
International Women's Day 2025

Remembering a pioneering Bridport woman

Ursula Holden – the town's first woman magistrate

1851 -1949



Ursula Holden in her home, Mountfield

To our twentieth century eyes, a woman becoming a magistrate might not seem to be an event to celebrate on International Women's Day. Yet until 1919 there were no women in courts other than the accused. The granting of the vote to some women in 1918 led to other reforms which suffragists had also fought for in the years before World War 1. The Sex Disqualification Removal Act (1919) eradicated the legal barrier to women's participation in many aspects of public and professional life. For example, women were allowed in principle to become magistrates, barristers and jurors for the first time. However, the hurdles to selection were great and in many places courts remained an all-male environment for many years. Bridport's first woman magistrate was appointed in 1923. Who she was, how she came to be appointed, her contribution and the degree to which she opened the door for others to follow, tells us a little more about the long struggle of women to be able to exercise hard-won rights.

Bridport's first woman magistrate

The Sex Disqualification Removal Act stated 'a person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial office or post'. In January 1923, the names of Dorset's first 5 lady magistrates (as they were called) were made public. Mrs Ellen Ursula Holden, Mountfield, Bridport headed the list together with women from Beaminster (Mrs Evelyn Lucy Margaret Sparrow), Wareham (Mrs Sarah Blanche Juliette Clark), Broadstone (Mrs Annie Georgina Pugh Briarwood) and Wimborne (Miss Katherine Mary Style) (Western Gazette, 5.1.1923). Magistrates could be appointed at a county or borough level. In the 1920s Bridport had 2 lady county magistrates (Holden and Sparrow) and no female borough magistrates. In 1926 these 2 were part of the 749 women magistrates in England and Wales, of which 100 were in London. By 1935 there had only been limited progress.

In England and Wales there were now 3,000 women JPs. Bridport's entry in Kelly's Directory for that year lists 3 women amongst the town's 27 county magistrates and 2 women had joined the list of 14 borough magistrates. By this time, although equal suffrage had been achieved and females were a majority in the Bridport population, women remained a small minority in the pool from which the Bridport Bench might be selected. It was to be a slow journey to reach the current state of affairs where 57% of the magistracy in England and Wales are women.

Anne Logan, historian of women magistrates, shows that the first women magistrates were middle-class, middle-aged and rooted in the establishment. This was certainly the case in Bridport. Margaret Sparrow (1882–1960), who lived outside Bridport near Stoke Abbott, was typical of many of the early lady magistrates as she was very well connected but does not seem to have had a public profile herself. She was a member of one of the leading local families, the Pinneys. Her father George Frederick Pinney had been a Dorset JP before the war.

Margaret Sparrow, pictured on the occasion of her wedding (Ladies Field, 7.5.1912)



When she took her seat on the Beaminster Bench (WG, 12.1.23), she sat alongside Major Pinney. This was probably Major General Reginald John Pinney (1863-1943) of Racedown Manor, who had become a JP in retirement from the army at the end of WW1 and was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Dorset in 1920. Evelyn's husband, who had been born in South Africa, was a gentleman farmer at Chartknolle where they lived a comfortable, servanted life in their 10 roomed home. Mrs Sparrow seems to have mainly sat on the Beaminster Bench despite being listed in the Kelly's Directory for Bridport. She occasionally sat at Bridport Police Court, together with Bridport's lady magistrate, Mrs Holden.

The story of Ellen Ursula Holden has some differences to that of Mrs Sparrow. She did not have Sparrow's family connections to the magistracy. It was Holden's role in the establishment of the Women's Institute in Bridport and the county (specifically that she was the first Chairman of the Dorset Federation of WIs) which was cited as her 'qualification' for appointment. It is likely that the WI lobbied for women to be admitted to the magistracy as they felt this was an appropriate civic role for women, detached from party politics but safeguarding the interests of women and children.

The process for appointing women magistrates was not transparent. Lobbying was not straightforward and individuals were not invited to apply. Recommendations were made to the Lord Chancellor by Lords Lieutenants for the counties advised by a shadowy group who met in secret. This meant that much depended on personal connections and the women selected were often related to or came from the same social milieu as male JPs. In Dorset it is not surprising that the Women's Institute was the acceptable face of organised women and a means to locate suitable lady magistrates.

