters of female Guardians. In March 1882 a meeting was held at Redland House, the home of Mr and Mrs Whitwell, and it was argued that 'where numbers of women, children and aged persons are gathered together in need of the sympathy and help women can give, there should be women in power and not merely as visitors'.<sup>4</sup> Although women such as Mary Clifford and Frances Power Cobbe had undertaken workhouse visiting in Bristol and had made small changes to workhouse life, as visitors they could do little to influence Poor Law policy or practice.

It was decided therefore that three women should stand for election to the Barton Regis Board of Guardians and the choice of women illustrates the existence of a network associated with education, philanthropy and the Poor Law. Miss Clifford was persuaded to stand by Thomas Pease, the former Chairman of the Barton Regis Board. Mr Wilson of Clifton College suggested Miss Alice Winkworth, one of three sisters who were active and influential in Bristol. Mary Clifford encouraged Miss Catherine Woollam to stand and finally, a fourth woman agreed to stand for election in 1882, Mrs Prentice Manning. Winkworth and Woollam stood for the Clifton ward, Clifford stood for Westbury on Trym and Prentice stood for St Philip and St Jacob's. All four were elected to the Barton Regis Board of Guardians and Clifford and Winkworth headed their respective polls. Bristol returned more women Guardians in 1882 than anywhere else outside London. At subsequent

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<sup>3</sup> *Englishwoman's Review(ER)*, 1882., pp.194-5

<sup>4</sup> ER, 1882, pp.127-8

annual elections the four women were elected on each occasion and when elections became triennial in 1886 they were once again elected. Mrs Prentice declined to stand in 1899 because of ill health, but her place was taken by another woman, Mrs C.H.Terrell, who was successful.

Three of the four women elected in 1882 were unmarried. This partly reflects the tendency for single, middle class women to become involved in philanthropic and community-based work, but also the difficulties faced by married women in establishing their right to stand for election. Prior to the abolition of the property qualification for public office in 1894, married women had to demonstrate that they were qualified to stand for election 'in respect of other premises than those where residing with husband'. Between 1882 and 1893 there were only four women Guardians in the whole of Bristol, while in 1895 this number increased to twelve and all three Bristol Poor Law Unions returned women Guardians. In Barton Regis Union Clifford, Winkworth and Woollam were re-elected and they were joined by four new female representatives: Mrs Hester Hawkins, Mrs Mary Ann Trebilco, Miss Caroline Nightingale and Miss Mary Davis Gotch. Two women were appointed as Guardians for the Bristol Incorporation of the Poor: Mrs Mary Graham and Mrs Mary Ann Wethered. In Bedminster Union two new women Guardians, Sarah Terrett and Miss E. Evans, joined Miss S. J. Pedder, who was first elected in 1893.

The Bristol women elected as Guardians in 1882 proved to be particularly popular with the voters. Mary Clifford served for 25 years, Alice Winkworth served for 37 years and Catherine Woollam served for 27 years, until her death in 1909. With the amalgamation of three Bristol unions in 1898 to create an enlarged union for the City of Bristol, five other women were voted onto the new board: Mrs Mary Ann Trebilco, Mrs Hester Hawkins, Miss Caroline Nightingale, Mrs Mary Graham and Mrs Sarah Jane Terrett. Again these women served as Guardians for many years: Mary Ann Trebilco failed to be elected on a couple of occasions, but served almost continuously through to 1914; Mary Graham served without a break until 1919; Caroline Nightingale served until 1914 and Hester Hawkins and Sarah Jane Terrett both served until 1904. Of the eight women elected to the new Board in 1898, four were spinsters, three were married and one, Mrs Graham, was a widow. Nationally about 50% of female Guardians in the early twentieth century were married.

