

Ladies Reading Societies and Civic Life: Middle Class Women in Leicester
1869-1914

Sally Kathryn Owen
BA Hons. History (Open University)

Submitted for The Open University
A826 MA in History

January 2024

15,995 words

Abstract

The Leicester Ladies Reading Society and the Belmont House Society were two exclusively female, middle class reading societies active in Leicester in the latter decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Societies shared many common features but primarily they provided feminine social spaces in which the pursuit of self-improvement through study took place. As part of this educational pursuit, members of the Societies developed an awareness of their duties as middle class women; to be responsible citizens not frivolous, idle housewives but useful, moral social improvers.

This study aims to engage with historiographical debates around the extent of female presence in the civic life of provincial towns in this period. It will argue that through membership of these Societies, middle class women in Leicester contributed significantly not only to the cementation of middle class culture in Leicester but also to the increasing acceptability of women in the public sphere.

The memberships of the Societies and their aims and purposes will be explored, with a focus on contemporary debates around female education. This leads into an evaluation of the Societies' civic activity, particularly philanthropic and social work. The final chapter takes the Societies' aims, purposes and civic activity and analyses to what extent these fostered a 'feminist consciousness'.

This study concludes that through membership of these Societies, a core group of middle class women formed and participated within a feminine public sphere. Through study and public works, they used their femininity in ways that subverted traditional interpretations of separate spheres ideology whilst simultaneously conforming to emerging gendered roles within the public sphere.

Membership of the Societies also seems to have contributed to an awareness of collective femininity amongst middle class women in Leicester, which arguably expanded feminist activity including an active suffrage campaigning presence in the town.

Contents

	Page
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “Nothing less than the pursuit of perfection”: Membership, Aims and Purposes	6
Chapter Two: “Worthy Citizens”: Philanthropy and Class Identity	20
Chapter Three: “A pleasant sense of unity and domesticity”: Fostering a Feminist Consciousness?	34
Conclusion	46
Bibliography	48

List of Abbreviations

BHS	Belmont House Society
COS	Charity Organisation Society
LLRS	Leicester Ladies Reading Society
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

Personal Statement and Acknowledgments

I confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own work.

No part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification of any other university or institution.

Some material from the first part of the Masters (A825) End of Module Assessment, part 2, has been drawn upon and reworked, this is especially relevant for chapter three.

I would like to thank my MA supervisor Dr Lucy Faire for all her support, advice and encouragement and also Dr Denise McHugh for providing the same during the first part of the MA.

Introduction

In late Victorian and Edwardian towns female associational life became an important marker of middle class urban sociability, and therefore identity, as part of the wider growth of middle class culture.¹ Morgan and Harris have both argued that middle class women in provincial towns during this period, far from being confined to the 'domestic sphere', as has been the traditional interpretation of 'separate spheres' ideologies, made an 'important contribution to emerging ideals of a progressive middle class,' based around voluntary associations, local government and a burgeoning civic pride.² However, other historians have proposed that the strength of 'separate spheres' ideology upheld women's near exclusion from civic life; for example Gunn concludes women's roles were mostly passive and supportive to their male contemporaries. In response to these debates, this local project aims to examine the ways and extent middle class women in Leicester influenced and contributed to the civic life of the town, especially through their membership of two exclusively female Societies: the Leicester Ladies Reading Society and the Belmont House Society.

The Leicester Ladies Reading Society, herein referred to as the LLRS, was formed in 1869 when 'a small group of young women in Leicester felt the need of more concentrated study'.³ The group continued to be active for sixty years, with generations of women from Leicester's most affluent middle class families setting themselves rigorous learning programmes with the ethos of self-improvement as part of responsible citizenship.⁴ This ethos is evidenced in the intensively active nature of membership, with fortnightly meetings throughout the winter with a paper or lecture to

¹ Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p.207.

² Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Woman's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), p.1; Jose Harris, *The Penguin Social History of Britain: Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin UK, 1994).

³ Gertrude Ellis, 'History of the Leicester Ladies Reading Society, 1869-1930' in Isabel C. Ellis, *Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester* (Leicester: privately printed, repr. 1935), pp.286-297, p.286.

⁴ Sarah Elizabeth Francis, "Worthy citizens" middle-class women and the public sphere in Leicester c.1850 – 1900 (unpublished masters dissertation, University of Leicester, 2013), p.14.

research, prepare and present.⁵ The Belmont House Society, herein referred to as the BHS, was founded in 1886 by Anna Beale, head teacher of the Belmont House School for girls and her great friend and deputy Agnes Kilgour, in an attempt to prolong connections between past pupils and teachers; 'for social and intellectual intercourse'.⁶ The Society soon found its dual purpose for social and philanthropic work alongside their personal studies and endured well into the twentieth century as an active presence within Leicester's intellectual and artistic circles. The Society's role in the founding of Leicester University in the 1920s and their renowned dramatic performances and exhibitions are testament to this.⁷

The two Societies were chosen for this study as their memberships represent many of the most active middle class Leicester families, a core group of predominantly liberal, non-conformists who set the example for 'active citizenship'; permeating voluntary, philanthropic and cultural associations alongside business ownership and the formal governance of the town.⁸ The Societies also demonstrate the spectrum of female associations, with different but connected functions; one a private group focussed on self-improvement through education, the other more outward looking, promoting philanthropic activity and access to the arts.

While looking into the impact that the growth of female only associations had on middle class identity and the civic landscape of Leicester during the period 1869-1914, the debates around 'separate spheres' ideology will be relevant throughout. The principle of 'separate spheres', that the realms of the public world were exclusively male and the domestic female, has been present in western tradition from antiquity.⁹ However, it was during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, along with the rise of middle class urban culture, that these principles became the pervasive

⁵ Gertrude Ellis, p.295.

⁶ Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR), Records of the Belmont House Society (RBHS) 18D57/1 Minute Book 1886-1903, 8 July 1886, p.4.

⁷ Francis, p.159.

⁸ Dinah Freer, 'The Dynasty Builders of Victorian Leicester', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 53 (1977), 42-54, p.45.

⁹ Amanda Vickery, 'From Golden Age to Separate Spheres?: A Review of the Chronology and Categories of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 383-414, p.383.

construct of societal ideals, evidenced in the deluge of didactic literature of the period promoting the 'domestic virtue' of women as a marker of civilized society.¹⁰ Debates around the ubiquity and impact of separate spheres intensified with the growth in women's history in the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps not inconsequentially contemporaneously with third-wave feminism.¹¹ This scholarship led to more nuanced views on women's roles in society as well as an accepted fluidity between the public and the domestic.¹² This research aims to contribute to these debates, especially the ways in which these potent discourses were used and subverted by women, taking their moral virtue and maternal responsibility into the public realm and how this contributed to calls for full citizenship.

The key primary sources are the records that the Societies themselves left behind. For the BHS this is an extensive collection of meeting minutes, programmes, scrapbooks and accounts. However, direct information on the LLRS has been based on just one memoir written by long standing member Gertrude Ellis. Thankfully, the records of other relevant local organisations, newspapers, wills and memoirs have allowed for further insight into the memberships of both Societies and their civic activity. Most of these sources are from the viewpoint of the women themselves, some consciously and others unconsciously recorded for posterity and are vital for understanding how these women operated and interacted with each other and wider society. There are of course limitations to the sources; they cannot speak for all middle class women and the voices of working class women are alas silent. Local newspapers help to cover external viewpoints and contemporary writers such as Ruskin, have also been drawn upon for wider, national perspectives.

The hypothesis for this project was initially inspired by debates between social historians on the impact middle class women had on late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban civic life. Regional studies from elsewhere in Britain focusing on female middle class experience, especially

¹⁰ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2018), p.151.

¹¹ Vickery, pp.389-391.

¹² Gordon and Nair, p.2.

those of Smitley, Morgan and Gordan and Nair have been particularly useful in elaborating on these theories and expanding on the nuances and complexities of projecting parameters of gender and spheres of influence onto women of this period.¹³ Smitley's proposed 'feminine public sphere'; that middle class women did operate within public life but in gender specific ways has proved to be particularly relevant to this study.¹⁴ Local studies of nineteenth century Leicester have been consulted. Francis's work on middle class women and Aucott's biographical collection of Leicester women have provided helpful starting points.¹⁵

Chapter one will explore the memberships of the two Societies and how these women were connected to each other and the wider middle class community in Leicester through Smitley's framework of religious, kinship and neighbourhood networks. Then the aims and purposes of the Societies will be analysed in the context of contemporary debates around female education, in relation to appropriate middle class femininity and comparisons to other regional and national trends. Conclusions drawn in other local studies will be used as a comparative tool, such as Kelman's work on a ladies' essay Society in Victorian Edinburgh.¹⁶

Following on from the Societies' purposes, the theme of philanthropy will be the focus of chapter two. Secondary material will be drawn upon to reinforce the connections between female associational life and philanthropy posited by King and Meller's comment on middle class women as the drivers of using the arts as a 'civilizing tool'.¹⁷ How the women's roles in public, philanthropic work contributed to their class and gender identities and to what extent this conformed to

¹³ Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere: Middle Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland c.1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Smitley, p.129.

¹⁵ Shirley Aucott, *Women of Courage, Vision and Talent: Lives in Leicester 1780 to 1925* (Leicester: Self-published, 2008).

¹⁶ Kate Kelman, 'Self-Culture': The Educative Reading Pursuits of the Ladies of Edinburgh, 1865-1885,' *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 36 (2003), 59-75.

¹⁷ Steven King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006); Helen Meller, 'Women and Citizenship: Gender and the Built Environment in British Cities 1870-1939', in *Cities of Ideas – Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800-2000*, ed. by Robert Colls and Richard Rodger (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 231-257, p.232.

contemporary expectations will be explored. The social work of the BHS and LLRS members' activity through their membership of local branches of the Charity Organisation Society and the Kyrle Society will all be considered within the context of the national picture.

In the final chapter, the previous themes of education and public works are brought together to consider the extent that membership of the Societies fostered a 'feminist consciousness' and how this impacted the women's public activity. Pioneering 1990s studies in feminism of this period emphasising the significance of female sociability as a conduit for feminist activity by Lerner and Levine form the basis of the investigations featured in the chapter.¹⁸ The National Union of Women Workers, suffrage campaigns and the significance of the Societies themselves as feminine social spaces will be analysed to uncover how these Leicester women displayed an awareness of a feminine collective identity.

¹⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: OUP, 1994); Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

Chapter One

“Nothing less than the pursuit of perfection”: Membership, Aims and Purposes.

This chapter will explore the memberships of the LLRS and BHS, their respective aims and purposes and how these compared to national trends in female associational life. In her study of middle class women in civic life across Scotland c.1870-1914, Smitley outlines the importance of religious, kinship and neighbourhood networks in the creation of a ‘feminine public sphere’ in which women actively participated in public life.¹ The memberships of both the LLRS and the BHS show that these networks also played a formative role in the female middle class associational culture in Leicester. Therefore, the memberships of each Society will be analysed through the themes of religion, kinship and neighbourhood. Records of the Societies will be gleaned along with census and biographical sources to uncover these networks and consider how they related to middle class identity. The aims and purposes of each Society will then be explored with a particular emphasis on contemporary debates around female education and how this connects to coinciding pervasive gender ideologies.

Religion continued to play an important role in late nineteenth century society and is relevant to both Societies in terms of their memberships and motivations as it intertwined with a sense of moral duty and responsible citizenship.² In his study of Victorian women in Leeds, Morgan identifies the relationship between the development of urban middle class culture with the increasing influence of non-conformism, of which the ‘sensibilities of self-help and self-discipline’ fitted.³ Non-conformism held significant influence within the civic life of Leicester, the town council having been virtually taken over by non-conformists as a result of the Municipal Reform Act of 1835.⁴ Evangelical

¹ Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere: Middle Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland c.1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p.40.

² Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p.5.

³ Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Women's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), p.18.

⁴ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.370.

