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Middle Class Women and the Public Life of an English Market Town:
Banbury 1844-1894.

Rosalind Locke BA (Honours) Humanities

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, Banbury was an archetypal market town whose primary function was to serve the needs of its own population and the rural hinterland that surrounded it. As such, the town supported many voluntary philanthropic and social organisations. This dissertation investigates the role of middle class women in this public life of the town during the second half of the century, when the town's prosperity and influence was at its highest.

Recent historians have questioned the image of the nineteenth century 'angel in the house' and argued that some women were able to subvert this domestic ideology and other Victorian moral beliefs to create opportunities for greater roles in public life. The importance of religion as a means of justifying public roles for women has also been debated whilst women's social networks have been seen as providing routes into voluntary organisations. Using four categories of voluntary organisations this dissertation examines what were the influences and motives behind middle class women's involvement.

This dissertation concludes that whilst certain nineteenth century morals like self improvement were influential on Banbury's middle class women's activities, it was religion and the associated social and familial networks that had the greatest effect on the women at this time. Women took part in voluntary organisations alongside their male and female kin, as well as associates from church and chapel. During this period it became more socially acceptable for women to have an active role in Banbury's public life although their actions remained within a socially acceptable feminine sphere.

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Personal Statement

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at the Open University or at any other university or institution.

Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessment as part of A825.

1. Introduction

There are few if any towns the size of our own, that can boast of so great a variety of societies for the amelioration of the condition of suffering humanity and the promotion of the welfare of the different classes of the community as ours.¹

This was how an anonymous correspondent described the Oxfordshire market town of Banbury in the mid nineteenth century. A quick glance through pages of the town's weekly newspapers verifies that there were indeed many different voluntary organisations at that time and that this number grew dramatically over the next fifty years. This dissertation asks to what extent were middle class women involved in these types of organisations and examines what might have influenced their choices and activities.

The dissertation draws on several themes. Aspects of family history are relevant, particularly the contemporary views of women in public life and the notion of separate spheres. The theme of religion is central to any study of philanthropic organisations as the vast majority were linked in some way to organised religion. Finally, this study touches on some aspects of urban history, specifically the development of the market town.

Central to the research are the three weekly newspapers, the *Banbury Guardian*, *Banbury Advertiser* and *Banbury Beacon*. Each contains articles, letters and editorials pertaining to the activities of the various social and philanthropic organisations of the town, including references to committee members, events and reports of annual general meetings. Local autobiographies will illustrate individual women's involvement in voluntary organisations and give some colour and personal insight into the research. The minutes and ephemera

¹ 'Banbury Choral Society', *Banbury Guardian*, 19.12.1844.

of some of the organisations are still in existence and these will reveal not only the different activities of women but contemporary male attitudes towards women.

Working from sources such as these does present some challenges. There are many benefits of using historical newspapers as they offer a readily available, contemporary viewpoint, and for many of Banbury's social and philanthropic activities, newspapers are the only surviving source. However as Bates states, like all historical sources the limitations and potential pitfalls of newspapers need to be properly managed.² These included the potential for inaccuracy, an editorial bias and the selectivity of the writers. How much was the role of women ignored by the journalists and were the activities of certain organisations not deemed suitable for inclusion? Using evidence from more than one newspaper goes some way towards minimising some of these issues, however in a male dominated society the fact that the activities of women were not recorded does not necessarily mean that they were not taking place. Autobiographies also have their limitations. They can be unreliable as the author can distort the truth according to their motives, or simply misremember an event. Obtaining a secondary reference to an event helps to verify an individual's account.

The decision to cover the fifty year time period from 1844 to 1894 was made with several considerations in mind. Firstly the sources for the study of Banbury for this time period are unusually rich with both primary and several excellent secondary histories being readily available. Secondly, this is a manageable time period for the amount of research time available, but also long enough to give some indication of how women's roles changed over time. Finally, this time period covers what has been described as a distinct phase in

² Denise Bates, *Historical Research Using British Newspapers* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2016), pp.41-49.

the history of Banbury, a time of economic growth, political power and social vitality, when its influence and importance as a market town was at its height.³

The initial stages of this study were influenced by Prochaska, who states that philanthropy did more than any profession to widen the horizons of women in the nineteenth century. He describes how the contribution and influence of women in philanthropy expanded greatly during the nineteenth century and that women in the late Victorian society had many more opportunities than their predecessors. He argues that women realised the potential of the experiences that charitable work offered and that their continued efforts slowly broke down the prejudices against them. Prochaska also highlights women supporting organisations financially, either as contributors or as fundraisers. In the case of the latter he focuses on the importance of the charity bazaar to the expansion of women's involvement in philanthropic enterprise.⁴

Other works have also discussed women's involvement in nineteenth century philanthropy, debating their motivations and the possible social consequences of their actions. Summers for example, emphasises the importance of visiting as a form of work which should not be treated as a middle class woman's hobby, but as a valuable contributor to social and political life.⁵ Elsewhere historians have debated women's wider public roles in relation to other contemporary or modern ideologies.⁶ These include Smitley who discusses the public role of middle class women in middle class identity and the notion of a feminine

3 Barrie Trinder, *Victorian Banbury* (Chichester: Phillimore and Co, 1982), p.159.

4 F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in 19th Century England* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), p.222.; p. 58.

5 Jessica Gerard, 'Lady Bountiful: Women of the Landed Classes and Rural Philanthropy' *Victorian Studies* 30, 2 (1987), 183-210.; Anne Summers, 'A Home from Home: Women's philanthropic work in the nineteenth century', in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. by Sandra Burman (London: Routledge, 1979), 33-63.

6 Simon Morgan, 'A sort of land debatable: female influence, civic virtue and middle-class identity, c 1830-c 1860' *Women's History Review*, 13:2 (2004), 183-209. Paula Bartley, 'Moral Regeneration: Women and the Civic Gospel in Birmingham, 1870-1914' *Midland History*, 25:1, (2013) 143-161. Anne Digby, 'Victorian Values and Women in Public and Private' *British Academy* (1992), 195-215.

public sphere, whilst Vickery challenges the concept of male and female separate spheres.⁷ Gordon and Nair meanwhile question the line between public and private spheres highlighting middle class women as arbiters of public taste and virtue.⁸ However, despite the different emphasis there is an agreement between all of these historians that the study of middle class women's public lives is an important facet of not only feminist history, but social history as well.

Whilst most of these studies have involved middle class women in major towns and cities, for instance Gordon and Nair in Glasgow, there has been little research into middle class women in smaller towns across nineteenth century England.⁹ The rationale for this study is therefore to add to the existing understanding of women active in public life by means of a localised study. It seeks to expand the notion of the feminine public sphere to include all four types of voluntary organisation as described by Davidoff and Hall. These were philanthropic and charitable organisations, cultural based societies, business groups, such as trade organisations and political based societies.¹⁰ Such categorisation is a useful tool and provides a much broader picture of women's involvement in public life of Banbury than just focussing on philanthropy alone. The study looks at individual women, their families and their social networks to build a picture of middle class life in a market town during the second half of the nineteenth century. It challenges the notion of the captive 'angel in the house' who was unable, or maybe unwilling to participate in the wider public life of a bustling market town, and reveals a little about a section of society, whose lives are somewhat invisible to modern day readers.

7 Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere Middle-Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland, C 1870-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 1-19.; Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres', *The Historical Journal*, 36 2 (1993), 383-414.

8 Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain*, (London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp.1-9.

9 Gordon and Nair, pp.9-34.

10 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 420.

2. Market Towns and the Middle Class

Market towns represented the majority of smaller towns in nineteenth century England. These towns usually provided a wide range of services and trades, with no more than fifteen percent of the population involved in any one single trade.¹¹ Market towns served as an economic base for the surrounding rural area and were the focal point for many social and cultural activities. The degree of influence over the surrounding area defines the relative importance of a market town. Also more important market towns relied upon transport links, road, water and later rail, enabling them to act as economic centres for both people and commodities from far beyond the immediate locality.¹²

Banbury in North Oxfordshire very much fulfils the market town definitions of Sweet and Borsay. Several historians have celebrated the town for its typicality, describing it as a pure, unadulterated market town, uncomplicated and not influenced by other functions such as ports, spas or heavy industry.¹³ During the nineteenth century the town was the economic and social centre for a wide rural hinterland, with over 400 journeys by carriers per week to the town in the 1850s.¹⁴ The influence of the town was such that the term Banburyshire was introduced in the early to middle decades of the nineteenth century to describe the informal area around the town which included parts of Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Buckinghamshire as well as Oxfordshire. The town had impressive transport links, standing on the crossroads of several major roads, and with no less than seven turnpike roads passing through the town. The Oxford Canal arrived in the town in

¹¹Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow: Longman, 1999) p.15.; Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford:OUP, 1989) p. 5.

¹² Borsay, p.6.

¹³ A. Everitt, 'The Banburys of England' *Urban History*, 1 (1974), 28-38.; Barrie Trinder, *Victorian Banbury* (Chichester: Phillimore and Co, 1982), p.2.; Kate Tiller, 'Victorian Banbury', *Urban History*, 16 (1989), 222-224.

¹⁴ Trinder, p.194.

1778 and by the early nineteenth century Banbury had become a canal town of repute.¹⁵

The town's economy further prospered with the arrival of two railways in 1850, and a third in 1900. The result of this prosperity was that between the 1830s and the 1880s the town's population grew by over 83%.¹⁶

The town also had a varied occupational structure. In 1851 around a third of the working population were involved in crafts and manufacturing trades of some kind, but less than ten percent were in any one specific trade.¹⁷ Banbury also was self governing with its own parliamentary representation, corporation and board of health. It was a mature market town whose importance was more than local and consequently any study of Banbury is significant because it adds knowledge to our understanding of market towns in general.¹⁸

Like most market towns the population of Banbury was a microcosm of the wider demographic of nineteenth century England. There were local landed gentry, like Lord Saye and Sele of nearby Broughton Castle, whilst there were also many working class areas and some notorious haunts of criminals and prostitutes. The 1830s also saw a boom in the building trade for new homes to accommodate Banbury's burgeoning middle class, although as Gunn finds, defining exactly who fitted into this social group is difficult to do.¹⁹ The term "middle class" has been subject to many different social and economic definitions, frequently with a political agenda. Often it seems easier to define those who are not middle class rather than those who are. Best uses an economic rationale to describe the different members of the middle class, although the wages of some manual

15 Trinder, p.25.

16 Trinder, p.159.

17 Trinder, p. 202.

18 Trinder, p.2.

19 Simon Gunn and Rachel Bell, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*. 1st ed. (Phoenix:2011), p.2

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=s98O6mjm94UC&pg=PT1&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>
[accessed Dec.1 2018].

workers could be higher than white collar clerical workers. Meanwhile Davidoff and Hall divide the middle class into higher and lower ranks using a variety of categories, including religious, political and social, but there would surely have been many examples of crossovers within categories.²⁰ During the nineteenth century, as a social category, the middle class increasingly became an extremely broad diverse group. The middle class could encompass qualified professionals, such as lawyers, architects and clergymen. Merchants and manufacturers whose self made success was as a result of the Industrial Revolution would also be seen as within the middle sector of society, whilst shopkeepers and clerical workers, would also have aspired to be included within this bracket.²¹ Nevertheless what is clear is that shared morals and ideals created a distinctive 'middle class' group within society. Values of sobriety, thrift, sexual morality, progress and hard work were common to all. Furthermore according to Loftus being middle class was defined by taking responsibility for oneself, one's family and the community, the latter having implications for middle class involvement in public life.²²

This diversity makes a clear definition of Banbury's middle class difficult. However, within this dissertation census records have been used to identify the women mentioned, and several common factors have emerged. Firstly, the male family members of the women tended to be professional men, such as bankers, solicitors or actuaries. They were also tradesmen, and in most cases master tradesmen who employed a number of workers. Sarah Beesley, whose memoir is an important primary source for this dissertation was the daughter of John Golby Rusher, master printer, bookseller and publisher and she married Thomas Beesley, a chemist and sometime chairman of the Board of Health. Secondly, the

20 Geoffrey Best, *Mid Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London: Fontana Press, 1979) pp101-111.; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 24.