As Walton states in his study of women in social work, most women Guardians were the wives or daughters of upper middle class and professional men.<sup>5</sup> This is true in Bristol with some of the female Guardians being members of influential families such as the Fry, Pease and Winkworth families. For some, assisting a husband or father in parish work, had provided the necessary experience of service. Thus, Mary Clifford's father was an Anglican vicar and Mrs Mary Ann Trebilco was married to a vicar. Whether or not families were prestigious, it was common for there to be other members of the family involved in social or political action. Mrs Sarah Jane Terrett was married to William Terrett, who in the municipal elections for Bedminster East in 1897 was described as 'at the front in religious, social and municipal work' and Hester Hawkins' husband, Frederick, served on St George Urban District Council. In 1907 a working class socialist woman was elected as a Guardian; Jane Tillet was the wife of Ben Tillet, formerly a leader in the London dock strike.

Having spent some time examining how the first cohort of women Guardians came to be elected, it might be useful to consider the social and political networks which connected

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<sup>5</sup> R.G.Walton, *Women in Social Work* (London, 1975).

individual women and their families. It is not possible in an essay of this length to explore the complex interconnections which sustained the female elite, so I have chosen to focus on one woman in particular, Mary Clifford.

### **MARY CLIFFORD AND HER NETWORKS**

As one of the first women to be elected as a Poor Law Guardian in Bristol, Mary Clifford was highly regarded by her contemporaries. Her influence on other women can be read in the numerous tributes to her work and to her as a person. Some years earlier, Mary Carpenter had inspired a generation of women in Bristol to undertake philanthropic work and in due course Mary Clifford provided an example of how women could combine charitable work with public office, or move from one to the other.

Born in 1842, Mary was the eldest child of Reverend John Clifford and his wife Emily. Like many middle class women of her generation Mary chose to remain single and for much of her adult life she was involved in domestic duties and assisting in her father's parish, St Matthew's, Kingsdown. Though deeply religious, in her early twenties she found the life of a vicar's daughter rather circumscribed. Nonetheless, parish work provided some opportunities to put her Christian ideals into practice. She described the aim of her parish work as 'not moulding their lives but helping their souls'<sup>6</sup> and this concern for the spiritual welfare of the poor became evident later in her Poor Law work.

### **EDUCATIONAL LINKS**

In the 1860s, Catherine Winkworth and John Percival of Clifton College set up the Clifton Association for the Higher Education of Women and Mary Clifford and many other women supported this association and participated in the educational programmes that were organised. Elizabeth Sturge recalled in her *Reminiscences* how courses were arranged on a variety of subjects, with eminent speakers giving lectures and commenting on students' papers.<sup>7</sup> Meetings were held at Clifton Hill House, the home of John Addington Symonds, and he gave a number of lectures on Greek literature. Mary Clifford took one of his courses in 1869 and became a devoted friend to his wife. Thanks in part to this campaign for female education, University College, Bristol was open to both male and female students in 1876 and Marion Pease was one of the first to take advantage of this and went on to become a member of staff at the Day Training College. The movement for higher education for women and for high schools for girls united women from some of the leading Bristol families, including the Sturges, the Peases and the Winkworths.

### **LINKS BETWEEN POOR LAW AND CHARITY**

Following her father's retirement in 1879, Mary was able to extend her charitable activity in other directions. She began to visit the workhouse, paying particular attention to the sick and elderly inmates in Barton Regis infirmary. When she became a Guardian of the Poor, Mary's main influence was in promoting policies she considered would enhance the moral and physical well being of particular classes of paupers. She remained concerned to improve the welfare of elderly inmates in the workhouse and thought charitable assistance could be better organised to help the more deserving aged, however, she disagreed with the

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<sup>6</sup> G.M Williams, *Mary Clifford* (Bristol, 1921).

<sup>7</sup> E.Sturge, *Reminiscences of my Life*, (Bristol, 1928)

move to introduce old age pensions. She was keen to see children removed from the workhouse, or from family homes she considered unsuitable, and she promoted fostering and child emigration as the means to remove children from moral danger and neglect. Similarly, she was concerned about the plight of unmarried mothers and of women who were considered to be mentally defective.