Christianity has also been cited as an important element in debates around the ubiquity of separate spheres ideology in practice.⁵ Revisionist studies in this area have concluded that rather than Evangelicalism being the 'religion of the home', many women appropriated ideals around female moral and spiritual superiority to legitimise entry into public life.⁶ This emerging form of female religiosity or 'Women's Mission', inseparable from engagement in public works, allowed women to participate fully in the 'conversion experience' so prized by Evangelicals of the period. As mid-nineteenth century female activist Barbara Leigh Smith put it; 'to do God's work in the world is the duty of all...of both sexes...'.⁷

One particularly prominent Leicester woman who epitomises the principles of 'Women's Mission' is Edith Gittins, an artist and teacher living on the border of the town centre and the favoured Stoneygate suburb.⁸ Gittins was four times president of the LLRS, BHS member through her teaching role at the school, and was active in the Leicester Kyrle Society, Women's Liberal Association and the Literary and Philosophical Society, where she was amongst the first female members admitted in 1886.⁹ Gittins's motivation for her prolific civic activity seemingly grew from her strong Unitarian faith. Her funeral eulogy dedicated her service to the town as her 'interpretation of God's hand in the phenomena of society', as she saw 'every social problem as a challenge to her theology'.¹⁰ Gittins's commitment to her faith and her church is evident in the forty years she taught in the Sunday School; in her memoir, friend and contemporary Isabel Ellis describes Gittins as 'peculiarly the child of the

⁵ Amanda Vickery, 'From Golden Age to Separate Spheres?: A Review of the Chronology and Categories of English Women's History' *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 383-414, p.390; Smitley, p.2.

⁶ Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831-51* (Macmillan, 1995) cited in Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p.4.

⁷ Cited in Gordon and Nair, p.4.

⁸ Census entries for Edith Gittins, 1871,1881,1901 < <https://www-findmypast-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/> [accessed 30 October 2023]; Siobhan Begley, 'Voluntary Associations and the Civic Ideal in Leicester 1870-1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2009), p.35.

⁹ Rosa Smurra, and Marco Orlandi, 'The Role of Women in the Shaping of Civic Identity in Edwardian Leicester: Edith Gittins and the Anglo-Saxon Past of Æthelflæd's Fountain. Historical Reconstruction and 3D Visualization. *Urban History*, 49 (2022), 335-363, p.341.

¹⁰ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 13 August 1910.

Great Meeting. None understood better its essential principles... she loved and taught the Bible as few knew how'.¹¹

According to a study of nineteenth century Leicester, attendees of The Unitarian Great Meeting became disproportionately influential in the cultural and civic life of the town, including a high number of publicly active women.¹² A denomination characterised by intellectualism, 'an acute sense of social responsibility and duty as well as an awareness of the importance of education' was developed.¹³ Consequently, it was through The Great Meeting that Gittins, along with Annie Clephan, Agnes Fielding-Johnson, Jane Paget, and the four Eames sisters formed the LLRS. The Society was not exclusively Unitarian however as Anne Pattison, a Baptist, is also named as a founding member.¹⁴ Women joining from other denominations include members of the Ellis family who belonged to the Quaker meeting and the Anglian Corah sisters, daughters of Leicester's largest hosiery factory owner; demonstrating the uniting power that class and gender held seemingly over religious affiliation.¹⁵

Religious networks have proved more difficult to confirm within the BHS, although their close and enduring connection with the Anglican Girls Friendly Society hints at there being at least some Anglican members.¹⁶ However their membership lists are a useful source for uncovering kinship networks across both Societies as well as links to the wider middle class population of Leicester. Contrary to more orthodox conclusions, urban and social historians focusing on local studies have argued that kinship remained an important part of urban life in the late nineteenth and early

¹¹ Isabel C. Ellis, 'Some of My Contemporaries' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 136-181, p.148.

¹² Francis, Sarah Elizabeth, "Worthy citizens" Middle-Class Women and the Public Sphere in Leicester c.1850 – 1900 (unpublished master's dissertation, University of Leicester, 2013), p.20.

¹³ Francis, p.24.

¹⁴ *Leicester Journal and Midland Counties General Advertiser*, 25 October 1867.

¹⁵ Gertrude Ellis, 'History of the Leicester Ladies Reading Society, 1869' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp.286-297, p.290.

¹⁶ Susan Mumm, 'Women and Philanthropic Cultures' in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, eds. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.58.

twentieth century.¹⁷ Furthermore, Smitley has highlighted the gendered nature of how kinship ties were used by women in this period; sharing knowledge, skills and using the positions held by male relatives to gain access to and influence civic life.¹⁸

Both Societies had kinship links within their memberships and with the wider network of middle class families that formed a type of 'new elite' through their civic and business roles in the town.¹⁹ Isabel Ellis, belonging to both the LLRS and BHS, claimed kinship connections with at least three of these principal families and provides a compelling example of how kinship ties not only maintained connections but also influenced how these women operated in the public sphere. Isabel's grandfather, Joseph Dare was the founder of Leicester's Unitarian Domestic Mission. A passionate advocate for education as a means of lifting the poorest out of poverty, he set up additional Sunday school lessons, a free library and adult evening classes.²⁰ Her mother, Isabella Evans is listed as a 'school board member for Leicester' in the 1881 census, the first woman to be elected for the role.²¹ Isabella also became one of the first women to give public lectures on health.²² Isabel's marriage in 1891 to Bernard Ellis, a Quaker business owner, established her within the influential Ellis family where she found kinship connections with a number of other active Ellis women, including fellow LLRS member and biographer of the Society Gertrude Ellis.²³ Isabel's networks show the interconnectedness of Leicester's middle class families but also the cascading influences of the importance placed on education and the validity of women taking on public roles.

¹⁷ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1985), p.133; Morris, R.J., *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

¹⁸ Smitley, pp.53-55.

¹⁹ Dinah Freer, 'The Dynasty Builders of Victorian Leicester' *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 53 (1977), 42-54, p.45.

²⁰ ROLLR, Records of the Great Meeting Unitarian Chapel DE2462/9, Records of the Domestic Mission Society.

²¹ Census entry for Isabella Evans, 1881 < <https://www-findmypast-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/> > [accessed 30 October 2023].

²² Francis, p.279.

²³ Census entry for Isabel Evans, 1891 < <https://www-findmypast-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/> > [accessed 30 October 2023].

The LLRS was the more exclusive of the two Societies due to the private, intimate nature of their meetings. The group was smaller, with a consistent membership of around fifteen, and was drawn almost exclusively from Leicester's leading professional families, most notably the Ellis, Paget and Corah families.²⁴ Familial and generational links were common within the LLRS; 'groups of sisters were a feature of the Society throughout its existence' and generational ties are evidenced in the joining of Edith Bolton in 1913, fourteen years after her mother, co-founder Clara, resigned due to ill health.²⁵

The larger and more fluid nature of BHS membership reflected a wider range of middle class families. A list of all members past and present compiled in 1912 names 169 women including members of the same influential families that belonged to the LLRS: Ellis, Gimson, Paul and Gittins among them. These membership records show the strong connections between the two Societies but also their difference in composition. Membership restrictions outlined in early copies of the rules of the BHS state that new members had to be between 18-35 and unmarried.²⁶ Thus many younger relatives of LLRS members are found in the membership records of the BHS: Dorothy Gittins, niece of Edith Gittins and Alice Paul daughter of Clara Paul being examples of this.²⁷ However, the BHS seems to have relaxed its rules and from 1912 there is no mention of marital status in the rules of membership. This was perhaps an attempt to retain married, more experienced members but it also indicates a shift in attitudes in feminine ideals.²⁸ As with the LLRS, the occurrence of sisters being active within the same Society is evident. The BHS, being the more youthful of the Societies, claimed the membership of many unmarried sisters; the Sloane, Vipian and Gimson sisters all fit into this category.²⁹

²⁴ G. Ellis, pp.288-290.

²⁵ G. Ellis, p.289.

²⁶ ROLLR, Records of the BHS 18D57/16 Programmes of Events, 1888-1900.

²⁷ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/16 Programmes of Events, 1890.

²⁸ Vickery, p.384.

²⁹ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/16 Programmes of Events, 1900-1914.

Neighbourhood networks, particularly the significance of middle class suburbs, are cited by Smitley as facilitators for women actively participating in civic life through associational membership.³⁰

Morgan too identifies the importance of place in middle class urban identity, the emerging suburbs of Leeds giving the occupants a sense of consequence within urban society.³¹ Neighbourhood is certainly a relevant factor for the membership of the LLRS, particularly in its early years. The members were all drawn from a relatively small area spanning from the more centrally located New Walk out to the South Easterly suburb of Stoneygate, although the geographical scope of the Society expanded with the growth of the suburbs. LLRS member Clara Paul, like many of her contemporaries, moved further out of town in the 1890s but was able to continue holding meetings in her home on Ratcliffe Road in the fashionable Knighton suburb.³²

Neighbourhood as a network was less applicable for BHS members, however suburbia was arguably even more relevant than to the LLRS. With a far larger membership than the LLRS, the BHS covered more of the town and surrounding area. Although the majority of meetings, exhibitions and social work continued in the town centre, by the twentieth century at least one meeting per season was taking place either in the surrounding suburbs or even further afield. The Autumn programme for 1910 lists an outing to Mrs Billdon's in Ulverscroft, eight miles north of Leicester in Charnwood Forest, for which 'Bicyclists to meet at Groby Road Tram Terminus at 1.45'.³³ It seems the BHS were conscious of keeping the society local however: a revised list of the society's rules passed in December 1910, limited the membership to seventy and stated that members must live within a ten mile radius of Leicester.³⁴ The expansion of the group outwards into the county is testament to the growth of the suburbs. Meetings held at the opulent addresses of Mrs Cooper of Anstey Grange and Mrs Kaye of Great Glen Manor, a large residence built for the Kayes in 1907, are examples that place

³⁰ Smitley, p.46.

³¹ Morgan, p.13.

³² Begley, p.35.

³³ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/18 Programme of Events, 1910.

³⁴ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/1 Minute Books ,1910.

the BHS firmly within their class and demonstrates the tension found in contemporary middle class aspirations of urbanity and community alongside gentrification.³⁵ Thus, religious, kinship and neighbourhood networks all contributed to the makeup of both Societies to different extents whilst aiding the overall connectedness of the Societies to the wider middle class social and cultural scene in Leicester during the period.

Explicitly, the aims and purposes of both societies were ultimately underpinned by education, both the desire to further educate themselves but also to use this education to improve the society in which they lived. Debates around female education had been intensifying at the national level since the middle of the nineteenth century, intermingled with discourses regarding separate spheres ideology. Evidence for both the LLRS and the BHS suggest that the Societies were not only aware of these debates but were actively engaged in them; their expressed aims and purposes showing their own interpretations and motivations.

The timing of the formation of the LLRS in 1869 seems not inconsequential. The same year, John Stuart Mill published his seminal essay *The Subjection of Women* in which he argues for equal rights and opportunities for women.³⁶ Mill uses gendered ideologies as a defence of his views arguing, contrary to contemporary prejudices, that women are in fact the psychological superior, having more capacity to multitask through their experience and intuition of the domestic sphere.³⁷ The idea of femininity as a virtue was a powerful tool, used on multiple sides of the argument around female education. Looking back in 1930, the Society's biographer Gertrude Ellis reflects on the significance of 1869 as a time when a 'fresh movement of intellectual life among women' saw the founding of the female-only Hitchin (later Girton) college as well as the first 'lectures for ladies', the forerunner

³⁵ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/18 Programme of Events, 1910; J M Lee and R A McKinley, 'Great Glen', in *A History of the County of Leicestershire: Volume 5, Gartree Hundred* (London: Victoria County History, 1964) accessed via British History Online <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/leics/vol5/pp102-112>> [accessed 31 August 2023].

³⁶ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1869).

³⁷ Mill, pp.102,113.

of the University Extension Movement.³⁸ Indeed, the group's own erudite ambitions were bolstered by a series of University Extension lectures presented by Professor Henry Morley in Leicester in 1873, Ellis claiming they 'brought fresh stimulus to serious study in Leicester'.³⁹ Thus demonstrating the relationship between national initiatives in female education and their impact at the local level.