21 Donna Loftus, 'The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml> [accessed Sept. 4 2018].

22 Loftus, 'The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class'.

addresses of the women showed that they lived in the wealthier areas of the town, near the North and South Bars, along West Bar Street and the Oxford Road. Dashwood Road, St. John's Road, Calthorpe Road, and Broughton Road were opened up in the 1840s following the break up of the Calthorpe Estate and became the site of much of Banbury's new suburban housing.²³ Finally another factor which was used to identify the women in this dissertation as middle class was the presence of domestic servants within their households. Almost all of the women lived in households with at least one servant and most had at least two. This is an important point because, as Hughes describes, having at least one maid-of-all-work was crucial to being seen as middle class, with more job specific servants identifying you as upper middle class to your contemporaries.²⁴

The extended Edmunds family of Banbury demonstrate many of the characteristics discussed above. Richard Edmunds senior (1793-1872) was a farmer's son, who built his own business as a seed merchant and ironmonger. He was a member of the Wesleyan Church and became the Capital Burgess of the Town Council in 1831. He embraced the notion of progress arguing in 1865 that 'we need as many railways as we can get'.²⁵ Richard and his wife, Alice had six surviving children, who were themselves to become influential in local politics, commerce and the church. Frederick Fletcher (1821-1902), a Wesleyan minister and Henry (1823-1904), an ironmonger eventually moved away from the town. Alderman Richard Edmunds (1822-1895) had a successful ironmongery business and held most of the local offices open to laymen in the Wesleyan church. He was also extremely active in the public life of Banbury becoming a magistrate, a member of the Board of Health and Mayor of the Borough on three occasions. He is quoted as

23 William Potts, *A History of Banbury: The Story of the Development of a Country Town* (Abingdon: The Abbey Press, 1958, 1978), p.273.

24 Kathryn Hughes, 'The Middle Class: Etiquette and Upward Mobility' <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-middle-classes-etiquette-and-upward-mobility> [accessed December 1st 2018].

25 Trinder, p.80.

saying that 'the aim of good government should be the happiness of the greatest number.'²⁶ His younger brother William (1826-1908) was a partner in a very successful brewing company and was also a three time mayor of Banbury. Both men married twice and had sixteen children between them. Their sisters Mary (1820-1854) and Elizabeth (1829-?), both married into similar prosperous middle class families with Elizabeth remaining in the town after her marriage. Records show the different branches of the family living in the new suburban streets of Banbury with at least two domestic servants each.²⁷ Investigating the activities of the Edmunds' ladies does create a picture of middle class public life and also enables links to be made between individuals examining the importance of kinship.

26 Barrie Trinder, 'A Memorial of Richard Edmunds of Banbury', *Cake and Cockhorse*, Vol.3 No.2 (1965), 33-34.

27 Material and data about the Edmunds family is available on <<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>>.

3. Women and Public Life – A Historiographical Review

In this chapter I will examine some of the historical thinking surrounding the study of middle class women and public life. Using secondary sources I will look at some of the roles carried out by women and examine the contemporary ideologies and social conditions that influenced the choices women made. Finally I will discuss what some historians have seen as the wider effects and outcomes of women having a public role.

Accurately measuring the numbers of women involved in public life is difficult as many of the activities were carried out on an unrecorded informal basis. Davidoff suggests that between 1780 and 1850 only 10% of the subscribers to Birmingham's voluntary associations were women and even less were actively involved as committee members. However, many married women's subscriptions were seen as part of their husband's good works whilst countless small local charities, which might have attracted the support of women, worked out of the public eye.²⁸

In a society where a woman's primary duty was the home and family, paid female employment was viewed as unseemly for middle class ladies. They were also discouraged from doing physical household jobs, which were left to a growing army of domestic servants.²⁹ In this environment philanthropy was the most obvious outlet for middle class women's self expression, and equally nineteenth century philanthropic organisations depended a great deal upon the voluntary actions of women.³⁰

28 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 432.; Geoffrey Best, *Mid Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London: Fontana Press, 1979) pp155-9.

29 Sandra Burman, ed. *Fit Work for Women*, (London: Routledge, 1979), pp.9-10.; Kathryn Hughes, 'The Middle Class: Etiquette and Upward Mobility' <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-middle-classes-etiquette-and-upward-mobility> [accessed Dec. 3rd 2018].

30 F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in 19th Century England* (Oxford: OUP, 1980),p.5.; Anne Summers, 'A Home from Home: Women's philanthropic work in the nineteenth century', in *Fit Work for Women*, p.33.

Women were also involved in other areas of public life. Science and philosophical societies informed and educated women who attended their meetings and lectures whilst art and botanical societies offered occasional competitions or day trips. However the personal benefits of women's activities often needed to be taken into consideration and balanced against cost.³¹ Also by the end of the century the range of women's sports had expanded and physical exercise was being seen as a legitimate activity for women and a means of self improvement for girls. McCrone states that this sporting revolution was led by middle class women as an extension to their earlier educational and recreational experiences.³² Women's participation in local governance was limited by statute until the end of the century but prior to this they had played some part in political life through their involvement in certain causes. Many temperance societies had ladies committees and women played a conspicuous role in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act and the anti-slavery movement.³³

This public activity seems at odds with the modern day orthodoxy of middle class Victorian society in which women were confined to a domestic private role separate from outside influences. Vickery has described this separate spheres ideology as being crucial to the formation of a middle class identity and putting 'the middle in the middle class'.³⁴ However, other historians have sought to describe a more fluid version of this defined role.³⁵ Women might have been viewed as having a moral superiority, guiding the private, domestic world, but their mission was not just to be the family moral arbiter. There was a role for them in

31 Yaffa Claire Draznin, *Victorian London's Middle Class Housewife: What She Did All Day*, (London:Greenwood Press, 2001), p.133.

32 Draznin, p.153.; Gordon and Nair, p.206, p.219.; Jennifer A Hargreaves, 'Playing like gentlemen while behaving like ladies', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 2.1 (1985), 5.; Kathleen McCrone, 'Class Gender and English Women's Sport 1890-1914', *Journal of Sport History* 18.1(1991), 159.

33 Gordon and Nair, p.26-27.; Davidoff and Hall, p.433.

34 Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres', *The Historical Journal*, 36 2 (1993), 387.

35 Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere Middle-Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland, C 1870-1914*,(Manchester:Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 2-4. ;Gordon and Nair, p.224.; Anne Digby, 'Victorian Values and Women in Public and Private' *British Academy* (1992), 214.

public life which they could influence and civilise through their natural tendencies of goodness and spirituality.³⁶ Smitley describes this as a 'feminine public sphere' different from and parallel to men and an area in which women could expand their authority whilst remaining within the accepted views of gender.³⁷ Digby further argues that some women took advantage of the complexities of Victorian life which meant that there was the potential for confusion as to where the boundaries of acceptable female activity lay.³⁸

In reality, of course the character and activities of nineteenth century middle class women did not always fit with this feminine ideal. Women as well as men were influenced by other Victorian values and moral beliefs such as self help and progress.³⁹ Bartley, for example, has argued that women played a valuable role in the civic gospel movement, a philosophy which promoted public duty as having a moral and religious worth. Whilst men used municipal roles to tackle urban squalor Bartley states that women's civic gospel actions were more philanthropic and aimed at moral decay. By keeping to these definite gender roles the civic gospel provided opportunities for women to contribute to public life without challenging accepted social norms.⁴⁰

Although all Christian denominations stressed the importance of charitable conduct, none placed greater emphasis on it than Evangelicals. Evangelicals were the most significant supporters of philanthropic and charitable organisations with three quarters of all

36 Gordon and Nair, p.201.;Simon Morgan, 'A sort of land debatable: female influence, civic virtue and middle-class identity, c 1830-c 1860' *Women's History Review*, 13:2 (2004), 183-209.

37 Smitley, pp.3-8.;Gordon and Nair, p.201.

38 Digby, pp.196-198.

39 Paula Bartley, 'Moral Regeneration: Women and the Civic Gospel in Birmingham, 1870-1914' *Midland History*, 25:1, (2013) 143-161.; Digby, 195-215.

40 Bartley,143.

organisations in the second half of the century being Evangelical in character.⁴¹ Prochaska and Smitley agree that Evangelical ideologies inspired women's public activities as they identified with biblical role models and 'Christianity confirmed what nature decreed: women had a rightful and important place in the charitable world.'⁴² Gordon and Nair go further and describe how religion demanded a public role for women in which they could demonstrate their spirituality.⁴³ On a more practical note, religious centres, whether church or chapel, provided a focus for middle class social lives. They were places to meet like minded people and acted as a central point in a network of families, activities, clubs and associations. It was networks such as these which were extremely crucial in shaping women's public roles.⁴⁴

Martin has argued that voluntary organisations created a network of support which allowed women to enter public life. Through these networks women could traverse the boundaries of class and gender without any loss of social status.⁴⁵ However middle class women could be part of many different networks, familial, religious, neighbourhood and social, and these connections all had a bearing on how those women lived their public lives. The influence of the menfolk around them was crucial. Women's actions were carried out within social parameters that had been set by their men folk.⁴⁶ Research shows that the wives and sisters of middle class men mirrored their male kin's investment in public life whilst Draznin talks of the social obligations that wives had to their husbands and his interests.⁴⁷

The influence of women's female peers was also significant. Bartley recognises the

41 Prochaska, p.8.; Davidoff and Hall, p.78.; Jessica Gerard, 'Lady Bountiful: Women of the Landed Classes and Rural Philanthropy' *Victorian Studies* 30, 2 (1987), p. 188. ;David Bebbington, p.120.

