



Local History Collection

25 - The story of Dr. Esther Rickards O.B.E.

Winter 2025

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If you live in Fifield or Oakley Green you may have walked along the Oakley Green Road footpath and passed Braywood School. You may have even sat on, or spent a few moments on, the bench that is immediately outside the school entrance. The bench is dedicated to Dr Esther Rickards O.B.E.

Esther is considered one of the ten most inspiring women from history who you may not have heard of - but should know about!

Many of us today would find it hard to believe that Esther, who had wanted to become a vet, was not admitted into the profession at that time. So she qualified to be a Doctor instead!

Esther was born in London in 1893 into a Jewish family. Her Father was a vet and she was very interested in dogs - an interest that lasted her whole life.



Esther became a surgeon and a politician and also a 'violent suffragette' who chained herself to London railings. She was never arrested, although her sister was jailed twice. Esther was thrown out of St. Paul's and out of a synagogue for protesting. She also protested in the House of Commons after 6 bills were to be given a second reading but were refused time by the Government and became law. She spent time supporting other suffragettes imprisoned at Holloway by singing outside and found that if you sang a hymn after every song you can't be moved on - so that is what she did!

Educated at the London School of Medicine and St. Mary's hospital she qualified in 1920 - MRCS LRCP, followed by MB, BS, MS and finally FRCS in 1924. She worked at St. Mary's before joining the London County Council Service as Assistant Medical Officer at Paddington. In 1924 she was one of the first women accepted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons after obtaining her Master of Surgery qualification which was an unusual achievement for a woman at that time and she specialised in gynaecology. She also served as a member of the Mental Hospital Committee and fought hard to allow the admission of women to the staffing of mental institutions.

Esther became the first woman Labour Alderman and Councillor on the LCC in the late 1920's and was then a member of the North West Metropolitan Regional Hospital Board and St. Mary's Hospital Board of Governors, 1947-1971 rising to Vice Chairman for 6 years. She was also the Chair of the Socialist Medical Association affiliated to the Labour Party and played a key role in establishing the party's policy of creating the National Health Service (NHS) focusing personally on the policy relating to maternity, hoping to reduce the rates of mortality around child birth. She was awarded the OBE in 1966 and became Honorary Consulting surgeon to St. Mary's Hospital in 1971.

MISS ESTHER RICKARDS, M.S., F.R.C.S. First Woman Labour Alderman of the L.C.C.



MISS ESTHER RICKARDS

Miss Esther Rickards, M.S., F.R.C.S., the first woman Labour Alderman of the London County Council, was among the younger women who fought for political enfranchisement. An enthusiastic worker and an exceptionally clear thinker, in electing her an Alderman her fellow-councillors acknowledged her superior ability in dealing with public

more nurses, and occupational therapists. Miss Rickards advocates the development of individual hand-work as an effective way of engaging the minds of mental patients

Miss Rickards is a practical woman and she realises that whatever improvements may be effected in mental hospitals, unless provision is made for the after-care of patients, little, if any, headway will result. When a patient goes back to the environment which may have induced lunacy, or have attributed to it, such as bad housing, the constant noise of children, and privation, mental distress will probably return. When the Poor Law is taken over by the London County Council, Miss Rickards foresees better opportunities for dealing with these evils and for co-ordinating services.

When Esther received her OBE at Buckingham Palace, the late Queen, Elizabeth II, asked Esther what outside interests she had. 'Dogs Ma'am!' replied Esther and then the Queen realised that it was Esther who wrote to her each year regarding the Windsor Dog Show. They proceeded to talk about dogs for the next 10 minutes with no mention of the hospital work for which she was receiving the OBE.



In 1971, at retirement, Esther moved to Nightingale Cottage, Tarbay Lane, Oakley Green, where she spent much of her time breeding Cocker spaniels - a hobby of some 30 years. She was a founder member of the Windsor Gun Dog Society, Chair of the London Cocker Spaniel Society, First President of the European Spaniel Congress, and founded/revived the Windsor Dog Show, becoming Secretary. Esther also judged Dog Shows on an International basis and rescued the breed of Irish Water Spaniels from near extinction.

The other surprising 'hobby' of Esther's was her expertise in embroidery. She offered to make the new Presidential gown for the College of Surgeons which was gratefully accepted by Lord Brock who commented that it was unique to accept the piece of a Fellow 'whose prowess with a needle is usually of rather a different order'.

Dr Esther Rickards died in February 1977 aged 83 and the residents of Oakley Green and Fifield raised money for a memorial bench to be placed locally. The original bench was stolen but the replacement, funded by the Lottery, is still situated outside Braywood School next to the bus stop.