Ellis's evocation of this new impetus for female education and its influence on the forming of the LLRS, displays the group's awareness of the national atmosphere; 'the Society was a small local development of that great stirring of life in the education of women which was such a feature [of that time]'.⁴⁰ Ellis also cites the influence of 'efforts in home study' in the writings of contemporaries Caroline Fox, Charlotte Yonge and Josephine Butler as having inspired the founding of the LLRS.⁴¹ Although formed within this context of fresh momentum for women's liberation and education, the LLRS was largely cautious in their study of appropriately erudite material and subjects. The influence of writers such as Josephine Butler and Charlotte Yonge indicates the Society's leanings to the 'separatists' in the debate around female education. Both Butler and Yonge belonged to the school that strongly advocated for middle class women to pursue a literary and cultured education but stopped short at complete equality with men. Instead, these influencers stood for the 'value of distinctively 'womanly' characteristics', Butler arguing that a woman's education should encourage 'every good quality, every virtue which we regard as feminine to develop more freely'.⁴²

Seemingly complementing this view, and in contention with Mill's egalitarian proposals, art and social critic John Ruskin, gives a characteristically romanticised defence of complementarianism in his essay 'Of Queen's Gardens'. Ruskin establishes his firm belief in women's moral superiority and the sanctity of the home, 'shedding its quiet light' from those noble women who remain virtuous by

³⁸ G. Ellis, p.288.

³⁹ G. Ellis, p.287.

⁴⁰ G. Ellis, p.288.

⁴¹ G. Ellis, p.288.

⁴² Laura Schwartz, 'Feminist Thinking on Education in Victorian England' *Oxford Review of Education*, 37 (2011), 669-682, p.675; Josephine Butler, *The Education and Employment of Women* (Liverpool: T. Brakell, 1868), pp.17-18.

conforming to these ideals.⁴³ It is from this viewpoint that Ruskin proposes female education must promote 'suitable knowledge'; whilst he does not deny that boys and girls may need to learn the same things, he urges they be taught in different ways thus preparing them to use their knowledge in the separate spheres in which they are bound to operate within.⁴⁴ One of Ruskin's most impassioned arguments is the importance of serious reading material for women, to 'add to her qualities of patience... her natural poignancy... to keep her in a lofty and pure element of thought...'.⁴⁵ Evidence that the BHS were not only familiar with Ruskin's recommendation on this matter, but took heed of his advice can be found in a direct response in their manifesto written by Isabel Evans: '...we respond to Ruskin's appeal... [to] resolve that what we read will be of the best... we will not select what is foolish or pernicious...'.⁴⁶ She emphasises the sincerity of her conviction by quoting Ruskin himself; 'tell me what you read and I will tell you what you are'.⁴⁷ Further evidence of the regard the BHS held for Ruskin can be found in the reading lists for the reading section of the Society; between its formation in 1888 and 1911, a title by or a paper about Ruskin was studied almost every year, with him being chosen as the topic of study for the whole 1901 season.⁴⁸

The dangers of frivolous novels and modern magazines for 'impressionable and emotional women' were a real concern for social commentators who looked to reinforce conservative gender roles.⁴⁹

The first three years of the LLRS programmes of study; the Renaissance, Elizabethan England and the Romantic Poets, suggest the Society was content to conform to societal expectations. Flint outlines the pervasive belief in her work on female readers in the nineteenth century, that women should read for self-improvement, hoping to acquire knowledge that will build on 'innately valuable

⁴³ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London, 1865; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.78.

⁴⁴ Ruskin, p.82.

⁴⁵ Ruskin, p.82.

⁴⁶ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 Ideals of the BHS by Isabel C Evans, October 1893, p.6.

⁴⁷ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 Ideals of the BHS by Isabel C Evans, October 1893, p.6.

⁴⁸ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/13-14 Reading Section Rules and Minutes 1883-1911.

⁴⁹ W. R. Greg, 'False Morality of Lady Novelists', *National Review*, 8 (1859), in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p.5.

characteristics', not wishing to seem frivolous by studying contemporary novels but also refraining to foray into the preserved masculine realm of politics.⁵⁰ Indeed, the Society only began studying contemporary authors after 1918 and any political texts on reading lists tend to be of a historical nature.⁵¹

Evidence of this sense of what was acceptable study for middle class women can be found in a seemingly like-minded group that had begun to meet in Edinburgh in 1865. The Ladies' Edinburgh Essay Society was formed to provide 'a forum and mutual support for women who had no place to air their views in society'.⁵² In contrast to the private nature of the LLRS, the Edinburgh Society was much larger and published a magazine which, Kelman argues, set out guidelines for the education of women, creating a canon of appropriate reading material with an emphasis on reading that 'edifies rather than entertains'.⁵³ This cautious rhetoric is echoed in Lewis's biographical work on five prominent public Victorian women who Lewis claimed all valued education highly but with some trepidation on 'its effects on womanly qualities'.⁵⁴ Indeed, even the explicitly egalitarianist co-founder of Girton College, Emily Davies, maintained that serious reading would neither corrupt nor de-sex: 'the fast women and the masculine women are not those who sit down to their books and devote themselves to an orderly course of study'.⁵⁵ Although there does not seem to be any direct evidence that members of the LLRS were fearful of the Society somehow damaging their femininity, their scholarly and serious aim to 'present the essential and significant features of a subject in a balanced way' and to 'experience and achieve what the historical or literary student attempts' aligns

⁵⁰ G. Ellis, p.287; Flint, p.18.

⁵¹ Caroline Wessel, 'Leicester Ladies Reading Society' *Leicestershire Historian*, 45 (2009) 26-30, p.29.

⁵² Kate Kelman, "Self Culture": The Educative Reading Pursuits of the Ladies of Edinburgh, 1865-1885' *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 36 (2003) 59-75, p.60.

⁵³ Kelman, p.59.

⁵⁴ Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991), p.17.

⁵⁵ Emily Davies, 'The Influence of University Degrees on the education of women', *Victoria Magazine* (1863) in Flint, p.11.

the group with more moderate aims in self-improvement, seemingly within the appropriate bounds for their sex and class.⁵⁶

Emerging as a Society formed of former pupils of the Belmont House School for girls, it is unsurprising that a desire for knowledge was also a central binding principle of the BHS. The school itself, under the leadership of Anna Beale, looked to challenge boundaries placed on female education by being the first in Leicester to prepare its pupils for the London University Matriculation exams.⁵⁷ Like the LLRS, the aim of the BHS was one of self-improvement through education, but with a greater emphasis on using that education to become active members in civic life. Perhaps it is credible to draw an idea of the ethos of Belmont House from Beale's sister Dorothea, principle of Cheltenham Ladies College and a vocal advocate for female education, in her succinct description of the purpose of female education: 'the perfection of the individual and the good of the community'.⁵⁸ The first chairwomen of the BHS, Isabel Evans, outlines the group's dual 'inspiring and sustaining' motives to pursue further education: '... firstly the purely scientific passion for *knowledge*... the second is more interesting and far-reaching... the noble aspiration to leave the world in a better place than we found it'⁵⁹

The fervour of the BHS, expressed in an early account of the Society as 'nothing less than the pursuit of perfection', can be found in earlier works promoting female education for societal benefit.⁶⁰

Women's rights campaigner and teacher Mary Wolstenholme, writing in response to an 1868 inquiry into education led by the Liberal MP Lord Taunton, stressed the importance of female education as means of improving society as a whole. Wolstenholme riled against the inequalities she saw in 'the

⁵⁶ G. Ellis, pp.291, 295.

⁵⁷ Isabel C. Ellis 'Belmont House' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 254-285, p.262.

⁵⁸ Josephine Butler, *The Education and Employment of Women* (Liverpool: T. Brakell, 1868), p.18.

⁵⁹ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 Ideals of the BHS by Isabel C Evans, October 1893, p.5.

⁶⁰ I.C.Ellis, 'Belmont House', p.268.

artificial and acquired advantages' men gained through education.⁶¹ She argued that any perceived inferiority of female intellect was due to lack of equality in the education system and the evils of middle and upper class families prizing 'fashion and frivolity' over the 'rational, moral and intellectual' for their daughters.⁶² Passionate about equality in education, even Wolstenholme accepts the 'essential differences which are the ordinance of nature and which fit the sexes each to supplement and complement each other' and her argument concludes in a similar vein to those who called for a separate, feminised curriculum, emphasising the role of education as a conduit to social service and responsible citizenship: 'give us knowledge, power and life. We will repay the gift a hundred-fold'.⁶³

In this 'pursuit of perfection', the BHS formed a reading section 'for the purpose of promoting habits of reading good literature... and guiding members in the choice of such literature', the rules stating that members of the reading section must read for a minimum of three hours a week.⁶⁴ The BHS approach to study was equally erudite to the LLRS and shows a breadth of interest. The 1888 winter reading list included: *The Trial and Death of Socrates* by Plato, the *Political and Literary Essays* of Italian revolutionary Mazzini, contemporary critic and historian George Saintsbury's *Elizabethan Literature* and Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*.⁶⁵ Their ambitious programme of study firmly positions the aims of the BHS, not only in concurrence with supposed expectations of their gender but also within their class. In their study of Victorian middle class women in Glasgow, Gordon and Nair have identified engagement with cultured subjects, such as classical literature and history, as a 'requirement for a middle class woman': she needed to be able to demonstrate, in her knowledge and conversation, her 'membership of a shared community of cultural consumption'.⁶⁶ Jordan has

⁶¹ Elizabeth C. Wolstenholme, 'The Education of Girls, its Present and its Future' in *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A Series of Essays*, ed. by Josephine Butler (London, 1869; repr. Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p.319.

⁶² Wolstenholme, p.296.

⁶³ Wolstenholme, p.328.

⁶⁴ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/13 Reading Section Rules and Minutes, 1888.

⁶⁵ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/13 Reading Section Rules and Minutes, 1888.

⁶⁶ Gordon and Nair, p.210.

also pointed out that the rise in the education of middle class daughters throughout the nineteenth century was a consequence of 'aspirations of gentility' and cites education as imperative to the creation of middle class identity.⁶⁷

This assertion of middle class identity permeated through the aims and purposes of both Societies but is particularly potent in their interaction with the lower classes. Even the seemingly inward-looking Reading Section of the BHS, whose main purpose was self-improvement, was in small ways demonstrating the socially mindedness of the group. In December 1889, Miss Sloane proposed that 'the balance in hand should be used to buy books for the Belmont Girls Evening Home, instead of the section forming a library for its own use' which was carried unanimously.⁶⁸ Unfortunately the section neglected to record the titles of the books provided for the working class girls attending their evening provision. This is frustrating as it would have been interesting to see from a class perspective if there was overlap of their own reading material with that of their working class counterparts. However, it could be surmised based on the Society's earnest approach to their own literary consumption, that the books for the Evening Home were carefully chosen in consideration to edify rather than entertain.

In conclusion, the memberships of these two female-only Societies fit with other local studies of women contributing to middle class urban society through associational life. Through a combination of religious, kinship and neighbourhood networks, membership of both the LLRS and the BHS found unity which enabled their endeavours utilising common ambitions. Both Societies embraced the zeitgeist for female education, through their aims of self-improvement through personal and communal study as well as engaging in wider networks such as the University Extension Lectures and the Cambridge Extension Home Reading Scheme. Although to a large extent conforming to middle

⁶⁷ Jordan, p.449.

⁶⁸ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/13 Reading Section Rules and Minutes, 1889.

class gender ideals, the LLRS and BHS also used these ideals as a reasoning tool; their femininity required an appropriate education to be better wives, mothers but also citizens. Apposite female knowledge was also a requirement of middle class identity and both Societies drew on their gender and class as formative ground on which to build their civic identities. Particularly for the BHS, the sense of mission was inseparable from the desire for knowledge. The next chapter will examine the ways in which the Societies used their educational aims to pursue philanthropic and social enterprises and how these contributed to the wider middle class identity of the town.

Chapter Two

“Worthy Citizens”: Philanthropy and Class Identity

This chapter will examine the ways the BHS and LLRS were active in local philanthropy in Leicester, using the Societies’ records alongside local philanthropic organisations, newspaper coverage and memoirs. How these contributions impacted on gender and class identities will be explored through analysing how their work compared with contemporary ideals of middle class femininity and if this differed from national trends. This will be done through explorations firstly of the philanthropic activities of the BHS, then through the work of LLRS members within the Leicester branch of the Charity Organisation Society. Finally, the significance of the arts as a ‘civilising’ tool and the endeavours of the BHS and members of the LLRS in this area through the Leicester Kyrle Society will be discussed.