42 Prochaska, pp.12-17. ;Smitley, p.40.

43 Gordon and Nair,p.222.

44 Draznin, p.142.; Smitley, p.40.

45 Moira Martin (2008) Single Women and Philanthropy: a case study of women's associational life in Bristol, 1880–1914, *Women's History Review*, 17:3, 395,

46 Gordon and Nair, p.223.; Smitley, p.53.

47 Smitley, p.3.; Draznin, p. 134.

importance to women of 'a shared friendship group', and that female networking underpinned women's involvement in Birmingham's civic gospel movement.⁴⁸ Public life offered women opportunities for female companionship and many women who became involved in causes were recruited by friends and acquaintances.⁴⁹ Smitley also finds that mother/daughter relationships were important as there is evidence that mothers introduced their daughters to causes and activities and guided them through a public life 'apprenticeship'.⁵⁰

The involvement of women in public life had a number of consequences. Historians agree that there was a middle class identity of shared values and ideals.⁵¹ These included independence, self reliance and industriousness, and philanthropy was a way in which middle class women could contribute to these. Gordon and Nair state that a public role for women was crucial to the creation of a middle class identity whilst Smitley, has argued that the feminine public sphere was not just an arena for women's reforming activities, but should be understood as a site of middle class women's contribution to middle class identity.⁵²

Involvement in charitable works meant that women became more qualified to take on forms of employment previously only open to men and enabled them to develop levels of expertise in many areas.⁵³ Philanthropic work offered the opportunity to learn administrative skills such as organisation, finance and communication, whilst practical experience in education and medicine could also be gained. However, the most important

48 Bartley, 145.

49 Draznin p146., p.152.

50 Smitley, pp.53-56.

51 Donna Loftus, 'The Rise of the Victorian Middle Class' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/middle_classes_01.shtml> [accessed Sept 4 2018].

52 Gordon and Nair, p.201.; Smitley, p. 56.

53 Summers, p.33.; Davidoff and Hall, p.436.; Gerrard, p.209.

benefit to women was a sense of self confidence and self-respect. Middle class women's involvement and achievements were also an important factor in the softening of attitudes, which meant that by the late nineteenth century it became more acceptable for women to use their new skills to undertake wider public roles, such as local government and professional employment.⁵⁴

Experience in voluntary organisations may also have been influential in the campaign for women's suffrage. In her study of Birmingham Bartley found that women's rights and the civic gospel were intimately connected with many of the leading women in the civic gospel movement being involved in suffrage associations and societies.⁵⁵ At a practical level, the skills required for running a charity were very similar to those needed for political associations, and family and community networks crucial to success in both. It can also be argued that in undertaking more voluntary roles in public women were contributing towards female emancipation by reaching out for more power within society. However, as Summers highlights these advances were really for the middle class women alone, and certain charitable practises such as visiting were detrimental to the emancipation of women in the lower classes.⁵⁶ Moreover it is important to note that striving for more influence within society is not necessarily the same as political reform. Many of the women involved in philanthropic work were deeply religious and espoused conservative anti-feminist political principles.⁵⁷ Some were strongly anti-suffragist and not willing to muddy their good works with the unpopular demands of the suffragist movement.⁵⁸ Even when women did get the chance to participate in local government, they often did so not as a precursor to, but as an alternative to the vote. For many women 'citizenship lies in the

54 Prochaska, p.p.226-7.

55 Bartley, 145.

56 Summers, p.33.

57 Summers, p.59.

58 Prochaska, p. 229.

participation of each individual in effort for the good of the community' which was clearly distinct from any notions of national politics and the suffrage.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Digby, pp.200-203.; Mrs Humphrey Ward and others, 'An Appeal against Female Suffrage' reproduced in Digby, p.201.

4. Women and Philanthropy

Davidoff and Hall describe four types of voluntary organisations that developed in England from the late eighteenth century onwards; philanthropic, cultural, trade and political. Arising from earlier eighteenth century middle class social clubs, these organisations were intended to be more formal and with a higher degree of public accountability. The most prolific of these were the philanthropic organisations. Usually linked to one or more religious groups, they were often concerned with alleviating poverty or educating both adults and children in the accepted moral and religious teachings of the day.⁶⁰ Twells has argued that, even before 1850 women were at the heart of this missionary philanthropic movement and that it was the contemporary values about the nature of women that allowed them to move into this form of public life.⁶¹ Elsewhere Prochaska has described them as 'the leisured woman's most obvious outlet for self-expression', so much so that they became 'womanized' by the end of the nineteenth century.⁶²

Comparing different years in nineteenth century Banbury gives some idea about the growth of philanthropic organisations in the town and the involvement of women in such groups. In 1844 Pigot & Co's directory describes Banbury's public charities as being almshouses for twelve widows and a society for visiting and relieving the sick and distressed poor. Thirteen societies are also listed under Public Institutions, including a clothing society, a missionary association and a Bible society.⁶³ Reports of many of these organisations appear in the town's newspapers. However, there is hardly any reference to women and their involvement in any of the societies. For the most part ladies are

60 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, 2nd edn. (New York:Routledge, 2002), p. 419-29.

61 Alison Twells, *The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792-1850* (Basingstoke,2009), p7.

62 F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in 19th Century England* (Oxford: OUP, 1980),p.5.; p.223.

63 Pigot & Co.'s, 'Directory of Berks, Bucks... , 1844', (London:Slater,1844) p.158 in *Historical Directories of England and Wales* <<http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/cdm/ref/collection/p16445coll4/id/231345>> [accessed November 30th 2017].

mentioned only as being guests at social gatherings.⁶⁴ At Banbury's Club Day the town's societies took part in processions, religious services, dinners and teas. Although a lengthy article in the *Banbury Guardian* recorded the day's events, there was no mention of any female involvement in the festivities.⁶⁵ However, whilst men undertook the key roles in Banbury's societies, women did undertake roles that could be seen as extensions of their domestic roles or would have probably been disagreeable to men. At some events ladies were credited with providing the tea and refreshments. At the Unitarian Tract Society Anniversary, ladies were involved in the tea preparation and at the Temperance Anniversary Tea Meeting tea was 'prepared by the ladies belonging to that society, who (to their credit be it said) are never behind in doing their duty.'⁶⁶ At only two events in the year are women mentioned by name. Miss Tasker and Miss Hollowell performed at the Wesleyan Tea Meeting in February and nine ladies were listed by name as attending the National School's Anniversary in July.⁶⁷ Apart from the latter, on the few occasions when they are reported in the newspaper that year, women only appear to have taken active roles in events organised by religious groups.

However, it is important to note that in 1844 the *Banbury Guardian* focuses more on the trade and political organisations of the town and rarely on the activities of philanthropic organisations, which raises the question whether more existed or were they not considered newsworthy at the time.⁶⁸

Harrison and Trinder found that between 1843 and 1858 the number of references to voluntary organisations in Banbury's main newspaper more than doubled. Forty years

64 'Oddfellow's Ball', *Banbury Guardian*(hereafter *BG*), February 8th 1844.

65 'Club Day', *BG*, July 4th 1844.

66 'Unitarian Tract Anniversary', *BG*, July 25th 1844.; 'Temperance Anniversary Tea', *BG*, April 18th 1844.

67 'Wesleyan Tea meeting', *BG*, February 15th 1844.; 'National Schools Anniversary', *BG*, July 18th 1844.

68 Material used here from Rosalind Locke, A825 EMA part II, pp.8-10.

later, the range and number of voluntary organisations in the town had expanded even further.⁶⁹ Rusher's Banbury Directory of 1884 lists over seventy different clubs and societies, with examples of all of the four types described by Davidoff. Rusher's also reveals a rise in the involvement of women in some of those organisations. Several women are listed as holding offices in societies such as Miss Gillett, the Treasurer for the Dorcas Society.⁷⁰ Newspaper articles also reflect a greater involvement of women, as well as a changing attitude. Over fifteen ladies are mentioned by name in the report of the Harvest Festival Thanksgiving and a great deal was made of their contributions towards the event.⁷¹ There are also some reports of women personally addressing meetings and speaking out in public. In March, Mrs Hurd, of the committee was able to speak in place of the vicar who was unable to attend the Gospel Temperance meeting and at the Blue Ribbon Meeting a 'ladies platform' had been arranged for the 'gentler sex to plead the cause' of temperance. Mrs Gillett presided over the meeting and implored the ladies and gentlemen present to follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ and give up this habit.⁷²

It should be noted however that in the 1880s the vast majority of Banbury's voluntary organisations were still run by men. Also there were still some limitations on women's activities. It was often the case that even though women were involved with, or held office in societies they did not always speak at public meetings. At the 1884 Band of Hope Festival Miss Garrod the secretary was present but her report was read by the male superintendent.⁷³ Three years later during the Queen's Jubilee celebrations the townsmen acted as officials and organisers whilst the women carried out the more mundane tasks.

69 Harrison and Trinder, *Drink and Sobriety in an Early Victorian Town: Banbury 1830-60* (Longmans London, 1969) Appendices.

70 Rusher's 'Banbury List & Directory', (Banbury: Rusher, 1884) p. 9 in *Historical Directories of England and Wales* <<http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/cdm/ref/collection/p16445coll4/id/180350>>[accessed on December 3rd 2018].

71 'Harvest Thanksgiving', *BG*, 9th October 1884.

72 'Blue Ribbon Meeting', *BG*, 6th March 1884.; 'Gospel Temperance Meeting', *BG*, 20th March 1884.

73 'Band of Hope New Year Festival', *BG*, 17th January 1884.

The ladies who had volunteered to make the teas, a job for which they would surely have been very well qualified and able to organise themselves, were each given a comprehensive, and somewhat patronizing list of instructions by the Honourable Secretaries Fred Day and Oliver Stockton, which included the time to be ready, how to find their work station and what to do if they ran out of water.⁷⁴

It would therefore appear that during the mid to late nineteenth century not only did the number of voluntary organisations increase in Banbury, but also the contribution and potential influence of women. Whilst this might have been due to a greater acceptance of women in public life, we should not dismiss the idea that as Morgan states women were, by this time, becoming increasingly confident to take on these roles.⁷⁵ This growing involvement and confidence is particularly highlighted in the charity bazaars which took place in the town over this period.

Prochaska describes how important bazaars were to the expansion of philanthropic enterprise during the nineteenth century and estimates that tens of millions of pounds must have been raised by such events across the country. By the early 1830's, fancy fairs had become very fashionable in London, particularly after they had been given royal patronage and from this time onwards they became increasingly popular in the rest of the country.⁷⁶ Morgan states that they were 'a ubiquitous part of urban life and that some societies came to rely on them as an annual fundraising activity.'⁷⁷ Bazaars became not only a successful means of fundraising but a form of amusement for leisured ladies and gentlemen, combining the middle class love of shopping with the opportunity to be seen in the right

74 Centre for Banburyshire Studies, Potts Collection Reel 2 Vol. 9/10/11, *Banbury Jubilee Celebrations*, 1887. Material used here from Rosalind Locke, A825 EMA part II, pp. 10-13.