Generally Mary and the other women Guardians elected in Bristol in the nineteenth century favoured the strict administration of Poor Relief and supported moves towards better classification in the workhouse and further investment in additional institutions, such as hospitals and children's homes. In promoting these policies Mary worked closely with her female colleagues on the Board of Guardians, but each of them was also part of a wider network of individuals and organisations. What Helen Meller refers to as the 'civilising mission to the poor' excited considerable support amongst the upper and middle classes and a study of Poor Law and philanthropy in Bristol suggests the existence of a relatively cohesive female elite.

With regard to the care of pauper children, Mary was involved in two organisations: the National Committee for Promoting the Boarding Out of Pauper Children and the Bristol Emigration Society (BES). Florence Davenport Hill, who lived with her family in Bristol for many years, was an influential supporter of boarding out or fostering. Several other people in Bristol were involved in promoting the policy of boarding out and in many ways the emigration of children to Canada was an extension of this scheme. The Governors of two industrial schools, Mark Whitwell and Dr Goodeve, had been involved in the emigration of children from these schools in the 1870s and in 1882 Mrs Agnes Beddoe had set up the Bristol Emigration Society to encourage families and institutions to consider emigration. When elected as Guardians that same year, Mary Clifford and Catherine Woollam worked closely with Mark Whitwell and the BES, and Barton Regis Board of Guardians adopted the policy of emigration for selected pauper children.

As a result of the initiatives of Frances Power Cobbe and Mary Elliott in the 1860s, two organisations were set up to help girls and young women who had no suitable family support. The first was the Female Mission Society and the second, the Ladies Association for the Care of Girls, with Mrs Susan Pease as President. Mary Clifford became a member of the Female Mission Society, as did Helen and Catherine Sturge, and numerous women in Bristol were involved with the Association for the Care of Girls, including Mrs Goodeve. In addition to her work with the BES, Mrs Agnes Beddoe also set up a Home for Working Girls.

### **WOMEN'S POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS**

Philanthropic work of this kind not only made it possible for women to be actively involved in the public sphere, it also encouraged the growth of new women's associations. The National Union of Women Workers was an umbrella organisation which drew female representatives from a broad range of philanthropic work concerned mainly with women and children. Annual conferences were held in different towns and provided the opportunity for women to present papers on social issues and to extend their local networks by linking with women from other areas. When the Conference of Women Workers was held in Bristol in 1892 over sixty women in Bristol were involved in the organisation of the conference and a total of 250 delegates attended. Mary Clifford, Catherine Woollam and Alice Winkworth were all active members of the NUWW. Some female Guardians, such as Mary Ann

Trebilco were also members of the Bristol Women's Liberal Association and some, including Clifford herself, were supportive of suffrage societies.

Mary Clifford was involved with several female associations or societies, but also worked with men who shared similar objectives. The involvement of men such as Lewis Fry, Mark Whitwell and Dr John Beddoe in the Women Guardians' Society has already been noted, but concern about the poor state of working class housing led Mary Clifford and Catherine Woollam to join the Bristol Committee for the Better Housing of the Poor in 1903. Other members of this Committee included Elizabeth Sturge, Lewis Fry and Reverend Trebilco. A second committee on working class housing was set up which drew representatives for trades union and labour organisations and the existence of the rival pressure groups illustrates something of a class divide on social issues.

As noted earlier, many of the female Guardians who were elected in the 1880s and 1890s served through to the First World War. These very experienced female Guardians were joined in the early twentieth century by some younger women, of whom Miss Rosa Pease and Mrs E.A. Webb were the most notable. Pease became Chair of the Board of Guardians in 1920 and by 1930, when the Local Government Act abolished Boards of Guardians, she had served for 24 years, while Mrs Webb had served for 30 years. Mary Clifford retired from the Board of Guardians in 1907, but remained an active member of organisations such as the Bristol Civic League.

The women who served as Guardians in the period 1882 to 1914 were almost all middle class and generally well connected. Despite differences in age, religious persuasion and politics, there was a high degree of cohesion within this female elite, which found expression in shared ideals and common associations. Philanthropic and political action served to extend and reinforce connections associated with family and local community and provided opportunities for women to make a significant contribution to civic culture.