The ‘redefinition of poverty’, arguably epitomised by the 1834 New Poor Law Act, continued to evolve over the course of the nineteenth century and changed how the poor were viewed and thus what should be done to help them. By the 1870s the emphasis had firmly shifted from purely material concerns to spiritual and moral deprivation being inseparable from physical need.¹ It seems no coincidence that these shifts were contemporaneous with the growth of the urban middle class and the cementing of its collective identity, partly via interactions with the lower classes through philanthropy. These philanthropic endeavours became intertwined in the established associational networks of urban centres as organisations and societies were formed, tackling growing concerns that uncoordinated charity led to little change in the morals of those receiving it.² Therefore

¹ Jose Harris, *The Penguin Social History of Britain: Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin UK, 1994), pp. 238-9; Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Women’s Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), p.74.

² Steven King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p.57.

philanthropic activity contributed to the hallmarks of middle class ideals of active citizenship, civic duty and moral responsibility as well as reinforcing social and moral authority.³

The role of philanthropy as a conduit for middle class female activity in the public sphere is well established in the historiography of the period, especially in debates around separate spheres ideology.⁴ Pervasive contemporary discourses of the natural superiority of women's virtue and morality inadvertently highlighted the suitability of such qualities for public service. In their study of Victorian Glasgow, Gordon and Nair built on revisionist conclusions that the language of 'moral motherhood' not only enabled women to be active outside the home but also extended their responsibilities across new fields and giving them 'license to enter the public arena in purposeful and powerful ways'.⁵ Middle class women were thus able to manipulate even conservative complementarian rhetoric to justify their philanthropic activities. Parts of Ruskin's seminal staunch defence of separate spheres, 'Of Queen's Gardens', could be read as an unconscious invitation to women to take on philanthropic roles. In an extract discussing gendered roles in the home Ruskin relents that women may have a wider role; '...a woman has a personal work or duty, relating to her own home, and a public work or duty, which is also the expansion of that...'.⁶ Francis has pointed to the potency of local studies in uncovering how women operated within these discourses as local groups gained visibility in provincial urban centres.⁷

Evidence within the records of the BHS suggest an awareness of the Society, not only that new realms of the public sphere were opening to them, but also that they had a duty to serve in them. Anna Beale,

³ Morgan, p.9; King, p.60.

⁴ F.K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in 19th Century England* (Oxford: Publishers 1980).

⁵ Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p.3.

⁶ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London, 1865; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.87.

⁷ Sarah Elizabeth Francis, "Worthy citizens" Middle-Class Women and the Public Sphere in Leicester c.1850 – 1900 (unpublished master's dissertation, University of Leicester, 2013), p.9.

seemingly shared the views of her better-known sister; Dorothea, as Anna made a passionate address to this end in a letter to the first meeting, in which she outlines her hopes for the Society as:

...a fruitful source of strength and happiness [to] prepare women to enter with more profit to all upon those wider fields of usefulness now open and opening to them...I am sure you will all agree that the aim of all should be that thus uniting yourselves together you may become more worthy citizens, ready to further in your town and country all that would improve yourselves and your neighbours.⁸

The Society took heed of Beale's decree, soon becoming a hub of philanthropy alongside their educational pursuits. 'The Working Girls Club at Leeds' was the subject of a paper read at an early meeting of October 1886 and from there the interest in the welfare of girls was an enduring feature.⁹ This culminated in the opening of the Belmont Girls Evening Home in December 1889, seeking to provide 'useful instruction and recreation and a pleasant evening resort for working girls'.¹⁰ The work was so successful that the Home began to run separate evenings for different age groups to meet demand, gradually merging to become the Girls' Social Guild in 1910.¹¹ The BHS's particular focus on the welfare of women and girls is a trend found elsewhere within the national picture of women's philanthropy of the period. Morgan points out that middle class women in Leeds were far more likely to support charities that were aimed at their own sex.¹² This was perhaps due to an increased possibility of influence and decision making, especially if the charity had been founded by and was run by women. Another valid argument, which Susan Mumm has highlighted in her work on religion and philanthropy, is the apparent acceptability of middle class women having contact with lower class members of the same sex.¹³ This resonates with the theme of 'moral motherhood' and would enable

⁸ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/1 Letter from Miss Beale to the Belmont House Society, 8 July 1886.

⁹ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/1 Belmont House Society Minute Book, 7 October 1886.

¹⁰ Isabel C. Ellis, 'Belmont House' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 254-285, p.270.

¹¹ I.C. Ellis, p.271.

¹² Morgan, p.111.

¹³ Susan Mumm, 'Women and Philanthropic Cultures' in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. by Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.57.

the imparting of feminine virtue and domestic skills thus addressing the perceived moral needs of the working classes alongside the material.

The BHS expanded their philanthropic profile in October 1903 by setting up a section devoted to social service. The minutes taken from the first meeting, chaired by its president Agnes Evans (who co-founded the BHS before her marriage as Agnes Kilgour), stated that this newly elected committee should 'make what arrangements should seem it best, for the organisation and development of this work'.¹⁴ The group were cautious in their initial ambitions to tailor their schemes to the real needs of the town as they wished to 'gain some knowledge of the conditions and need before formulating any scheme'.¹⁵ It is also clear that the Society's commitment remained with helping women; '...it is hoped that something be done in the way of small social classes in cookery and baby hygiene'.¹⁶ These plans were realised in the proceeding years with the Society contributing to mother's 'play hours', providing dolls, toys and clothes as well as running cookery classes, thus evidencing a domestic emphasis and sense of 'moral motherhood' towards the lower class women the Society hoped to reach.¹⁷

The importance of the personal touch and forming relationships with the women who were to be helped by the social services section is evidenced in the section's meeting notes:

It is strongly felt that the real essential in social work is the personal element of sympathy and friendship and that the ideal of members should be not to change or upset the ways of life of those amongst whom they work, but to enter into their lives, that mutual help and sympathy may make for a fuller and better life both for the workers and for those whom they try to serve.¹⁸

This extract not only evokes the feminine nature of the work but also how class dynamics played out.

The 'civilising mission' of nineteenth century philanthropy has often been viewed by historians as

¹⁴ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/12 Social Services Section Minutes, 22 October 1903.

¹⁵ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/12 Minutes, 22 October 1903.

¹⁶ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/12 Minutes, 22 October 1903.

¹⁷ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/12 Minutes, 1903-1906.

¹⁸ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/12 Minutes 27 October 1903.

condescending with problematic echoes of colonialism, which is not being disputed here.¹⁹ However, in the case of the BHS's work it sincerely seems to be, at least in hope, that both parties gain something from the other and although assumptions on the morality of the working classes are apparent, there is a gentleness in their approach. The personal emphasis of the BHS's social projects were indicative of a specifically female type of philanthropy: the feminine touch needed for spiritual and physical reform of the poor, while the men dealt with the 'bigger picture' of sanitary reform and disease.²⁰ This example echoes other female philanthropists of the nineteenth century. In her biographical study of the prolific philanthropist and social reformer Louisa Twining, Deane stresses the significance of personal relationships between donors and recipients as a driving factor in Twining's work and message.²¹

This subsection of the BHS also provides evidence of the collaborative nature of women's public work in Leicester, the minutes recording a vote taken and passed that 'the section should not be confined to members...'.²² The records reveal connections between the BHS and LLRS as three of the ladies listed as joining from outside the BHS were members of the LLRS: Agnes Fielding-Johnson, Mrs Astley Clarke and Mrs Arthur Wykes.

The LLRS as a Society seemingly had no philanthropic or social aims. However, many of the LLRS members were active in these pursuits and joined other local organisations. The Leicester branch of the Charity Organisation Society, henceforth referred to as the COS, was particularly populated with LLRS members. The annual report from the 1890 lists LLRS members Mrs Paget, Mrs Paul, Agnes Fielding-Johnson and Miss Gimson as members of the Decisions Committee, showing the depth of their involvement. These women's commitment to the COS, as to the LLRS, also had longevity as all

¹⁹ Morgan, p.87.

²⁰ Francis, p.105.

²¹ Theresa Deane, 'Late Nineteenth Century Philanthropy: The Case of Louisa Twining' in *Gender, Health and Welfare*, ed. by Anne Digby and John Stewart (London: Routledge, 1996), p.136.

²² ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/12 Minutes, 22 October 1903.

but Agnes Fielding-Johnson appear in the same roles in the annual report of 1900.²³ The subscription books also show many members of both the LLRS and the BHS as regular financial contributors if not actually active as decision makers, including Anna Beale, Edith Gittins and the Eames sisters.²⁴

The COS was a national organisation formed in 1869 in an attempt to centrally control charitable endeavours with a particular emphasis on helping only the 'deserving poor'.²⁵ Although this type of 'rational philanthropy' characterised the period, the detailed, 'scientific' nature of their workings made the COS unpopular with some contemporaries who found their methods to be unnecessarily intrusive and lengthy.²⁶ The national COS did however benefit from significant female support from influential figures such as Octavia Hill and Louisa Twining, reassuring provincial middle class women of the Organisation's validity.²⁷ The Leicester branch was established in 1876 and from the offset aligned itself with the ethos of the national Society. The branch's founding principles are recorded in a printed volume of rules: 'The objects of the society shall be: - the Organisation of Charitable Relief and the Suppression of Mendicity and Imposition'.²⁸

The Leicester branch also seems to follow the pattern of the wider COS, as outlined in Humphrey's research, in the gendered nature of the division of roles.²⁹ Women played a large and integral part in the Leicester COS and by the turn of the twentieth century almost half of the members were female.³⁰ However, their roles within it reinforce the trend; namely growth in female involvement but within the confines of feminine appropriateness, with restrictions preventing them infiltrating supposed male

²³ ROLLR, Charity Organisation Records DE2340/26 Annual Reports and Rules, 1890-1900.

²⁴ ROLLR, COSR DE2340/20 Subscriptions Book 1884-1902.

²⁵ King, p.57.

²⁶ King, p.57.

²⁷ Mumm, p.57; Octavia Hill, *Homes of the London Poor* (New York: State Charities Aid Association, 1875); Deane, p.130.

²⁸ ROLLR, COSR DE2340/26 Annual Reports and Rules, 1890.

²⁹ Robert Humphreys, *Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p.104.

³⁰ ROLLR, COSR DE2340/26 Annual Reports and Rules 1900.

domains. Women were permitted to serve on the general and decisions committees. However, although making up a substantial proportion of the financial giving, no women are recorded to have served on the finance committee. Furthermore, although there were several female honorary secretaries, including LLRS member Margaret Gimson in 1901, the highest positions of chairman and treasurer remained exclusively male.³¹ It seems that in the case of the COS, both class and gender were intrinsic elements which determined its processes, where female agency was accepted but within the bounds set by men. The active involvement of many members of the LLRS and BHS demonstrate how philanthropic work 'extended and reinforced' female networks aligning Leicester with other urban centres like Bristol, where a small group of women were also forging out a distinct female philanthropic network.³²

Alongside more overt charitable work, members of both the LLRS and BHS were involved in the promotion of the arts in Leicester as a way of helping the poor live better lives. Meller's argument, that middle class women drove the 'civilising arts movement' nationally, as women felt confident to be active in public life in recognised extensions of the domestic realm, seems applicable to the situation in Leicester.³³ The Kyrle Society, founded by Octavia Hill's sister Miranda in 1878, looked to address a shortfall in the philanthropic efforts of Hill's contemporaries. The Society encapsulated contemporary ideas championed by influential figures such as Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and William Morris, that access to art and nature were intrinsic to civilising the working classes.³⁴ A piece in the *Magazine of Art* promoting the work of the Kyrle Society states; 'Much has been

³¹ ROLLR, COSR DE2340/26 Annual Reports and Rules 1890-1910.

³² Moira Martin, 'Single Women and Philanthropy: A Case Study of Women's Associational Life in Bristol 1880-1914', *Women's History Review*, 17 (2008), 395-417, p.404.

³³ Helen Meller, 'Women and Citizenship: Gender and the Built Environment in British Cities 1870-1939', in *Cities of Ideas – Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800-2000*, eds by Robert Colls and Richard Rodger (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p.234.