75 Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Woman's Place – Public Cultures in the Nineteenth Century* (Taurus:London 2007) p.107.

76 Prochaska, p.vii.;p.51.; p.55.

77 Morgan, p.116.

places, all under the guise of usefulness and philanthropy - the ideal afternoon entertainment.⁷⁸

For the women who chose to be involved, bazaars were important as they gave them the opportunity to practise administration skills, often independently from men. Committees had to be formed and friends and neighbours organised to produce items for sale. Also, as Morgan states, women became the public face of the nineteenth century bazaar.⁷⁹ A successful bazaar needed a lot of advertising and publicity, meaning that this was one of the most public activities that middle class women could become involved in.

Banbury's first advertised bazaar was in 1852, on behalf of the Christ Church building fund.⁸⁰ Prior to that, the *Banbury Guardian* had enthusiastically reported upon many of the larger London bazaars, such as the Anti Corn League Bazaar in Covent Garden and the Queen attending a bazaar in Regent's Park.⁸¹ Over the next twenty years the number of reported bazaars grew. Between 1872 and 1894, at least two per year were advertised and often many more. The main beneficiaries of the bazaars were church and chapel building funds, in particular the Wesleyan Methodist chapels, whose bazaars became celebrated features of Banbury's social calendar.⁸² Occasionally interdenominational bazaars were organised for causes such as the Temperance Hall, and in 1875 a bazaar was organised by a diverse group of local women in support of the National Asylum for Idiots in Surrey, many miles from Banbury.⁸³

78 Prochaska, p. 58.

79 Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain*, (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p.225.; Morgan, p.117.

80 'The New Church', *BG*, 11th March 1852, p.2.

81 'The National Free-Trade Bazaar', *BG*, 15th May 1845, p.2.; 'Epitome of News', *BG*, 3rd June 1847, p.4.

82 'Bazaar at Grimsbury Wesleyan Schoolroom', *Banbury Beacon*, 4th April 1891, p.8.

83 'Banbury Temperance Hall Bazaar Account', *BG*, 24th May 1877, p.1.; 'Bazaar in Aid of the National Asylum for Idiots', *BG*, 8th April 1875, p.2.

The growing importance of bazaars to Banbury's social life can also be seen in the amount of column inches they were given. A very short article in the *Banbury Guardian* reported upon the Wesleyan bazaar in June 1860. However, by the 1880's articles about bazaars in each of the three town newspapers gave detailed descriptions of stallholders, decorations and visitors.⁸⁴ Banbury's bazaars also became more accountable using professional business methods. Advertisements for bazaars were increasingly comprehensive, including the entertainment that would be provided and the cost of entry. By the 1870's, bazaar committees were publishing their accounts in the newspapers showing incomes and expenditures.⁸⁵ Visitors to the Wesleyan Tyrolese Market in 1888 were even provided with an official handbook to guide them through the bazaar and explain some of the background history to the fundraising event.⁸⁶

From their earliest example, Banbury's bazaars relied upon women for their success. An all male committee was responsible for the Christ Church bazaar in 1852, although it was proudly advertised as having the support of many wives and sisters of Banbury's most prominent men.⁸⁷ A visitor on the day noted that several titled ladies were responsible for the running of the stalls and nearly all the local nobility, clergy and gentry were in some way involved.⁸⁸ However, as time went by upper class ladies stopped being involved in the practical aspects of bazaars and acted more as named patrons. Advertising the patronage of the town's elite ensured that the event was seen as worthwhile and respectable (important features of any Victorian event) and attracted greater numbers of visitors.

84 'The Wesleyan Bazaar', *BG*, 7th June 1860.; 'International Fete and Bazaar', *BG*, 6th November 1884.; 'Japanese Fete and Bazaar', *Banbury Advertiser*, 22 May 1884.

85 'A Bazaar', *BG*, 16th May 1872, p.3.; 'Banbury Temperance Hall Bazaar Account', *BG*, 24th May 1877, p.1.

86 'Tyrolese Market', *BG*, 6th September 1888, p.8.

87 'Christ Church Bazaar', *BG*, 2nd September 1852, p.3.

88 Sarah Beesley, 'My Life 1812-1892', in *Victorian Banburyshire: Three Memoirs*, ed. by Barrie Trinder (Oxford: The Banbury Historical Society, 2013), p.71.

Administrative work and selling on the day was increasingly carried out by members of Banbury's middle class, with women taking more active roles in the organisation. In 1877 an advert for a forthcoming bazaar listed nineteen lady patronesses including Baroness North and Lady Paulet. A separate list was made of the committee who would be running the event which included a solicitor's wife, a manufacturer's wife and several wives of local tradesmen. These ladies' roles involved gathering donations of 'plain and fancy articles', arranging the stalls and entertainment, as well as collecting monetary donations before the event.⁸⁹ Newspaper reports also list the stall holders who were the sisters, wives and daughters of the town's businessmen and shopkeepers.⁹⁰

Women could also support bazaars by contributing goods for sale. Sarah Beesley describes how an elderly cousin 'employed a good deal of her time making fancy articles for bazaars for the benefit of charitable societies, Sunday schools etc'.⁹¹ Collecting promises for such items was an important job for members of the bazaar committee and they were also responsible for displaying sale items prior to the bazaar as a means of promoting the event.

Alongside the growing involvement of women in the organisation of bazaars there appears to be an increasing acceptance of women in these more public roles. The gentlemen's committees of Banbury's early bazaars usually thanked the often nameless ladies for their support.⁹² By the 1870s women contributors to bazaars were being named and described as 'the masters of the situation' and in 1877 it was the ladies' committee of the Temperance Hall bazaar who were giving their 'hearty thanks' to the men who supported

89 'Banbury Temperance Hall', *BG*, 29th March 1877, p.4.

90 'Bazaar in aid of the Temperance Hall', *BG*, 10th May 1877, p.5.; The National Archive:Public Record Office (hereafter TNA:PRO) RG 10/1464-5, data collected across total census for Banbury.

91 Beesley, p145

92 'Wesleyan Bazaar', *BG*, 14th June 1860, p.3.

them.⁹³ However, it is important to note that there were still limitations. Although women had organised and profitably run the Wesleyan Japanese bazaar in 1884, and been named and publically thanked, none were invited to the dinner which was held to celebrate its success which had wiped off the debt from the chapel.⁹⁴

As Prochaska described, bazaars became a form of entertainment as much as a fundraising activity. The ladies' committees of Banbury thought of increasingly amusing themes for their bazaars, maybe in response to competition from other causes. The Wesleyans in particular were very imaginative in their ideas. Indian, Swiss and other nationalities were popular choices, but other themes like rainbow colours, Charles Dickens and even lighthouses were used.⁹⁵ Sarah Beesley described how when visiting the Charles Dickens bazaar she enjoyed the spectacle of the ladies dressed as well known Dickens characters and the added entertainment of readings by Charles Dickens's son. At an earlier bazaar in 1882, she mentions the striking decorations, the costumes and the numerous attractions, such as a fish ponds and a gypsy tent. All of which meant that the hall 'was crammed' every evening and the bazaar was 'a great success'.⁹⁶ The stalls at bazaars were also designed to interest visitors such as sweet stalls, fruit and vegetable stalls as well as refreshments and simple games like bran tubs. However, if none of this encouraged gentlemen visitors to part with their money 'charming young ladies' were sometimes employed to sell button holes and 'make a raid on the pockets of gentlemen'.⁹⁷

93 'Bazaar in Aid of the Wesleyan chapel at Grimsbury', *BG*, 18th April 1872, p.2.; 'Banbury Temperance Hall bazaar Account', *BG*, 24th May 1877, p.1.

94 'Japanese Fete and Bazaar', *Banbury Advertiser*, 22nd May 1884, p.5.

95 'Grand Fete and Bazaar', *Banbury Advertiser*, 22nd May 1884, p.5.; 'Swiss Fete at the Town Hall', *BG*, 8th September 1881, p.5.;

'Wesleyan bazaar at Grimsbury', *BG*, 21st April 1892, p.6.; 'Our Local Calendar', *BG*, 22nd March 1894, p.8.

96 Beesley, p.137.; p.161.

97 'International Fete and Bazaar', *BG*, 6th November 1884, p.5.; 'Japanese Fete and Bazaar', *Banbury Beacon*, 4 April 1891.

Religious causes were the overriding beneficiaries of women's contributions to Banbury's bazaars reflecting the inescapable importance of religion in the lives of nineteenth century women.⁹⁸ Women remained responsible for the spiritual and moral welfare of the family within the home, but also had, through the guiding of the scriptures, a duty to use their influence out in the public arena. Consequently, philanthropic organisations linked to Banbury's chapels and churches were the main outlets for middle class women's public lives. Central to this was the role of lady visitors, women who visited the poor distributing help for the needy and infirm as well as for spiritual and moral guidance. The latter was especially important as for most of the century poor morality was seen as the major cause of poverty, and who better than the 'angel in the house' middle class woman to tackle this.

During this period, Banbury had two visiting societies; the Old Charitable Society, which had been established in 1782 and the Visiting Charitable Society, established later in 1820. Both were supported by members of Banbury's different denominations with monies being raised by the preaching of special sermons, as well as annual subscriptions and donations. The lists of these subscribers, as in 1858 to the Old Charitable Society included many ladies, such as Eliza Stutterd, a widowed woollen dealer's daughter, and Elizabeth Wyatt a sixty three year old landowner. Married women's contributions are not listed as presumably they are included in their husband's amounts.⁹⁹ The reports of the Visiting Charitable Society make clear the defined roles for men and women in the running of the society. Whilst approximately twenty women are listed every year as visitors their work is very much overseen by a male patron, president, officers and a committee of gentlemen. The lady visitors fit the image of typical Banbury middle class society. In 1861 they included Mrs R. and Mrs W. Edmunds, Miss Beere, Miss Francillon, an attorney's daughter

⁹⁸ Prochaska, p.vii.