³⁴ Robert Whelan, 'The Poor, as Well as the Rich, Need Something More Than Meat and Drink': The Vision and Work of the Kyrle Society' in *Octavia Hill, Social Activism and the Remaking of British Society*, ed. by Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell (London: University of London Press, 2016), p.92.

done...for their bodily wants, but... the poor, as well as the rich, need something more than meat and drink to make their lives complete'.³⁵ Dedicated to 'bringing the refining and cheering influences of natural and artistic beauty into homes and neighbourhoods of the poor in our large town', the Leicester Kyrle Society advocated 'feminine skills' and their benefit on the wider community.³⁶ Many members of the LLRS were active in the Leicester branch of the Kyrle Society: Annie Clephan, Clara Paul, Gertrude Ellis, Agnes Fielding-Johnson, Sarah Gimson and Edith Gittins; who established the Leicester branch along with Mrs Paget's husband Alfred in November 1880.³⁷

From its inception, the Leicester Kyrle Society had a predominantly female culture which reflected the national Society. In an invitation to the first meeting of the Leicester branch, fifteen of the twenty-six names listed as 'ladies and gentlemen already interested in the movement' were women.³⁸ There was evidently a positive response to the invitation and an appetite for the group in the town as the first meeting in the mayor's parlour in the town hall on 25th November 1880 attracted 'about a hundred ladies and gentlemen'.³⁹ By 1881 three sections had been established: decoration, gardening and outdoor space and entertainment. Unlike the COS, both men and women shared the management and secretary positions, although between 1880 and 1915, only two women, both also LLRS members, served as president: Edith Gittins and Annie Clephan.⁴⁰ Women soon began to outnumber men at meetings and seem to have led the day-to-day decisions and undertaken a large proportion of the work.⁴¹ The entertainment section organised visits to art galleries and gardens as well as art classes and exhibitions. Amateur dramatics were encouraged and links with the BHS can be found in a discussion in the minutes of a BHS committee meeting on 8th December 1887 where Miss Evans proposes they lend some of their scenery to the Kyrle Society for

³⁵ *Magazine of Art*, January 1880, p.210.

³⁶ ROLLR, Leicester Kyrle Society records 17D51/1 Minute books, 1880; Francis, p.161.

³⁷ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1880.

³⁸ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1880.

³⁹ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1880.

⁴⁰ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/2 Annual Reports, 1880-1915.

⁴¹ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1880-1917.

a production.⁴² As well as amateur dramatics, the Kyrle Society had other links with the BHS. Miss Sloane, BHS and Kyrle Society member, established a new section of the Kyrle Society in 1909 for 'Play hours and cripples'.⁴³ The link between the Societies had been long established; the *Leicester Chronicle* reporting on a session in December 1900 for crippled children where 'basket making and other small handicrafts were taught' in the BHS's Girls' Evening Home by members of the decoration section of the Kyrle Society.⁴⁴ Furthering her work with the social services section of the BHS and further strengthening the link between the two Societies, Miss Sloane also advocated for 'invalid drives into the countryside' and the new section provided fresh resources for the play hours for working class mothers and their children, originally set up by the BHS.⁴⁵

The Kyrle Society, along with the COS, has been criticised in historiography as 'doing to the poor' rather than 'with or through them', however the Leicester branch seem to have fostered, at least in some areas, a collaborative spirit.⁴⁶ One example of this is the 'Back Garden Improvement Scheme' which included an annual garden competition organised by LLRS member Gertrude Ellis. The *Leicester Daily Post* reported the schemes dual aims; '...gardening was the best possible relaxation for men who had to work in factories. Moreover, it helped to give them an interest and pride in their homes...'.⁴⁷ These aims relate to middle class ideals as the home as a sanctuary, a 'refining and civilising' influence, as well as keeping the working classes away from temptations of idleness or the pub.⁴⁸ Although the *Post* article refers to men, another press cutting kept in the Kyrle Society's records demonstrates some of the contemporary perceptions around women's capabilities. Entitled 'The Weaker(!) Sex' it reports the first prize was awarded to 'two old ladies' and goes on in an

⁴² ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/5 Committee Minute Book, 8 December 1887.

⁴³ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1909.

⁴⁴ *Leicester Chronicle*, 8th December 1900.

⁴⁵ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1909.

⁴⁶ Anne Anderson and Elizabeth Darling, 'The Hill Sisters: Cultural Philanthropy and the embellishment of Lives in late-Nineteenth Century England' in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England 1870-1950*, ed. by Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p.48.

⁴⁷ *Leicester Daily Post*, 11th April 1911.

⁴⁸ Whelan, p.97.

astonished manner that 'their wonderfully filled gardens are their unaided work, including the fencing and the painting'.⁴⁹ The gardening section also provided planted window boxes for the poorer terraced streets of the town, planted trees, cleared open spaces for public use, organised nature walks and gave out free seeds to working class children. The section's most evidently lasting projects was the development of Castle Gardens, still a public open space in the centre of Leicester and the purchase of Swithland Woods in Charnwood to be used for day trips for 'poor town dwellers'.⁵⁰

Whilst women were prolific throughout the Leicester Kyrle Society, perhaps the most obviously feminine section was the decoration section, which attracted many female artists to the Kyrle Society nationally.⁵¹ Edith Gittins was one such artist and along with fellow LLRS member Annie Clephan, oversaw the Leicester decoration section providing pictures, painted murals and decorative furniture to public buildings such as schools and hospitals. The particular dominance of women in this section is perhaps testament to its perceived domestic nature; an extension of beautifying the home. This is expressed in Ruskin's discussion on roles regarding the home; '...men's is to secure its maintenance, progress and defence; the women's is to secure its order, comfort and loveliness...'.⁵² Demonstrating the Society's close alignment with the Arts and Crafts movement, of which Ruskin was connected, Edith Gittins personally decorated the Convalescent Home on Stoneygate Road with a mural of Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* and William Morris furnishings.⁵³ This particular choice of artwork; an image of Christ knocking on a door overgrown with foliage, was typical of the didactic nature of art commissioned by the Kyrle Society; art with religious and moral undertones and

⁴⁹ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/3 Various loose papers relating to the business of the society.

⁵⁰ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/2 Annual Reports; Aucott, Shirley, *Women of Courage, Vision and Talent: Lives in Leicester 1780 to 1925* (Leicester: Self-published, 2008), p.103.

⁵¹ Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.55.

⁵² Ruskin, p.88.

⁵³ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1908; Aucott, p.103.

reforming, elevating messages.⁵⁴ Indeed religion was never far removed from philanthropic activity in the period. In her exploration of middle class philanthropy in the mid-nineteenth century, Twells highlights the close relationship between religious conversion and political economy, arguing that the self-help mantra of the Victorian middle classes promoted morality as the best cure for poverty.⁵⁵

As Anderson and Darling conclude on a national scale, the benefits of the Kyrle Society in particular to the middle class women of Leicester was that it brought together their 'personal, artistic and social attributes', enabling them to engage with issues in the urban environment without disturbing 'established codes of class and social behaviour'.⁵⁶ That is not to say that the Kyrle Society was in any way exclusively female or indeed seen as frivolous or below men's attention. In a press cutting kept in the records of the Society, it is reported that Dr Millard, Leicester's Medical Officer of Health was elected as chair in November 1909, himself stating that the 'work really fell into line with that of [my] own'.⁵⁷ Dr Millard expresses his views on the role of the Kyrle Society; '...society is entitled to the practical sympathy...the part that beauty of form and colour may play in gradually levelling up the tastes of the humblest denizens of our meanest streets...'.⁵⁸ This view adds to the sense of an inseparable link between the physical, spiritual and moral environment which epitomised the work of the Kyrle Society but also shows the appeal for middle class men as well as women to be involved in the 'civilising mission' of the working classes.⁵⁹

Along with the Kyrle Society, the BHS were aware of how the arts could be useful in their quest to become worthy citizens. A dramatic arm and a choral section were soon established as well as the

⁵⁴ Whelan, pp.97-100; William Holman Hunt, *The Light of the World*, c.1851-1856, oil on canvas, Manchester Art Gallery.

⁵⁵ Alison Twells, 'A Christian and Civilised Land': The British Middle Class and the Civilising Mission, 1820-42', in *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. by Alan Kidd and David Nicholls (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp.47-64, p.50.

⁵⁶ Anderson and Darling, p.39; Francis, p.142.

⁵⁷ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1909.

⁵⁸ ROLLR, LKSR 17D51/1 Minute books, 1909.

⁵⁹ Anderson and Darling, p.36.

holding of annual arts and crafts exhibitions from 1896.⁶⁰ A celebration of feminine crafts was a large part of the exhibitions, with needlework and lace taking up over half the catalogue in the Society's loan exhibition of 1902.⁶¹ The reaction to the 1902 exhibition in the local press shows how the activities of the BHS were received by their male peers. Local businessman William Viccars was asked to open the exhibition and his speech was reported in the *Leicestershire Mercury*:

...[he] paid high compliment to the Belmont House Society which he thought had been a distinct advantage to the social and intellectual life of Leicester. It was not sufficient for one to concentrate one's interests on merely selfish motives, but it was their duty to go outside themselves and try and do some good to those who were less fortunately situated...⁶²

Viccars speech reinforces the argument that middle class women were duty bound to do good works but interestingly, he also points to their intellectual influence, showing the increased acceptability of women in diverse realms of public life.

The BHS exhibitions are examples of the intertwined nature of philanthropy and the arts in middle class culture as many of the exhibitions were directly raising funds for the Society's philanthropic projects such as the Girls' Evening Home. Moreover, the BHS did not shy away from allowing contemporary debates on social issues to be visible at their events. In 1911 a new exhibition category was established for 'Essays on Social Subjects'.⁶³ Mary Sloane's essay entitled 'The Belmont House Society as a training ground for Social Work' won first prize in the category's maiden year and reads as a manifesto encapsulating the philanthropic aims of the Society:

...to be ready when called upon to give some help according to our power in useful work for the public good... it is true [the Society] has never limited its work by defining it. Its

⁶⁰ I.C. Ellis, p.275.

⁶¹ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 BHS Loan Exhibition Catalogue, 13-14 November 1902.

⁶² *Leicestershire Mercury*, 13th November 1902.

⁶³ I.C. Ellis, p.276.

principles are best expressed by the words of Miss Beale, "Covet earnestly the best gifts. Follow after charity".⁶⁴

In conclusion, the BHS and members of the LLRS contributed in significant ways to the philanthropic landscape in Leicester in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The amalgamation of class identity, societally prescribed gender roles and religious motivation drove their collective and individual endeavours to become 'worthy citizens'. The philanthropic work and therefore the public profile of the BHS and the LLRS represent two ends of the spectrum. The activities of the BHS are unequivocal because they took direct action as a group, opening the Girls' Evening Home in 1889 and creating a social services section in 1903. The substantially smaller and purely domestic nature of the LLRS necessitates an examination of individual members activities and memberships to other organisations. In her memoir of the LLRS, Gertrude Ellis praises the fact that the members 'were very varied in their associations outside the Reading Society...'.⁶⁵ Their members involvement with the local branches of the Charity Organisation Society and Kyrle Society are testament to this.

Although these women individually and collectively acted within the public sphere and impacted on it in a variety of ways, their roles seemingly remained defined by their gender and consequently contributed to their class identity. In this way, Leicester seems to conform to the national picture in this period as outlined by Morgan and Smitley, that middle class women were becoming more 'public' as their philanthropic work became more established and professionalised but remained in a defined 'feminine public sphere'.⁶⁶ By conforming to perceived feminine pursuits within the public sphere, the women of the BHS and the LLRS not only strengthened middle class culture in Leicester but, as their public works bolstered their experience and networks, a specifically feminine middle

⁶⁴ I.C. Ellis, pp.277-8.

⁶⁵ Gertrude Ellis, 'A History of the Leicester Ladies Reading Society 1869-1930', in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 286-298, p.290.

⁶⁶ Morgan, p.85; Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere: Middle Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland c.1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p.8.

class identity arguably emerged in the city.⁶⁷ This sense of a feminist consciousness within the two Societies will be explored in the next chapter.

⁶⁷ Meller, p.244.

Chapter Three

“A pleasant sense of unity and domesticity”: Fostering a Feminist Consciousness?

This chapter will examine the ways in which membership of the LLRS and BHS fostered a sense of ‘feminist consciousness’ amongst middle class women in Leicester; how this impacted their public activity and to what extent this percolated into the life of the town more generally, especially in connection to women’s organisations and women’s rights campaigns.

The use of the term ‘feminist’ is often elusive and has proved no less contested within historiography. First used in France in 1880, ‘feminism’ was to its early sympathisers, a broad term for defending the natural, moral, spiritual and intellectual equality of women but has since evolved, not only to encompass a range of views on womanhood but also diverse ideas on which campaigns, reforms and strategies should be prioritised.¹ In her book on feminism in Victorian England, Levine argues that a ‘conscious grouping’ of women was formed in the period, evidencing the awareness of gendered wrongs that shaped society through their actions, lifestyles and philosophies.² Lerner took a wider approach in her formative volume *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, tracing cultural shifts from the Middle Ages that culminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Lerner cites women’s increasing involvement in civic life, especially the development of female social spaces as experiences that fostered ‘feminist consciousness’, bringing to the fore a collective awareness of the distinct qualities and benefits of femininity in the context of public life.³

¹ Claire Goldberg Moses, “‘What’s in a Name?’ On Writing the History of Feminism”, *Feminist Studies*, 38 (2012), 757-779, pp.763-764.

² Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), p.17.

³ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p.224; Helen Meller, ‘Women and Citizenship: Gender and the Built Environment in British Cities 1870-1939’, in *Cities of Ideas – Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800-2000*, ed. by Robert Colls and Richard Rodger (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 231-257, p.241.

This awareness unequivocally led to more acutely feminist campaigns based on the injustices highlighted by what many perceived as the part admittance into the public sphere; the long and complex fight for suffrage being the pinnacle of this.⁴ However, a sense of feminist consciousness could also manifest into a celebration of femininity. Some women chose to embrace the complimentary nature of the sexes, pursuing public works within the boundaries of societal appropriate femininity without the outward desire for equality.⁵ Both these facets of feminist consciousness will be extrapolated from the records of the Societies, other organisations and the local press to reveal an emerging group of influential females in Leicester, built largely around the memberships of the LLRS and BHS. Cross membership with the National Union for Women Workers, involvement in campaigns for female suffrage and the impact of the Societies themselves as female social spaces will all be discussed. Other regional comparisons will be referred to in an attempt to uncover if the national picture, argued by Lerner and Levine, can be evidenced at the local level. Philanthropy, as has already been evidenced in chapter two, formed a large part of the 'feminine public sphere', allowing women to operate within public life on the grounds of moral duty.⁶ As Martin has cited in her study of female associational life in Bristol c.1880-1914, philanthropy was also a key factor in building female networks.⁷ The epitome of philanthropic activity encouraging female solidarity is perhaps the creation of the National Union of Women Workers, hereafter NUWW. A merging of several local philanthropic unions, the umbrella organisation brought women together to share experiences and develop ideas.⁸ An indication that the NUWW contributed to an

⁴ Levine, p.162.

⁵ Jose Harris, *The Penguin Social History of Britain: Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin UK, 1994), p.24.

⁶ Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public Lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p.6.

⁷ Moira Martin, 'Single Women and Philanthropy: A Case Study of Women's Associational Life in Bristol 1880-1914', *Women's History Review*, 17 (2008), 395-417, p.408.

⁸ Martin, p.396.

emerging feminist consciousness lies in the motto 'union is strength', displaying an awareness of the power that could be harnessed when women worked as a collective.⁹

Begley, in her study of civic ideals in Leicester, points to the overlap in membership of the BHS and LLRS with the NUWW as evidence of a developing female elite in Leicester.¹⁰ Established in 1894 'to form a common centre for all women and associations engaged or interested in religious, educational, social and philanthropic work, and to encourage sympathy and co-operation', the memberships of the LLRS and BHS were central to the branch from its inception.¹¹ The first annual report lists Edith Gittins as Vice President, Anne Evans as secretary and twenty eight members names can be identified as being LLRS or BHS members, including Annie Clephan, Miss Gimson and Jane Paget.¹² As the NUWW grew in Leicester, many more LLRS and BHS members joined and by 1900 around one third of the NUWW membership, including all leadership positions, were affiliated with either Society.¹³

These links were further strengthened through the organisations represented by the NUWW that LLRS and BHS members were also heavily involved; Girls Clubs and Evening Homes, the COS and the Girls Friendly Society all feature on the NUWW list of 1900, the Kyrle Society being added in 1902.¹⁴ The prevalence of female centred charity seems an apposite example of a demonstration of a feminist consciousness emerging in the NUWW. Patron and philanthropist Baroness Burdett-Coutts seemingly hints at this developing consciousness in her attempt to compile a report of women's philanthropic work in 1893. Burdett-Coutts cites the 'unity of feeling and purpose which pervades all these efforts...' again alluding to the strength of women working collectively for a common cause.¹⁵

⁹ ROLLR, Records of the NUWW, Leicester Branch 16D58/1 Annual Reports, 1897.

¹⁰ Siobhan Begley, 'Voluntary Associations and the Civic Ideal in Leicester 1870-1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2009), p.36.

¹¹ ROLLR, RNUWW, 16D58/1 Annual Reports, 1897; *Leicester Chronicle*, 12 May 1894.

¹² ROLLR, RNUWW, 16D58/1 Annual Reports, 1897.

¹³ ROLLR, RNUWW, 16D58/1 Annual Reports 1900.

¹⁴ ROLLR, RNUWW, 16D58/1 Annual Reports 1900, 1902.

¹⁵ *Women's Penny Paper*, 22 June 1893.

Alongside strengthening links between female organisations and social work in the town, the NUWW brought members into a wider group of publicly active women. Attendees of the national annual conference evidently found it to be an inspiring experience as one delegate expressed:

...those who represent the branch at the autumn conference...often express the wish that many other members could attend and derive the same pleasure and benefit from this gathering together of earnest workers from all parts of the country, at which subjects are treated by those who are best qualified by study and experience...¹⁶

These gatherings would undoubtedly have fostered an awareness of the national momentum for the professionalisation of middle class women's work in this field. The Leicester branch almost had the honour of hosting the 1915 conference, but it was 'not felt possible...so long as the war continued'.¹⁷ Prized by its members as a politically neutral organisation, built on mutual respect, welcoming varied religious and political persuasions in the ethos of gender solidarity, the Leicester branch of the NUWW demonstrates the potency of homogenous gender and class over religious and political differences as drivers in middle class culture.¹⁸ Furthermore, the NUWW enveloped these women into a national network of like-minded workers, thus bolstering their identity as part of a female force.

Morgan has highlighted the link between women's associational life and political activism, as middle class women in Leeds transferred their skills and experience in the former to campaign organising.¹⁹ This hypothesis seems to fit well with the situation in Leicester; as well as working collaboratively through the NUWW, both the LLRS and BHS had strong connections with campaigns for female suffrage. Furthermore, the fight for female suffrage perhaps best demonstrates how struggle and

¹⁶ ROLLR, RNUWW, 16D58/1 Annual Reports, 1906.

¹⁷ ROLLR, RNUWW, 16D58/1 Annual Reports, 1914.

¹⁸ Julia Bush, 'The National Union of Women Workers and Women's Suffrage', in *Suffrage Outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain, 1880-191*, ed. by Myriam Boussahba-Bravard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.105-131.

¹⁹ Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Women's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), p.149.

resistance 'enhanced the process of consciousness-formation'.²⁰ The LLRS particularly has been mentioned in local studies of the suffrage movement. Crawford points to the significance of the Society forming the same year that the third petition was presented to parliament, suggesting that the women's movement was 'clearly now making itself felt in Leicester'.²¹ Jenkins also cites the LLRS as an indication of the growing confidence of middle class women in Leicester, 'organising themselves and striving for self-improvement'.²²

Several LLRS and BHS members were present at the Temperance Hall in Leicester in February 1887 where LLRS member Agnes Fielding Johnson spoke alongside Millicent Fawcett on the fallacy of women being excluded from politics on the grounds that they were 'constantly taking an increasingly active part in political and public affairs.'²³ Although the suffrage campaign had an established history in Leicester, this meeting became the catalyst for the formation of the Leicester Women's Suffrage Society. Anna Beale, Agnes Kilgour and Edith Gittins served on the committee, showing again the influence of the LLRS and BHS at the forefront of the feminine public sphere in Leicester.²⁴

Edith Gittins became a prominent voice for the franchise nationally, speaking at suffrage events in London and elsewhere.²⁵ In a speech to the Leicester Liberal Club in April 1890 Gittins alludes to building on a momentum and honouring those women that began the fight for female emancipation a generation before: 'the least [we can] do is to make ready and reap the harvest of which [our] forerunners painfully sowed the seed'.²⁶ Gittins's reasoning is unambiguously tied to her and her peers' experiences of serving in various public roles: '...if women could exercise judgement in the

²⁰ Lerner, p.280.

²¹ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.66.

²² Jess Jenkins, *The Burning Question: The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in Leicestershire* (Leicester: Leicester County Council, 2012), p.11.

²³ *Leicester Daily Post*, 12 February 1887.

²⁴ Jenkins, p.20.

²⁵ Sarah Elizabeth Francis, "Worthy citizens" Middle-Class Women and the Public Sphere in Leicester c.1850 – 1900 (unpublished masters dissertation, University of Leicester, 2013), p.257.

²⁶ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 15 April 1890.

duties of citizenship...surely they could judge the merits of Parliamentary candidates...'²⁷ Partly through high profile local individuals like Gittins, Leicester became known as a place of support for suffrage nationally, receiving rallying visits from Millicent Fawcett again in 1896 and Sylvia Pankhurst who was living in Leicester in 1907.²⁸

As influential as the members of the LLRS and BHS were, most were seemingly careful to distance themselves from the more militant suffragettes; the Leicester branch of which was mainly associated with working class women.²⁹ Hannam has questioned orthodox assumptions that the suffragette Women's Social and Political Union was dominated by middle class women.³⁰ On the contrary, at the local level at least, Leicester seems to resemble Liverpool, Glasgow and Portsmouth, where the WSPU was 'less genteel'.³¹ The prolific Edith Gittins publicly opposed the actions of Leicester's suffragettes at a meeting of the Women's Labour League in 1907, stating their actions not only delayed the progress of their struggle but that they associated women with 'feeble violence and hysteria.'³² Gittins's choice of words reinforce the significance of 'femininity' within middle class feminist consciousness and the importance of retaining a sense of moral virtue intrinsic to contemporary gender ideals.³³

The LLRS and BHS members' involvement in local suffrage campaigning echoes that of other regional groups such as the Edinburgh Essay Society. The membership of the Edinburgh Society were at the forefront of the women's movement in their locality and were active in many corresponding

²⁷ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 15 April 1890.

²⁸ Francis, p.266; Crawford, p.68.

²⁹ Richard Whitmore, *Alice Hawkins and the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Leicester* (Derby: Breedon, 2007), p.10.

³⁰ June Hannam, "'I Had Not Been to London" Women's Suffrage – A View from the Regions', in *Votes for Women*, ed. by Sandra Holton and June Purvis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp.226-245, pp.231-232.

³¹ Hannam, p.231.

³² Cited in Whitmore, p.44.

³³ Morgan, Simon, 'A Sort of Land Debatable': Female Influence, Civic Virtue and Middle Class Identity, c 1830-c 1860' *Women's History Review*, 13 (2004) 183-209, p.195.

organisations, including the Edinburgh Women's Suffrage Society.³⁴ Concurring with sentiments expressed in Gittins's speech of 1907, the Edinburgh Society were advocates for conservative, non-militant approaches to campaigning.³⁵ In this respect it could be argued the LLRS, similarly to their Edinburgh counterparts, fostered a very middle class feminism; a middle ground which argued for women's rights as a pursuit of becoming more useful citizens but cautious not to risk their feminine reputation as morally superior by participating in 'unfeminine' activities.