⁹⁹ Centre for Banburyshire Studies, Potts Collection Reel 2 Vol. 9/10/11, *Banbury Charitable Society Annual Report*, 19th October 1858.; 'Charitable Societies', *Banbury Advertiser*, 13th November 1856, p.3.; TNA:PRO RG 9/918, f79,p.12.

and Mrs D. Rusher. Deborah Rusher was the wife of William Rusher, actuary of the Savings Bank and sister in law of Sarah Beesley. In the 1861 census her occupation is listed as 'distributor of stamps'.¹⁰⁰

Sarah Beesley's mother was also part of the committee of 'visiting ladies' for the Visiting Charitable Society. Sarah describes how, during a visit, the lady visitors would enquire as to what sickness was in the house and, should it be felt necessary, give out tickets for meat and groceries, or baby linen. Not all of the recipients were thankful or honest and Sarah recalls a visit when she was threatened with being reported to a member of the gentlemen's committee for refusing to hand out a ticket. The managerial role of the gentlemen's committee being so important Sarah was quick to speak to the gentleman and explain the situation herself.¹⁰¹

Whilst the Old Charitable and Visiting Charitable Society remained under the control of gentlemen's committees, in other philanthropic organisations ladies had a more organisational role. The Ladies Committee was an important element of Banbury's Auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society. They maintained a high proportion of the yearly donations over many years and ran their committee using professional business skills, minuted monthly meetings and annual accounts.¹⁰² Records of the Banbury Monthly Meeting of the Women's Friends also reveal a high level of professionalism. Their minutes and reports are extremely detailed showing those attending, business arising and the nomination process for new officers.¹⁰³

100 Centre for Banburyshire Studies, Potts Collection Reel 2 Vol. 9/10/11, *The Banbury Visiting Charitable Society Annual Report*, 23rd July 1861.; TNA:PRO RG 9/918, f68,p.19.

101 Beesley, p.59.

102 'Banbury Bible Society', *Banbury Advertiser*, 19th November 1874, p.4.; 'British and Foreign Bible Society', *Banbury Beacon*, 24th November 1888, p. 7.

103 Oxfordshire History Centre, NQ1/1/A3/4, *Banbury Monthly Meeting of the Womens Friends, 1840-1917*.

Although Sarah Beesley recalls her husband's aunt as being secretary in 1828 of British and Foreign Bible Society, details of the members of the ladies committee were not listed in any of almanacs or trade directories in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁴ The yearly almanac did however regularly list the lady officials of the town's poor clothing societies such as the Church Clothing Club and the Dorcas Society. As early as 1851 the Dorcas Society was listed as having Miss Padbury, the daughter of a woollen draper, and Mrs Piper, a Presbyterian minister's wife as the treasurer and secretary whilst Sarah Beesley's sister in law Mary was secretary of the clothing society in 1857.¹⁰⁵ Later in the century, John Langley recalls the two as having lady secretaries, one of whom was a Miss Hill, and other lady committee members who made clothes at their meetings.¹⁰⁶

Visiting societies and clothing clubs were a way for middle class women to help the poor and needy, but for members of the Victorian middle class the idea of self help and self improvement was a powerful concept. Samuel Smiles popular book *Self-Help*, which sold over a quarter of a million copies in his lifetime stated that self help 'constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength' and whilst 'help from without is often enfeebling in its effort ... help from within invariably invigorates'.¹⁰⁷ Banbury's middle class women could espouse this notion by subscribing to, or supporting mutual aid or friendly societies. Honorary middle class members, who did not need the insurance benefits, could make regular payments to demonstrate their support for the club and its objectives. Indeed, in 1805, Banbury had one of the earliest all female friendly societies. George Herbert describes the society as being founded by a Miss Long, 'quite an independent lady, a

104 Beesley, p.51.

105 Beesley, p.75.; Banbury Almanac 1851, in *BG*, 24th December 1851.; TNA:PRO HO107/1734, f390,p.26.; HO107/1734, f444; p.11.

106 John Langley, 'Further Memories of Late Victorian and Early Edwardian Banbury', in *Cake and Cockhorse* 3.3 (1966), 44.

107 Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (1859) in *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890*, ed. by J. M. Golby (New York: OUP, 1986) p.106.

celebrity here' with meetings that took place at the house of Joseph Hopkins, a slater in North Bar. Very little information about the society exists, but Herbert includes three rules from the society's handbook. Rule 1 states that the admission fee was 2s 6d which entitled the member to a rule book, a blue bow and a wand, whilst rule 24 describes how members should be decently dressed and sober when attending the town's Club Feast Days in July. It was very clear that this was a female only group as Rule 25 states that 'no man shall ever be admitted into the club room or on a feast day except the vicar of the parish of Banbury.' The society lasted at least twenty years, but there are no records of it after 1825.¹⁰⁸ Later, in 1884, a branch of the Young Women's Help Society was formed in the town, its objectives being to provide young women the opportunity to meet for recreation and instruction after 'the labours of the day'. The society sought to enlist the support of young women from the leisured classes to 'use their influence to promote the happiness of their poorer sisters.' The branch had a complicated hierarchy of members from subscribers down to probationers and the rule book lists the benefits of membership as being educational (evening classes, lending library, writing meetings) and financial (sick club, penny bank). The cost was 1d per month.¹⁰⁹ In 1896, the society was still flourishing, with over 200 attendees in one month. A number of middle class ladies were providing teas, entertainments and supporting the vicar with Bible studies and spiritual teaching. These included Mrs Walkley, a corn merchant's wife and Mrs Fortescue, a solicitor's wife with the vicar's wife, Mrs Porter, acting as secretary and treasurer.¹¹⁰ However, it should be noted the Young Women's Help Society was an exception and that, on the whole, Banbury's friendly and mutual aid societies, such as the Banbury Mutual Aid Society and the

108 George Herbert, *Shoemakers Window: Recollections of Banbury before the Railway Age* (London and Chichester: Phillimore and Co, 1971) p.54.; p.129.; Shaun Morley, ed., *Oxfordshire Friendly Societies, 1750-1918* (Great Britain: Oxfordshire Record Society, 2011) p.45.

109 'Young Women's Help Society', *Banbury Guardian*, 12th June 1884, p.5.; Oxfordshire History Centre, PAR21/1/A/4. *Young Women's Help Society Rulebook*, 1884.

110 'Girl's Friendly Society', *Banbury Advertiser*, 7th January 1892, p.4.; 'The Young Women's Help Society', *BG*, 10th January 1889, p.5.; 29th February 1896, p.8.; TNA:PRO RG12/1183,f6,p.5.; RG12/1183, f28,p.7.

Wesleyan Mutual Aid Society remained male dominated organisations both in membership and supporters.¹¹¹

As Smitley described, Banbury's middle class women who were regularly involved in religious activities had the opportunity to form friendships and participate in social networks.¹¹² These networks could then spread out into the wider community and become part of the town's public life. In 1886 'a few benevolent ladies ... formed themselves into a committee to carry out the work of ... a most beneficial and helpful institution'. The object of the Banbury Invalid Kitchen was to provide beef tea and puddings to the poor and needy. The original committee consisted of eleven women from the towns leading Wesleyan families.¹¹³ Two years later, the committee had grown to sixteen and the Banbury Guardian published detailed accounts and an impressive list of the town's ladies who had made donations.¹¹⁴ However, it would appear that the ladies might have become a victim of their success as from 1889 the annual meetings were all male affairs and whilst the ladies committee were thanked, only men were present.¹¹⁵

The network of people involved in the Invalid Kitchen was further extended by its connection with the town's Soup Kitchen. The Soup Kitchen had begun in 1879 by members of the Anglican community. As the years passed the two charities worked increasingly together, sharing premises and bills, and describing each other as 'Sister Society'. Eventually ladies like Mrs F. Robinson and Mrs Walkley were members of both

111 Morley, p44-61.; 'Banbury Mutual Aid Society', *BG*, 18th September 1873, p.2.; 'Wesleyan Mutual Aid Society' *BG*, 22nd December 1892, p.7.

112 Smitley, p.40.

113 'The Invalid Kitchen', *BG*, 23rd December 1886, p.5.

114 'Banbury Invalid Kitchen', *BG*, 12th January 1888, p.5.

115 'Banbury Invalid Kitchen', *BG*, 4th July 1889, p.5.; 15th September 1892,p.7.

committees and what had begun as a few Wesleyan ladies getting together probably in a drawing room meeting had become an integral part of the town's public life.¹¹⁶

Participation in causes like the Invalid kitchen and Soup Kitchen led to women making new friends and extending their social networks. However their existing familial networks greatly influenced their involvement in different organisations. Whilst it is difficult to link people by surname alone, comparing the membership lists of gentlemen's and ladies committees for different philanthropic organisation does appear to reflect a relationship between middle class men's interests and those of their sisters, wives and daughters. In 1858, nine of the twelve members of the ladies British Schools Committee share surnames with members of the gentlemen's committee, whilst in 1874 five of the seven women on the Ladies committee of the National School were married to gentlemen members.¹¹⁷

There is also evidence that, as Smitley stated some mothers and daughters worked together within organisations. Sarah Beesley's mother took her on visits for the Visiting Charitable Society and Sarah states that she sometimes went in her mother's place.¹¹⁸ Also in 1861 Deborah Rusher's seventeen year old daughter Jane Elizabeth was a member of the Visiting Charitable Society ladies' committee. Later in 1891 Mrs Lumbert, a master tailor's wife was not able to be involved in the soup kitchen any more but Mr Lumbert was pleased to tell the committee that his daughter would be taking her place on the ladies committee.¹¹⁹

116 'Banbury Soup Kitchen' *BG*, 6th December 1894, p.6.

117 Centre for Banburyshire Studies, Potts Collection Reel 2 Vol. 9/10/11, *Banbury British School Society*, 2nd July 1858.; *Banbury National Schools Annual Report*, 31st January 1874.

118 Smitley, p.55.; Beesley, p.51.

119 'Banbury Soup Kitchen', *BG*, 3rd December 1891, p.7.; TNA:PRO RG11/1528,f68,p.4.

For the Edmunds ladies, their philanthropic roles were very much influenced by the different networks and relationships that they were involved in. The majority of the causes which they supported were run by or based within the towns Wesleyan Methodist movement. Primarily at the Marlborough Road chapel, the ladies also supported groups at the Neithrop Methodist Mission in a poorer suburb of Banbury and sometimes Methodist events in the wider Banburyshire community.¹²⁰ In these capacities, they often worked alongside the same group of women with family names such as Austen, Kilby, Coomber and Brummitt regularly appearing in the same ladies committee lists.¹²¹ Sisters-in-law, Mrs Richard Edmunds and Mrs William Edmunds frequently worked together. Both acted as lady visitors for the Visiting Charitable Society and were on a number of bazaar committees. After both of their first wives died (in 1875 and 1881) Richard's and William's second wives continued this close philanthropic relationship, almost seamlessly despite both coming from different parts of England. Elizabeth Edmunds, Richard and William's sister who married Edward Payne, a prosperous town grocer also remained part of the family network after her marriage. In 1854 she and her sisters-in-law presided at one of the refreshment tables at the opening of the Town Hall and in 1887 they were all collectors for the Queen's Jubilee offering. They also regularly worked together on ladies committees, such as the Crouch Street School committee.¹²² Future family members can also be found within the Edmunds ladies social networks as, prior to her marriage to Francis Page Edmunds, Miss Helen Herrieff's name can be found alongside the Edmunds ladies in a number of lists and on some occasions she is described as representing the Edmunds

120 'Chipping Warden Bazaar', *BG*, 24th September 1885, p.8.; 'Cropreddy', *BG*, 22nd June 1882, p.5.; 'Neithrop Mothers Meeting', *Banbury Beacon*, 7th January 1893, p. 5.