Alongside displaying feminist consciousness through public works and campaigning, the LLRS and BHS provided environments where a sense of sisterhood and shared femininity could flourish. Ellis evokes a domestic idyll in her description of LLRS meetings; '...members were welcomed in...laying aside outdoor garments, and settling down to a long afternoon, with or without needlework for the listeners, gave a pleasant sense of unity and domesticity.'³⁶ The comfort felt in these words of an all-female environment has been cited as a one of the reasons for the success of such societies and is evident in other parts of Leicester's civic life.³⁷ Four times president of the LLRS Edith Gittins organised 'women's friendly meetings' at the Unitarian chapel, where bible teaching and hymn singing were exclusively ran and attended by women.³⁸ The creation of this feminine public space shows how the members of the LLRS were participating in fostering a feminist consciousness in other areas of the town's public life.

Levine has suggested a characteristic of feminist women at this time was the strength and longevity of their female friendships, refusing to retreat on account of husbands or duties at home.³⁹ This type

³⁴ Kate Kelman, 'Self-Culture': The Educative Reading Pursuits of the Ladies of Edinburgh, 1865-1885' *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 36 (2003), 59-75, p.73.

³⁵ Kelman, p.73.

³⁶ Gertrude Ellis, 'A History of the Leicester Ladies Reading Society 1869-1930' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 286-298, pp.290-291.

³⁷ Francis, p.160.

³⁸ Isabel C. Ellis 'Some of My Contemporaries' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 136-181, p.148.

³⁹ Levine, p.30.

of enduring commitment is evident in Ellis's remembrances: 'the meetings came round as regularly as the winters themselves and wove themselves into the fabric of life through youth and maturity, marriage and bereavement, to old age...'⁴⁰ Ellis goes on to describe the times shared away from the serious business of study:

The break for tea was a time of happy intercourse. After some of the members married, their small children appeared and handed round cakes with grave politeness, and their growth through schooldays was watched with interest as the years went by.⁴¹

This reference not only evokes the overtly domestic setting of the meetings but also highlights the constancy of the Society through the evolving female roles as wives and mothers.

The tenacity of the LLRS ladies to study together in the face of convention and an awareness of the tensions felt between motherly duties and the Society, are articulated by an unnamed member:

I cannot express all it, the Reading Society, has meant in my life. A busy mother for many years is sorely tempted to put aside any absorbing interests of her own because they seem to clash with the crowding, practical claims on her time and strength. Again and again, I have felt absolutely wicked at leaving my family for hours together. But as the years have gone on, I have realised that it has been thanks to the compulsory reading that I have been able to keep up in touch, intellectually with my husband and children.⁴²

In this example, the member is evidently content to justify her education for the benefit of family harmony, providing another example of how domestic ideology was simultaneously upheld and subverted by the Society.

Similarly, LLRS member and gifted artist Clara Paul has been described as 'worship[ing] her husband and never knew that spiritually and intellectually she was far beyond him', thus hinting at an extent of self-denial required to conform to societal expectations.⁴³ Lewis explains Victorian feminist's desires for 'womanly fulfilment' through traditional means of marriage and childbearing

⁴⁰ G. Ellis, p.291.

⁴¹ G. Ellis, p.291.

⁴² G. Ellis, p.295.

⁴³ I.C. Ellis, p.149.

posed an issue of balance for this innovating generation of women, poised to enter public life but obliged to maintain her private identities of wife and mother.⁴⁴ Indeed, Newnham college fellow Jane Ellen Harrison lamented that marriage for a 'woman at least, hampers the two things that made life glorious – friendship and learning.'⁴⁵ Although much evidence suggests that both were possible alongside marital duties for many LLRS and BHS members.

Single members however, free from the distractions of marriage and child rearing were able to fully embrace a life of public service. Gordon and Nair have posited that single women of this period were obliged to overcompensate their femininity; emphasising traits of purity and sacrifice in place of marriage and motherhood.⁴⁶ This is seemingly true in the case of Edith Gittins who was described in her obituary as 'one of the great personal forces which made for the social and moral well-being of the community'.⁴⁷ Gittins's life work as both an artist and social improver culminates in a bequest in her will of £500 for the 'erection and maintenance of a public drinking fountain...to be beautiful in material, colour, design and workmanship...'.⁴⁸ The fountain was to be in honour of Æthelflæd 'Lady of the Mercians' and daughter of Alfred the Great who had led an army against the Vikings in the tenth century.⁴⁹ A recent study exploring the role of women in shaping civic identity in Edwardian Leicester highlights the significance of Gittins's choice of the Anglo-Saxon queen, not only as evidence of the contemporary popularity of Anglo-Saxon history but also as a representation of a powerful women in a male dominated culture.⁵⁰ Gittins's desired legacy therefore demonstrates not

⁴⁴ Jane Lewis, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991), p.18.

⁴⁵ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student Life* (London, 1925) in Philippa Levine, "'So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks": Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (1989), 150-174, p.162.

⁴⁶ Gordon and Nair, p.167.

⁴⁷ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 8 August 1910.

⁴⁸ ROLLR, DE1169/1/25 Will of Edith Gittins, 12 October 1910.

⁴⁹ Michael Wood, *The Story of England* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.100.

⁵⁰ Rosa Smurra and Marco Orlandi, 'The Role of Women in the Shaping of Civic Identity in Edwardian Leicester: Edith Gittins and the Anglo-Saxon Past of Æthelflæd's Fountain. Historical Reconstruction and 3D Visualization', *Urban History*, 49 (2022), 335-363, p.346.

only middle class civic engagement and philanthropy alongside local cultural references but also an outward expression of feminist consciousness.

Gittins's singleness is also cited as a contributing factor to her suffrage campaigning as she 'not only fended for herself but also bore the responsibility of others... developing a natural vigour; it is not surprising [she] felt strongly the claims of women to political equality'.⁵¹ As prolific and explicit as Gittins was in her public roles, she does not appear to have been a controversial figure; tributes in the local press after her death commend her 'thoroughly womanly help', strengthening the argument that members of the LLRS and BHS fostered a sense of feminist consciousness within the societal boundaries of their gender and class.⁵²

A final facet of feminist consciousness that can be gleaned from the Societies is that of a celebration of femininity and feminine skills. As alluded to in the discussion on the arts as a civilizing tool in chapter two, the BHS exhibitions had an emphasis on crafts associated with femininity thus displaying the Society's desire to validate female contributions to the arts. Chairman Isabel Evans shows this awareness along with a sense of commission, through the familiar guise of Pre-Raphaelite art. Speaking on Burne-Jones' *Golden Stairs* Evans saw that there:

could not be a more perfect representation of the grace and beauty, the purity of girlhood. This picture is forever linked in my mind with the divine ideal of our Society – a procession of stately and tender maidens, uniting to make music throughout life.⁵³

This statement is charged with contemporary feminine ideals of purity and gentleness but also hints at the assumed responsibility to improve society by utilising natural femininity.

Further awareness of this feminine responsibility and the power of influence can be gleaned from a pamphlet written by Isabel Evans on her being made chairman of the Society in 1892:

⁵¹ I.C. Ellis, p.147.

⁵² *Leicestershire Mercury*, 8 August 1910.

⁵³ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 Ideals of the BHS by Isabel C Evans, October 1893, p.13; Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*, 1880, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

Need I remind you of the immense influence which you exercise, you fifty of the foremost girls of our town... there is no power on earth so strong or so universal, as the power of womanhood... To you is given the great privilege of moulding the character of the men who are making history.⁵⁴

This could be read as a conservative endorsement of women only operating in supportive roles to men, as proffered by Gunn in his work on middle class culture in industrial cities.⁵⁵ However, there is a sense of breaking with the past with an emphasis on the strength required to carry out true feminine qualities as Evans continues: 'We have done with the helpless, clinging, fainting heroine of a bygone generation... True gentleness and tenderness are the outcome of strength not weakness.'⁵⁶ This sentiment supports a feminist consciousness existing at a cultural, emotional level amongst these Leicester women, apart from outward political debates. Therefore, it seems a feminist consciousness was fostered within the BHS and consolidated through their public works in the town, showing the significance of feminine contribution in practical and cultural ways which led some members into political engagement.

In conclusion, a feminist consciousness certainly emerged in Leicester during the latter decades of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century and the LLRS and BHS were significant contributors to this. The increasing visibility and involvement of members in public life through their philanthropic work and the momentum of campaigning for women's rights are testament to this. As Steinbach has warned, historians need to be cautious not to promote an overtly feminist narrative and especially avoid the tendency to treat women as a cohesive group.⁵⁷ However, a paucity of sources showing a range of responses to emerging feminism with the LLRS and BHS has prevented

⁵⁴ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 Ideals of the BHS by Isabel C Evans, October 1893, pp.13-14.

⁵⁵ Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority and the English Industrial City, 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.92.

⁵⁶ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/17 Ideals of the BHS by Isabel C Evans, October 1893, p.14.

⁵⁷ Susie Steinbach, *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), p.3.

any counter arguments here. Furthermore, King has concluded that many women in this period attributed their public activities as a 'feminist journey'.⁵⁸

Involvement in civic life through the NUWW and other organisations and the fight for women's political and legal rights were however only part of a much wider shift in the cultural lives of women in Leicester. Both Societies provided forums for a feminist consciousness to develop and consequently equip the members of these Societies to become actors on the civic stage. The two Societies fostered a feminist consciousness in distinct ways from each other. The LLRS was a domestic haven where the women of the most affluent and influential Leicester families could educate and cultivate their minds whilst simultaneously building friendships and connections that subverted traditional ideals of submissive femininity.⁵⁹ A similar camaraderie can be found amongst the members of the BHS but with an outward looking, public service ethos. Their involvement in the arts as social duty undoubtedly fanned the flames of the perceived special qualities that women could bring to the civic wellbeing of the town. These Societies thus contributed a strong community of middle-class women in Leicester, although not all outwardly conveying strong feminist convictions, their bonds of friendship, commonality of purpose and a sense of duty to be 'worthy citizens' portray a consciousness of the significance found in shared femininity.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Steven King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p.63.

⁵⁹ Levine, p.30.

⁶⁰ ROLLR, RBHS 18D57/1, Letter from Miss Beale to the BHS, 8 July 1886.

Conclusion

This study of two female reading Societies active in Leicester during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century set out to uncover the contributions and impact middle class women had on their locality. Overall, the findings suggest that these Societies played a pivotal role in consolidating the public presence of middle class women within the civic fabric of the town. Through their organisational, intellectual, and philanthropic camaraderie, a core group of women began to impact the local public sphere in a variety of ways, ultimately leading to the emergence of a feminist consciousness displayed through collective action and feminist campaigns.

Both Societies were instrumental in the building of a female middle class culture in Leicester. As chapter one revealed, religious, kinship and neighbourhood networks all contributed not only to the viability of the groups but also their durability, thus echoing the female middle class associational cultures uncovered in other regional studies such as Smitley's work on Scottish towns and Morgan's research on Leeds.¹ The aims and purposes of the Societies also fit within the wider national picture in regard to an increased interest in female education, especially the contemporary movement of self-improvement for the benefit of others; better equipping themselves for their feminine roles at home but also within the widening feminine public sphere .

Finding commonality in class identity, feminine ideals and religious motivations, the BHS and members of the LLRS were driving forces in the town's philanthropic and socially minded organisations and projects. Through local branches of national organisations such as the COS and the Kyrle Society, these women were able to exercise their skills and experience alongside their male peers. Although in some cases assuming leadership positions, the women's roles tended to conform to gendered expectations; roles that could be justified as an extension of the domestic or under the

¹ Megan Smitley, *The Feminine Public Sphere: Middle Class Women and Civic Life in Scotland c.1870-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) ; Simon Morgan, *A Victorian Women's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).

guise of moral motherhood. Hence, the Societies' activities place Leicester alongside Glasgow, Bristol and Bolton where philanthropy not only acted as a conduit for middle class women to enter public life but exemplified prized middle class qualities of public spirit, responsible citizenship and civic pride thus strengthening their class identity.²

The overtly gendered nature of the Societies' members public occupations concurs with the evidence explored in chapter three of female solidarity found in shared domesticity and enduring friendships.

This growing consciousness is evident in the expansion of female organisations such as the NUWW being established in Leicester and the fresh impetus for suffrage campaigning, led in many cases by BHS and LLRS members.