121 'Banbury and Neithrop Mission Room Meeting', *BG*, 10th January 1889, p.6.; 'Christmas Tree at Marlborough Road School', *Banbury Advertiser*, 1st January 1885, p.4.

122 'Opening of the Town Hall', *BG*, 2nd November 1854, p.2.; 'Crouch Street Schools', *BG*, 5th June 1879, p.7.; 'The Queen's Jubilee', *BG*, 17th March 1887, p.7.

family.¹²³ However, it is important to note that as Draznin found, obligations towards supporting their menfolk's remained paramount and the Edmunds ladies' philanthropic activities remained closely linked to their husband's interests.¹²⁴

Two newspaper reports in particular demonstrate the importance of family, religious and neighbourhood networks that influenced women and philanthropy in Banbury during the late nineteenth century. On July 24th 1890 the Banbury Guardian reported upon a meeting of the Invalid Kitchen. The meeting was presided over by Mr W. Edmunds. Present was wife, his sister-in-law, Mrs R., her son, Mr P.S. and his wife, her mother and sister, Mrs and Miss Herrieff and another daughter-in-law of Mrs R., Mrs F.P. Edmunds. Of the four non family members who attended the meeting three lived in adjacent streets to Mrs R. Edmunds in Dashwood Road. Changes to the committee for the following year saw William Edmunds sister and niece, Mrs and Miss Payne joining the committee.¹²⁵ Two years earlier, eleven members of the extended Edmunds family took part in the three day Tyrolese Market bazaar at the Marlborough Road School Room acting as officials, stallholders and distinguished guests alongside many of the town's leading families.¹²⁶ Women from these families appear over and over again in records of the town's charitable activities and as such it would seem that by the 1890s an influential group of philanthropic women had developed within the town. This concept of a philanthropic elite has been recognised by Moira Martin. She describes how in Bristol, a group of women had developed by the end of the nineteenth century who through their charitable activities

123 'Philharmonic Society's Concert', *BG*, 16th December 1886, p.6.; 'Banbury Amateur Athletic Report', *Banbury Advertiser*, 24th May 1888, p.8.

124 Yaffa Claire Draznin, *Victorian London's Middle Class Housewife: What She Did All Day*, (London:Greenwood Press, 2001), p.134.

125 'Banbury Invalid Kitchen', *BG*, 24th July 1890, p.8.

126 'Tyrolese Market', *BG*, 6th September 1888, p.8.

gained an elevated position in society.¹²⁷ Within Banbury, certainly the Edmunds ladies were part of a group of middle class women who, through their network of relationships and the Nonconformist tradition of philanthropic activity, became part of a female culture in which they were social leaders in their own right. Whilst certain titled ladies still patronised some causes, philanthropic organisations did not now need this upper class backing to succeed.

Surviving evidence demonstrates that, as Smitley described, there was, in Banbury, a feminine public sphere. Women were able to have a public presence and within this expand their authority. How much of this was created by the women manipulating the contemporary definitions of womanhood or by those definitions demanding their involvement is unclear.¹²⁸ However what is clear is that this public presence remained firmly within society's expectations and existed alongside, and not as a challenge to, men's public activities.

127 Moira Martin, 'Single Women and Philanthropy: a case study of women's associational life in Bristol, 1880–1914', *Women's History Review*, 17:3, (2008), 398.

128 Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere Middle-Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland, C 1870-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 3-8.

5. Women in other Voluntary Organisations

Using social and familial networks as well as an underlying religious doctrine the middle class women of Banbury were able to practically support philanthropic causes. In this respect they were implementing the ideology of the 'women's mission' in which their virtuous and nurturing qualities could be used not only in the private sphere of the domestic home but also benefit wider public life. However, as Mrs Beeton advised, 'to be a good housewife does not necessarily imply an abandonment of proper leisure or amusing recreation'.¹²⁹ Not only that but the Victorian notion of self improvement meant that if they had the time and money women, as well as men, should find ways to improve themselves. Using Davidoff's other three categories of voluntary organisations, cultural, trade and political, it is possible to get a picture of how much Banbury's middle class women were able to act as their own person and think of their own needs and interests.¹³⁰

As we have seen self help was a cause which Banbury's middle class women could support, although not necessarily benefit from. Personal progression and self improvement was, however a way for them to conform to this popular idea. Useful pastimes which strengthened the mind and body certainly fitted with the ethos of an age, where 'Heaven helps those who help themselves'.¹³¹ For the middle class women of Banbury the challenge was to achieve this without over stepping accepted boundaries of female behaviour.

¹²⁹ Isabella Mary Beeton, *Book of Household Management*, (London:Ward,Lock & Co.,1861) in Draznin, *Victorian London's Middle Class Housewife: What She Did All Day*, (London:Greenwood Press, 2001), p.149.

¹³⁰ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, 2nd edn. (New York:Routledge, 2002), p. 420.

¹³¹ Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (1859) in *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890*, ed. by J. M. Golby (New York: OUP, 1986) p.106.

Trinder states that the significance of public lectures in the nineteenth century, and the associated notion of self improvement are reflected in the memoirs of Banbury inhabitants of the time.¹³² Certainly public lectures were being held in Banbury in the early decades of the nineteenth century and by 1850 they were an established part of the cultural life of the town.¹³³ As Sarah Beesley's memoir demonstrates it was socially acceptable for women to attend such gatherings, so much so that when discussing the building of a new town hall one speaker called for the inclusion of suitable facilities for the presence of ladies.¹³⁴ The subject of lectures was often religious or moral but scientific and geographical themes were not uncommon. In 1853 Sarah Beesley attended a lecture by Sir Henry Dryden on Church Singing and Music which 'kept the company roaring with laughter'; whilst she later records her daughters attending a botany lecture in the Mechanics Institute.¹³⁵ In 1872 a series of six educational lectures were held in the Exchange Hall. The speakers included a Fellow of the Royal Society, and the themes included a talk on the formation of mountains. The cost of admission was only one penny, with extra to reserve a seat. Beesley describes how popular the events were with both men and women, with 'ladies taking their fancy work and gentlemen their newspapers, etc., to fill up the time' as they needed to arrive early to guarantee a seat.¹³⁶

Some women took their education further and took part in classes or joined clubs that satisfied their interests. One common and socially acceptable interest was botany. Sarah Beesley's daughters enjoyed trips out with their female cousins 'botanising' in 1874 whilst

132 Barrie Trinder, ed. *Victorian Banburyshire: Three Memoirs* (Oxford: The Banbury Historical Society, 2013), p.8.

133 Thomas Boss, 'Reminiscences of Old Banbury', in *Victorian Banburyshire: Three Memoirs*, p.187.;
Barrie Trinder, *Victorian Banbury* (Chichester: Phillimore and Co, 1982), p.72.

134 'Public Meeting', *Banbury Guardian (hereafter BG)*, 31st October 1850, p.2.

135 Sarah Beesley, 'My Life 1812-1892', in *Victorian Banburyshire: Three Memoirs*, p.72.; p.100.

136 Beesley, p.132.

a ladies botany class had been started at the British School more than ten years earlier.¹³⁷ The *Banbury Guardian* listed the names of students who had passed Department of Science and Art examinations in 1864 and these included Marianne Mansfield, a master painter's daughter and Fanny Gibbs a fishmonger's daughter.¹³⁸ Classes were also held in the Mechanics Institute and in 1872 it was proudly reported that two of Mr French's botany class were successful in passing the examination, 'one of the young ladies, Miss Rusher occupies the highest positioning of the list of 277 candidates.'¹³⁹ As time went on women took ever more practical and active roles. In 1882 the Banburyshire Natural History Society and Field Club held their June excursion to the local Avon Dassett hills. Eight women joined fourteen men in a packed programme identifying flora and fauna in a variety of habitats. The inclement weather, sometimes tough terrain and long hours meant that it wasn't a day for faint hearted ladies.¹⁴⁰

There were also opportunities for Banbury's middle class women to take up other hobbies. In 1874 the Beesley's adult daughters, attended Mr Sturgeon's School of Art Drawing Classes whilst there is a report in the *Banbury Guardian* about a meeting in March 1884 to form a sketching club in town. Although presided over by a local vicar most of the attendees were women and the secretary and half of the new committee were ladies.¹⁴¹ Attitudes towards women's involvement in cultural activities didn't entirely soften. In May 1894 the formation of a photographic society was announced with a great deal of flourish and excitement. Full details of the society's rules and benefits to members and

137 Beesley, p.107.; p.86.

138 'Banbury Science School', *BG*, 21st July 1864, p.2. The National Archive:Public Record Office (hereafter TNA:PRO) RG 9/918,f62, p.7.; RG 9/918,f 26,p.12.

139 'Banbury Mechanics Institute', *BG*, 3rd October 1872, p.2.

140 'Banburyshire Natural History Society and Field Club', *BG*, 8th June 1882, p.2.

141 'Proposed Sketching Club', *BG*, 3rd April 1884, p.3.; Beesley, p.105.

subscription amounts were. It was only right at the very bottom of the announcement that it was felt necessary to state 'The society is open to ladies'.¹⁴²

As well as local educational visits the newly opened railways enabled middle class women to travel further afield to broaden their horizons. Sarah Beesley recalls in her memoirs the five days that she spent visiting the Great Exhibition of 1851 and describing the exhibits as 'a sight I shall never forget'.¹⁴³ She also travelled to Worcester, Salisbury and Reading describing in detail her interest in the architecture, history and geology of the areas.¹⁴⁴

Self improvement of the mind then was something that Banbury's middle class women had the opportunity to take part in during the second half of the nineteenth century. Was physical self improvement through sport also an option for these women? McClone and Parratt have described how developments in girl's education led to an increased number of women taking part in physical activities and how from the 1860s onwards upper and middle class women took a more frequent part in recreational sports, such as croquet and lawn tennis. Both acknowledge though that when women did take part in sporting activities it had to be done within the social norms and whilst challenging the Victorian ideals of femininity, and equally as important masculinity.¹⁴⁵

There is evidence of women taking part in some forms of physical activity in Banbury during this period. In the 1850s there are regular advertisements by Henry Stone, bookseller and stationer for ladies bows and arrows, although the nearest archery club

142 'Formation of a Photographic Society', *BG*, 17th May 1894, p.5.

143 Beesley, p.71.

144 Beesley, p.90.;p.105.;p.124.

145 Kathleen McCrone, 'Class Gender and English Women's Sport 1890-1914', *Journal of Sport History* 18.1(1991), 159.; Catriona M. Parratt, 'Athletic "Womanhood"', *Journal of Sport History* 16.2 (1989),142-3.

was over ten miles away in Edgehill.¹⁴⁶ In 1870 Banbury's Recreational Ground and Bathing Company advertised ladies swimming on Tuesdays and from ten till twelve on Friday mornings. There are no surviving records as to which ladies were might have been tempted to take a dip, but the cost of 7s 6d and the timing would have limited the number of prospective swimmers to the leisured middle and upper classes.¹⁴⁷

However it appears that for most of Banbury's middle class women their involvement in sporting pastimes was as onlookers rather than participants. From the mid century onwards the local papers increasingly reported on cricket, football and later athletic events. In June 1851 there was a 'Grand Cricket Match' held at Banbury between local players and a touring team. Over three days the match drew crowds of over 1000 with each day 'graced by the presence of many ladies'.¹⁴⁸ From the late 1870's results of tennis matches began to be reported and these mention the presence of lady spectators. Charles Fletcher Edmunds, eldest son of William Edmunds was often supported by members of his family. In July 1880 two of his sisters, a cousin and his aunt, Mrs R Edmunds are listed as being present along with at least twenty other named ladies from the Edmunds family social network.¹⁴⁹ The same Charles Edmunds was to go on to be one of the founders of the town's Bodicote Golf Club in 1894 and later president of the Banbury Star Cyclists Club. In this capacity his wife and daughters regularly supported him at social functions, although there is no mention of any of them taking part.¹⁵⁰ It seems that Banbury's sporting organisations were mostly all male affairs. The Bodicote Golf Club does not record any women players in the nineteenth century, although by 1891 other clubs in the area were encouraging lady players. The Banbury Chestnuts Bowling Club too, one of the oldest

146 'Archery', *BG*, 24th June 1858, p.5.

147 'Banbury Recreational Ground', *BG*, 12th May 1870, p.3.

148 George A. Smith, 'Banbury v All England: Cricketing Connections', *Cake and Cockhorse* 16,6-7(2005), 221.

149 'Lawn Tennis', *BG*, 22nd July 1880, p.5.

150 'Banbury Star Cyclists Club', *Banbury Advertiser*, 20th August 1896, p.5.

sporting organisations in the town, did not open its doors to ladies until 1904, and then only on certain Tuesdays.¹⁵¹ Also none of the surviving diaries and published histories of the time describe middle class women taking part in sport. However it cannot be assumed that the Edmunds ladies and the other middle class women of Banbury did not enjoy recreational sports pastimes and further research in this area would be valuable.

Although at this time Banbury's middle class women do not appear to have been performing publically in the sporting arena they were certainly performing musically in public. Tea with musical entertainment was the most popular form of social activity in Banbury at this time. All kinds of voluntary organisations came together for tea meetings, which were usually followed by some form of singing or musical playing. Musical evenings were also used as fund raising opportunities. On the 15th January 1874 the *Banbury Advertiser* lists four, well attended musical entertainment evenings which had taken place in the previous week. One was for the benefit of the church organ, one for the Primitive Methodist Schoolroom, one for the Neithrop Mission School and one for the Juvenile Mutual Improvement Society. The reports detail the varied programmes, each of which included performances by a number of women.¹⁵² Percy Edmunds, son of Richard Edmunds junior and his sisters took part in the annual concerts for the Horton Infirmary, which included performers from many of Banbury's middle class families. In 1879, even though the performers were all amateur, the local paper does take a somewhat harsh line with its review stating that they had heard the performers in better voice than they were on the night and 'a little more breadth in the choice of the performers would also be

151 J.S. Owen, 'Banbury and District Golf Club 1894-1919', in *Cake and Cockhorse* 11.2 (1989),34-39.; Banbury Chestnuts Bowls Club, 'A Potted History of the Chestnuts Bowls Club' <www.banburychestnuts.co.uk/our-history.html> [accessed 10 Dec.2018].

152 'Entertainment on behalf of the Organ', 'Entertainment at the Primitive Methodist Schoolroom', 'Entertainment at the Neithrop Mission School', 'Entertainment', *Banbury Advertiser*, 15th January 1874, p.2.

advisable.¹⁵³ Banbury also had several musical societies and clubs which although male dominated did attract some female members. The New Philharmonic Society regularly featured female performers in its programmes. In 1880 the last concert of the season featured nearly one hundred amateur performers with performances by Miss Askew and Miss Dixon, being praised by the local papers. However, whilst ladies did take part in the performances the society's committee remained an all male affair. The Banbury Choral Society and the Bridge Street Choral Society also put on regular performances with female performers taking part, although the former often used the talents of professional female singers such as Madame Gilardoni and Miss Ellen Horne to support the local amateurs.¹⁵⁴

Davidoff and Hall's third category of voluntary associations relates to trade and business societies. They describe these organisations as being traditionally male dominated. Despite women family members often working incredibly hard to support businesses they lacked access to the professional training and skills necessary to engage in the intellectual activities of the trade societies.¹⁵⁵ Surviving evidence seems to support this argument in Banbury. The town's most prominent trade association was the Banbury Agricultural Association which formed in 1834. Its original purpose was to protect its members' interests, but over time it became more recreational and its shows attracted large numbers of visitors. However records do not show any women's involvement in the movement.¹⁵⁶ Many other trades in the town formed clubs such as the plush weavers and printers and from the late 1860s there was a retail cooperative society but these were working men's associations, sometimes working in direct opposition to the middle class tradesmen and

153 'Horton Infirmary Concert' *BG*, 25th September 1879, p.6.

154 'New Philharmonic Society' *BG*, 13th May 1880, p.6.; 6th April 1882, p.5.; 'Banbury and District Choral Society' *BG*, 11th May 1871, p.3.

155 Davidoff and Hall, p.420.; p.446.

156 Oxfordshire History Centre, 0212/F1,2,3, *Banbury Agricultural Association Minute Book*, 1874-1961.

often closed to women.¹⁵⁷ An exception to this male dominance was the teaching profession as women took an active role in Banbury's Teaching Association. In July 1880 Mrs Fowler and Miss Booth from the Cherwell British and Hanwell Board Schools were elected part of the committee alongside male teachers from other schools and a third of the membership was female teachers.¹⁵⁸ Trade clubs and associations in the town also acted as benefit societies for their members and for the town's teachers Banbury had its own branch of the Church Schoolmasters and Schoolmistresses Benevolent Association which was formed in 1883. Like the Teaching Association women did work alongside men on the committee in what was described as 'urgent and heavy work' there being 'a long list of candidates, 138 for the 20 annuities to be granted'.¹⁵⁹

The final group of voluntary organisations is concerned with political interests.¹⁶⁰ For women, middle class or not, this was a subject that was restricted by the laws of the land. During the second half of the century various government acts, such as the Local Government Act of 1894 entitled women who owned property, to vote in local elections, become poor law guardians or act on school boards, but these were women of independent means and not the majority of Banbury's middle class women discussed in this dissertation. However, it is not true to say that these women were totally cut off from the political process. Banbury, in the nineteenth century was a hot bed of political views and strongly held differences lead to social tension and hostilities. Elections were closely fought and heated political and electoral meetings commonplace.¹⁶¹ In 1841, Henry Vincent, prominent Chartist leader and spokesperson for the London Working Men's Association visited Banbury. He was known to be sympathetic towards women's

157 Trinder, *Victorian Banbury*, p.32.;p.90.

158 'Banbury Teachers Association', *BG*, 1st July 1880, p.5.; 30th June 1881, p.5.

159 'Church Schoolmasters and Schoolmistresses Benevolent Association', *BG*, 9th October 1884, p.5.

160 Davidoff and Hall, p.420.

161 Trinder, *Victorian Banbury*, p.47-54.

involvement in politics stating, 'What have women to do with politics? My answer is 'everything'.¹⁶² On June 14th he held a meeting for the ladies of Banbury. The ladies were admitted to the boxes and pit, while the wives and daughters of the non-electors were invited to the gallery. It was firmly advised that no gentlemen were allowed to attend.¹⁶³ Six years later Mr James Macgregor was campaigning as the Conservative candidate. He ultimately lost the election but was well supported in the town. As well as a gentlemen's committee of supporters it was also announced that 'the following ladies, who have also formed a committee, will be happy to receive subscriptions from any of Mr Macgregor's friends.' Interestingly only four of the fourteen ladies on the committee share a surname with any of the gentlemen committee members, meaning that this was not just a group of ladies supporting their husband's political interests. It is difficult to find details about all of the women but Mrs R. Bignell was a widowed land owner and Mrs T. Strange was the wife of a silversmith.¹⁶⁴

However for most middle class women their political interests were confined to campaigning on social and moral issues. Levine has described how middle class women used their supposed moral superiority to enable them to enter this area of public life.¹⁶⁵ Certainly in the nineteenth century moral causes such as anti-slavery were causes in which women played an integral and public part. Following the emancipation of slavery in the British colonies in 1833 activists moved towards world wide abolition with the aim of exerting pressure on other countries. Consequently the ability of men to influence parliament was not as important and moral pressure, the realm of women became more

¹⁶² Trinder, *Victorian Banbury*, p.57.

¹⁶³ Veronica Butt, 'Banbury Theatre: Its place in the Community' in *Cake and Cockhorse* 10.4 (1986), 106.

¹⁶⁴ Centre for Banburyshire Studies, Potts Collection Reel 2 Vol. 9/10/11, 5th August 1847.

¹⁶⁵ Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900* (Florida:University Press of Florida,1989), p.133.

important.¹⁶⁶ In Banbury the anti-slavery movement attracted supporters from across the political and religious divides and in the 1830s it was a well supported cause.¹⁶⁷ In January 1850 Mr Scoble from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society attended a public meeting in the town but from this point on there is very little reference to local male involvement in the slavery movement in Banbury's newspapers.¹⁶⁸ There was however a Female Anti-slavery Society which the *Banbury Guardian* reported upon in 1858. The article claims that the society had been running for eighteen years with the purpose of 'circulating anti-slavery information, holding lectures, and contributing £5 to £10 per year for the general purpose of anti-slavery effort'. The article goes on to praise the 'noble' ladies in their efforts. Whilst no mention in this article is made of who these ladies were the Banbury Almanac of 1851 lists M. Edmunds, the elder sister of Richard Edmunds jnr. and L Cadbury, wife of James Cadbury, a Quaker grocer as treasurer and secretary.¹⁶⁹

However in nineteenth century Banbury, as in a lot of towns, the most fervent social and moral cause was the question of temperance. The temperance movement first began in 1834 in Banbury and by the early 1840's the town's Temperance Society was receiving support from a wide section of the middle classes, including both Conservatives and Liberals and Anglicans and Nonconformists. In 1842 a ladies association had been formed with Mrs James Cadbury and Mrs John Head acting as secretary and treasurer. Both ladies husbands were prominent Quaker leaders of the main society, and John Head was also responsible for donating the meeting room which was to act as the societies headquarters for over two decades. The ladies association recruited from 'ladies of

166 Women: From Abolition to the Vote <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/abolition_women_article_01.shtml>[accessed on Nov. 13th 2018].