The LLRS and BHS therefore contributed to the civic life and middle class culture of Leicester in significant, but nevertheless, gendered ways. Through their ambitious study programmes, philanthropy, social work and promotion of the arts, a feminine public sphere was created and operated within. Consequently, the Societies fostered a sense of collective femininity, an awareness of the qualities that women were utilising for the gain of wider society, leading some to campaign for political equality. The explicit link between the social, intellectual nature of the Societies' meetings with their public, cultural contributions to what was by then a city (Leicester having been granted city status in 1919), is best expressed by Gertrude Ellis in her concluding words on all the LLRS had meant personally and achieved publicly: '...whose meetings and papers had had a very definite influence on the lives of its members, several of whom, in their turn, had had considerable influence on the life and progress of the City of Leicester'.³

² Steven King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p.60; Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), p.5; Moira Martin, 'Single Women and Philanthropy: A Case Study of Women's Associational Life in Bristol 1880-1914', *Women's History Review*, 17 (2008), 395-417, p.395.

³ G. Ellis, p.296.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archive Material

The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR)

DE2340 Leicester Charity Organisation Society Records

17D51 Leicester Kyrle Society Records

14D55 Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society Records

DE3736 Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Photographs

LE329 Local Studies Ephemera

18D57 Records of the Belmont House Society

DE2462 Records of the Great Meeting Unitarian Chapel

DE4325 Leicester Liberal Association Records

DE3736 Photographs of Social and Political History

DE3463 Records of Leicester Diocese 1829-1955

19D59 Records of the Leicester School Board

16D58 Records of the National Union of Women Workers, Leicester Branch

DE2211/3 Will of Annie Clephan, 11 July 1930

DE1169/1/25 Will of Edith Gittins, 12 October 1910

Printed Sources

'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935)

Ellis, Gertrude, 'A History of the Leicester Ladies Reading Society 1869-1930' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 286-298

Ellis, Isabel C., 'Some of My Contemporaries' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 136-181

Ellis, Isabel C., 'Belmont House' in 1930' in 'Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester', Collected by Isabel Ellis (Unpublished typescript, printed privately, 1935), pp. 254-285

Published Sources

Books and Essays

Butler, Josephine, ed., *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A Series of Essays* (London, 1869; repr. Cambridge: CUP, 2010)

Butler, Josephine, *The Education and Employment of Women* (Liverpool: T. Brakell, 1868)

Carnegie, Andrew, *Wealth and the Best Fields for Philanthropy* (No Publishing Information Given, 1890)

Churton Braby, Maud, *Modern Marriage and How to Bear It* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1920)

Gissing, George, *The Odd Women* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1893)

Gittins, Edith, 'Story of the Schools' in *The Centenary Book of the Great Meeting Sunday Schools* (Leicester: Spencer Brothers, 1883)

Hill, Octavia, *Homes of the London Poor* (New York: State Charities Aid Association, 1875)

Hopkins, Ellice, *The Power of Womanhood* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1899)

Lytelton, Kathleen, *Women and Their Work* (London: Methuen & co., 1901)

Mill, John Stuart, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1869)

Ruskin, John, *Sesame and Lilies* (London, 1865; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

Wolstenholme, Elizabeth C., 'IX The Education of Girls, its Present and its Future' in *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture: A Series of Essays*, ed. By Josephine Butler (London, 1869; repr. Cambridge: CUP, 2010), pp.290-330

Newspapers

Leicester Chronicle

Leicester Daily Post

Leicester Journal and Midland Counties General Advertiser

Leicester Journal

Leicestershire Mercury

Leicester Pioneer

Magazine of Art

Women's Herald

Women's Penny Paper

Government Documents

Census for England and Wales, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911(accessed via Find My Past)

Directories

Leicester Trade Protection Society Directory (Leicester: Trade Protection Society, 1870 and 1875)

Wrights Directory of Leicester (Leicester: Wrights & Co,1882)

Artworks

Burne-Jones, Sir Edward Coley, *The Golden Stairs*, 1880, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London

Holman Hunt, William, *The Light of the World*, c.1851-1856, oil on canvas, Manchester Art Gallery

Secondary Material

Books

Aucott, Shirley, *Women of Courage, Vision and Talent: Lives in Leicester 1780 to 1925* (Leicester: Self-published, 2008)

Banks, Olive, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981)

Boussahba-Bravard, Myriam, *Suffrage Outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain, 1880-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Boynton, Helen E., and Grant Pitches, *Desirable Locations: Leicester's Middle Class Suburbs, 1880-1920* (Leicester: Leicester City Council, Living History Unit, 1996)

Boylan, Patrick John, Anthony Fletcher and Caroline Wessel, *Exchanging Ideas Dispassionately and Without Animosity: The Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, 1835-2010* (Leicester: Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, 2010)

Briggs, Asa, *Victorian Cities*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

Caine, Barbara, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: OUP, 1992)

- Cannadine, David, *Patricians, Power and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Towns* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982)
- Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey* (London: Routledge, 2006)
- Darling, Elizabeth, and Lesley Whitworth, *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)
- Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2018)
- Elliott, Malcolm, *Victorian Leicester* (London: Phillimore, 1979)
- Flint, Kate, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: OUP, 1993)
- Gordon, Eleanor, and Gwyneth Nair, *Public lives: Women, Family, and Society in Victorian Britain* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003)
- Gleadle, Kathryn, and Sarah Richardson, eds, *Women in British Politics 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat* (New York: Palgrave, 2000)
- Gunn, Simon, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority and the English Industrial City, 1840–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)
- Harris, Jose, *The Penguin Social History of Britain: Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London: Penguin UK, 1994)
- Holton, Sandra, and June Purvis, *Votes for Women* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000)
- Humphreys, Robert, *Sin, Organised Charity and the Poor Law in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995)
- Jenkins, Jess, *The Burning Question: The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in Leicestershire* (Leicester: Leicester County Council, 2012)
- Kidd, Alan J., and David Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle-Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)
- King, Steven, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2006)
- Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: OUP, 1994)
- Levine, Philippa, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990)
- Lewis, Jane, *Women and Social Action in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991)
- Maltz, Diana, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
- Morgan, Simon, *A Victorian Women's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006)

Morris, R.J., *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990)

Rendall, Jane, *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987)

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

Steinbach, Susie, *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004)

Thompson, Paul, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1985)

Vickers, Amanda, *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics 1750 – the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001)

Whitmore, Richard, *Alice Hawkins and the Suffragette Movement in Edwardian Leicester* (Derby: Breedon, 2007)

Wood, Michael, *The Story of England* (London: Penguin, 2010)

Book Chapters

Anderson, Anne, and Elizabeth Darling, 'The Hill Sisters: Cultural Philanthropy and the embellishment of Lives in late-Nineteenth Century England', in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England 1870-1950*, ed. by Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp.33-50

Bland, Lucy, 'The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s', in *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* ed. by Jane Rendall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 141-164

Bush, Julia, 'The National Union of Women Workers and Women's Suffrage', in *Suffrage Outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain, 1880-1911*, ed. by Myriam Boussahba-Bravard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.105-131

Deane, Theresa, 'Late Nineteenth Century Philanthropy: The Case of Louisa Twining' in *Gender, Health and Welfare*, ed. by Anne Digby and John Stewart (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.122-142

Gleadle, Kathryn, "'Our Separate Spheres": Middle class Women and the Feminisms of Early Victorian Radical Politics', in *Women in British Politics 1760-1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, eds by Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp.134-152

Hannam, June, "'I Had Not Been to London" Women's Suffrage – A View from the Regions', in *Votes for Women*, ed. by Sandra Holton and June Purvis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp.226-245

Lewis, Jane, 'Gender and Welfare in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in *Gender, Health and Welfare*, ed. by Anne Digby and John Stewart (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.208-228

Meller, Helen, 'Women and Citizenship: Gender and the Built Environment in British Cities 1870-1939', in *Cities of Ideas – Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800-2000*, ed. by Robert Colls and Richard Rodger (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 231-257

Mumm, Susan, 'Women and Philanthropic Cultures', in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. by Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 54-71

Rendall, Jane "'A Moral Engine"? Feminism, Liberalism and the *English Woman's Journal*', in *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914*, ed. by Jane Rendall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 112-140

Thompson, Dorothy, 'Women, Work and Politics in Nineteenth Century England: The Problem of Authority', in *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914* ed. by Jane Rendall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp.57-81

Twells, Alison, "'A Christian and Civilised Land": The British Middle Class and the Civilising Mission, 1820-42' in *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940*, eds. Alan Kidd and David Nicholls (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp.47-64

Walker, Linda, 'Gender, Suffrage and Party: Liberal Women's Organisations, 1880-1914', in *Suffrage Outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain, 1880-1914*, ed. by Myriam Boussahba-Bravard (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp.77-102

Whelan, Robert, "'The Poor, as Well as the Rich, Need Something More Than Meat and Drink": The Vision and Work of the Kyrle Society', in *Octavia Hill, Social Activism and the Remaking of British Society*, ed. by Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell (London: University of London Press, 2016), pp.91-118

Articles

Boylan, Anne M., 'Evangelical Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century: The Role of Women in Sunday Schools', *Feminist Studies*, 4 (1978), 62-80

Freer, Dinah, 'The Dynasty Builders of Victorian Leicester', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 53 (1977), 42-54

Garrett, Miranda, 'Interior Decoration and Domesticity in the Women's Penny Paper/ Woman's Herald', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 51 (2018), 289-306

Goldberg Moses, Claire, "'What's in a Name?" On Writing the History of Feminism', *Feminist Studies*, 38 (2012), 757-779

Gunn, Simon, 'Class, Identity and the Urban: The Middle Class in England, c. 1790-1950,' *Urban History*, 31 (2004), 29-47

Jordon, Ellen, "'Making Good Wives and Mothers"? The Transformation of Middle Class Girls Education in Nineteenth Century Britain', *History of Education Quarterly*, 31 (1991), 439-462

Kelman, Kate, "'Self-Culture': The Educative Reading Pursuits of the Ladies of Edinburgh, 1865-1885,' *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 36 (2003), 59-75

Levine, Philippa, "'So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks": Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (1989), 150-174

MacLeod Walls, Elizabeth, "'A Little Afraid of the Women of Today": The Victorian New Woman and the Rhetoric of British Modernism', *Rhetoric Review*, 21 (2002), 229-246

Martin, Moira, 'Single Women and Philanthropy: A Case Study of Women's Associational Life in Bristol 1880-1914', *Women's History Review*, 17 (2008), 395-417

Middleton, Charlotte, 'The Census Records of Leicester 1851–1911, Class and Society', *Family & Community History*, 24 (2021), 247-269

Morgan, Simon, 'A Sort of Land Debatable': Female Influence, Civic Virtue and Middle Class Identity, c1830-c1860', *Women's History Review*, 13 (2004), 183-209

Schwartz, Laura, 'Feminist Thinking on Education in Victorian England', *Oxford Review of Education*, 37 (2011), 669-682

Simmons, Jack, 'A Victorian Social Worker: Joseph Dare and the Leicester Domestic Mission', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 46 (1971), 65-80

Smurra, Rosa, and Orlandi, Marco, 'The Role of Women in the Shaping of Civic Identity in Edwardian Leicester: Edith Gittins and the Anglo-Saxon Past of Æthelflæd's Fountain. Historical Reconstruction and 3D Visualization', *Urban History*, 49 (2022), 335-363

Sutherland, Gillian, 'Self-Education, Class and Gender in Edwardian Britain: Women in Lower Middle Class Families', *Oxford Review of Education*, 41 (2015), 518-533

Verba, Ericka Kim, 'The Circulo De Lectura De Senoras (Ladies' Reading Circle) and the Club De Senoras (Ladies' Club) of Santiago, Chile: Middle- and Upper-Class Feminist Conversations (1915-1920)', *Journal of Women's History*, 7 (1995), 6-33

Vickery, Amanda, 'From Golden Age to Separate Spheres?: A Review of the Chronology and Categories of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 383-414

Wessel, Caroline, 'Leicester Ladies Reading Society,' *Leicestershire Historian*, 45 (2009), 26-30

Theses

Begley, Siobhan, 'Voluntary Associations and the Civic Ideal in Leicester 1870-1939' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2009)

Francis, Sarah Elizabeth, "Worthy citizens" Middle-Class Women and the Public Sphere in Leicester c.1850 – 1900 (unpublished masters dissertation, University of Leicester, 2013)

Websites

British History Online

Find My Past

Project Gutenberg