167 Trinder, *Victorian Banbury*, p.70.

168 'The Slave Trade', *BG*, 3rd January 1850, p.2.

169 'The Banbury Female Anti-Slavery Society', *Banbury Guardian*, 14th October 1858, p.2. ; Banbury Almanac 1851 in *BG*, 24th December 1851.

respectability' and its objectives were to visit and give out tracts and advice. Two ladies were assigned a particular district which they were expected to cover personally. The ladies association lasted for several years but had lost its initial fervour by 1845.¹⁷⁰ However, in the Temperance Society, perhaps more than any other of Banbury's voluntary organisations women appear to have been more welcome, more accepted and worked more as equals. When the foundation stones of the Temperance Halls were laid in 1875 much was made of the contribution to the cause by the town's ladies, and five out of the six stones were laid by women including 'Miss Edmonds (daughter of Mr R Edmonds)'.¹⁷¹ In May 1886 at the annual meeting Mrs Champness addressed the mixed audience her husband the Rev T. Champness touchingly acknowledged that he could now tell their children that he had heard their mother make her first temperance speech and that 'she was the best friend her had ever had'.¹⁷² As time passed the society also became one of the leading recreational agencies in the town. They sponsored railway excursions, held musical entertainments and were responsible for many public lectures.¹⁷³

The Temperance Society was responsible for the formation of Banbury's first youth organisation the Band of Hope in 1861.¹⁷⁴ In the annual report of 1865 much is made of the success of the Band with over 700 signatures to the Pledge and twice yearly public festivals. The previous summer it was estimated that over two thousand attended the festival of sports, music, singing and addresses. The report also highlights that the Band was managed by a non sectarian committee of both ladies and gentlemen. Indeed the list of committee members is split equally between men and women. Mrs W. Edmonds and

170 Brian Harrison and Barrie Trinder, *Drink and Sobriety in an Early Victorian Country Town: Banbury 1830-1860* (London: Longmans, 1969), p.18.; p.22.

171 'Laying the Foundation Stone of the New Temperance Hall', *Banbury Advertiser*, 7th October 1875, p.4.

172 'Banbury Temperance Society', *Banbury Advertiser*, 6th May 1886, p.4.

173 'Temperance Society Concert', *Banbury Advertiser*, 5th April 1866, p.4.; 'Temperance Society Picnic to Woburn', *BG* 28th June 1866, p.3.

174 'The Temperance Society', *Banbury Advertiser*, 1st August 1861, p.4.

Mrs R. Edmund jnr. were listed as well as the wives of two of the town's bankers and an attorney's wife. The annual report also lists individual subscribers and their donations, of which over thirty are women.¹⁷⁵ As time went by the make up of the committee changed and by the late 1870's many of the ladies on the committee were young unmarried women with no apparent family connection to the gentlemen members. These included daughters of hatters, leather workers and drapers, suggesting that the committee had become more lower middle class in outlook.¹⁷⁶

Whilst the Band of Hope became the most visible symbol for the promotion of abstinence in Banbury there still remained an element of active campaigning for the temperance movement. In 1894 the feminist *Women's Signal* magazine lists several Banbury women as being branch members of the National British Women's Temperance Association, the president being Mrs Eustace Durran, the wife of one of Banbury's most respected and longest serving tradesmen, a jeweller and a prominent Wesleyan.¹⁷⁷ Recently formed from part of the British Women's Temperance Association, the NBTWA was to become an increasingly political body with growing ties to the suffrage movement. The mid 1890s also saw the expanding of Banbury's Women's Liberal Association. Formed in 1893 (rather later than many women's Liberal groups in the country) the objects of the association were defined by a visit from Miss Garland, an organising secretary from the national federation. These included educating women in politics, equal justice for all and equal political rights for all.¹⁷⁸ A year later at the first annual general meeting it was claimed that the association had two hundred and forty two members and had supported a packed years events including teas and entertainments as well as lectures on subjects such as 'Women's

175 Centre for Banburyshire Studies, Potts Collection Reel 2, Band of Hope Annual Meeting, 3rd January 1865.

176 Centre for Banburyshire Studies Potts Collection Reel 2, Band of Hope Annual Meetings, 1865 onwards.; 'Banbury Band of Hope', *BG*, 23rd January 1879, p.5.; TNA:PRO, RG 10/1464-5, data collected across total census for Banbury.

177 'Banbury', *Women's Signal*, 29th March 1894, p.14.; 12th April 1894, p.14.; TNA:PRO, RG12/1183,f52, p.13.

178 'Women's Liberal Federation', *BG*, 17th August 1893, p.8.

Suffrage' and 'Women's sphere in Politics' Delegates had also been sent to the national conference in London. Whilst the president was Lady Cecilia Roberts, later national president of the Women's Total Abstinence Association, the secretary and treasurer were local girls Miss Stone and Miss Walford. Both were daughters of middle class families from wealthy suburban streets of Banbury, whose female relations had been active in many of the town's philanthropic organisations. ¹⁷⁹

This appears then to be the beginnings of an organised movement supporting women's suffrage in Banbury. However for many of the women mentioned in this dissertation this was a cause for their daughters and granddaughters to fight for. Many historians have noted the link between philanthropic activities and the women suffrage movement for as Prochaska notes 'philanthropy pointed out the limitations imposed upon women at the same time as it broadened their horizons.'¹⁸⁰ However as Prochaska and others have also stated, dedicating time and money to and publically supporting voluntary organisations was not always towards a political end, especially for the first generation of publically active middle class women.¹⁸¹ Mrs W. Mewburn epitomises this class of woman. She was the wife of William Mewburn, a wealthy stockbroker, prominent Wesleyan and part of the religious and female network that the Edmunds ladies belonged to. In May 1894 she was part of a deputation of the town's leading Wesleyans to a bazaar in the small local village of Wardington. In the opening speech she declared that 'she had not much sympathy with those women who spoke on women suffrage, the emancipation of women and that sort of thing. She had no desire to be an emancipated woman'. Whether this was due to her distaste for the women's suffrage movement and the hostilities it aroused or just an

179 'Banbury Women's Liberal Association', *BG*, 25th October 1894, p.6.; TNA:PRO, RG12/1184, f 81, p.1.; RG12/1183, f160, p.50.

180 F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in 19th Century England* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), p.227.

181 Prochaska, p.229.; Anne Summers, 'A Home from Home: Women's philanthropic work in the nineteenth century', in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. by Sandra Burman (London: Routledge, 1979), p.59.; Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere Middle-Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland, C 1870-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp.110-112.

indifference to women's rights we shall never know, but Mrs Mewburn was clear where she stood on the matter.¹⁸²

Away from philanthropy Banbury's middle class women maintained a less obvious public presence. For the most part they acted as more as spectators rather than participants in cultural events and those activities in which they were proactive remained very much part of the socially acceptable female norms of the day. Whilst they took a prominent part in some of Banbury's morally based causes, organisations like the Band of Hope were family orientated and so could be seen as an extension of the middle class women's role as domestic guardians. As for political aspirations, in the mid 1890's Banbury's middle class women were not yet ready to take a stand.

¹⁸² 'Local and district Intelligence', *BG*, 17th May 1894, p.8.

6. Conclusion

The object of this dissertation was to discover the level of middle class women's involvement in the public life of the market town of Banbury. Despite there being several well written town histories, little research has been carried out on the townswomen and their interests. The first half of the dissertation focussed on the philanthropic organisations on the town. By the late nineteenth century Banbury's middle class women had far more opportunities for engagement in public life than their mothers and grandmothers. Certainly by the mid 1890s the local newspapers reported the names and public activities of women in a far more pragmatic, matter of fact way. Women's roles also appeared to change. In the 1840s, they were more likely to be the 'tea-makers' or the 'lady visitors' carrying out practical work that was unappealing to men. By the end of this period women were more commonly taking on more administrative, public roles. These greater opportunities, the increased confidence of women to take them and an acceptance of women in more managerial roles surely came from their successes as organisers of the many charitable bazaars which took place in Banbury during this period.

Two factors emerge as the main influences on the choices and public actions of Banbury's middle class women. Religion was key. Virtually all of the causes that women were involved in were linked in some way to religion, either through fundraising, evangelising or by supporting church managed charities, like visiting societies. As important were the religious social networks that the women found themselves part of. Women regularly worked alongside other church and chapel families. Many of these also lived within the new middle class areas of Banbury, thus creating a neighbourhood network for women to be part of. However, the influence of family was absolute. For families like the Edmunds', supporting the causes which your menfolk espoused and working alongside your mother, sisters and in-laws seems to have been expected.

Some contemporary ideologies did seem to influence Banbury's middle class women. Although their husbands may have been influenced by the ideals of the civic gospel, joining municipal organisations, there is little evidence that Banbury's women were motivated to become involved in municipal action even at a moral level. However, they espoused self help through their support of friendly and mutual aid societies and promoted self progression through their cultural and educational activities.

The second half of the dissertation reviewed Banbury's voluntary organisations which were of benefit to the members themselves. Whilst trade associations were not commonly supported by women their interest in broadening their minds through educational and cultural activities is frequently recorded in the local newspapers. However there is very little proof that the women in this dissertation were motivated to improve themselves by a desire for increased personal status. Although Sarah Beesley had a keen interest in the world around her, and supported education in other women there is no feeling within her memoir that she sees this a route to further herself, and her tone always remains respectful towards her husband's intellect.

The time period of this dissertation covered a golden age in Banbury's history when the town, and its influence, was at its greatest. However the research has shown that although women had been active in Banbury's politically campaigning groups by 1894 the women's suffrage movement was only just beginning to appear in the town. Extending the time period up to 1918 and focussing on the developments of female political groups, such as the Women's Liberal Association would be useful as it would allow for connections to be made between the middle class ladies from this dissertation and later generations.

Attitudes towards female emancipation could be gained from local newspapers and a

detailed local study of woman's suffrage in a small market town would add to the wider national picture.

This study has shown that in the second half of the nineteenth century it became increasingly acceptable for Banbury's middle class women to take more active roles in the public life of the town. However what emerges is a picture of a group of women who were content to have a public life which was generally enabled by the networks of which they were a part, highly influenced by their religious lives and could be justified by the notion of self progress and betterment, either in oneself or others. By the mid 1890s although some of Banbury's middle class women could be seen as an elite female public group, they were not able to, or apparently desirous of breaking out of this socially acceptable feminine public sphere.

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