The WI was the strongest non-party women's organisation in the county in the 1920s. Many of the key roles in the Dorset Federation were taken by women from the servanted-classes, although Bridport WI had a membership which reached women from a wider range of social backgrounds. Holden herself had been a founding member of Bridport WI in 1917, lived at the 12-roomed Mountfield and had become well-known in the town during the war. Unlike a number of the other active women in Bridport, Holden does not appear to have been involved in the West Dorset Women's Suffrage Society, where local women campaigned for the vote. So although Holden was part of the local WI along with other WDWSS members such as Agnes Suttill and Jean Edwards, she never made any public statements which suggested she was a suffragist or feminist. To those who made these appointments she probably appeared to be well-connected without being controversial: a safe pair of hands.



Who Was Ursula Holden?

Although listed at appointment as Ellen Ursula Holden, she signed her name in the WI minute book as E. Ursula Holden, so I think we can assume that she was known as Ursula. She was born in 1851 as Ellen Ursula Ware. In an unpublished memoir written by her son Andrew, she was remembered as 'A very talented, very wonderful woman. A very devoted wife and mother'. She was well educated and fluent in a number of languages. As a young woman, she travelled a good deal with her mother in Switzerland and Italy. According to family legend she was a lady probationer at St Thomas's Hospital and was interviewed by Florence Nightingale. It was on a voyage to Australia with her mother that Ursula met Lonsdale Holden who was an Englishman working as a surgeon at Hobart General Hospital in Tasmania. They were married in Melbourne. The Holdens had 3 children – Huen (b.1880); Andrew (b.1883, married in 1912 to Una, sister of Field Marshall Montgomery and daughter of the Bishop of Tasmania); and Ursula (b.1884, married in 1914).

The family returned to England in 1908, briefly living in Falmouth and then coming to Bridport in 1912 from Lostwithiel, Cornwall. Lonsdale and Ursula Holden lived at Mountfield (the current location of Bridport Town Council).



Ursula Holden as a young woman in Hobart, Tasmania



Mountfield.

By 1914 their adult children had all married and left home. Ursula had been brought up with servants and was faithfully served in Australia and then in England by Elizabeth Liebering (1862-1956), a German woman who had originally been the children's nanny and later served as housekeeper and cook including at Mountfield. She never gave up her German nationality. It is not clear how she, as a German national and thus 'enemy alien', was treated in WW1. In WW2 she was exempted from internment because of her age and because she had been in Britain since 1884. By 1939 she was listed as a retired nurse who lived with a couple at 24 Bedford Place, near Mountfield. Ursula paid her a pension in retirement. Elizabeth was buried in Bridport cemetery beside the Holdens. Throughout the period that Ursula lived at Mountfield from 1912 to 1942, she was always accompanied by servants.

So what kind of woman was Ursula Holden? She was a skilled craftswoman who made all her own clothes when the family lived in Tasmania. She was also very musical (in Bridport she conducted the Bridport WI choir, organised concerts, and even performed on the cello). In Tasmania she had taught herself bookbinding which remained her main hobby. She continued to win prizes for it when she was living in Bridport. Her son remembered her as taking the trouble to learn all the crafts of the WIs such as rug making, basket making and even country dancing. Once in Bridport she was an active member of the Dorset Arts and Crafts Association, often acting as a judge at local exhibitions. Here she mixed with many of the other women active in Bridport public life. She also set up a handloom in a bedroom in Mountfield, weaving linen cloth that she then embroidered. She was also very well read. Perhaps unsurprisingly there was little time for anything domestic: she never did any housework and her son said he never saw her cook anything. But then women of her social class had servants to undertake this labour. Mrs Holden was still advertising for servants in 1940: a general maid aged 28-45 with good references was required to work in a quiet and safe area for good wages and with outings (WG, 15.11.1940).

Ursula Holden's life in Bridport

Ursula was 61 when she and her husband took up occupation of Mountfield in 1912. Aside from playing her cello at a concert in aid of the Cottage Hospital building fund in 1914, she was not very visible before the war. Yet she was clearly not overawed by the idea of speaking in public as she can be found at a meeting on Our Women's Patriotism in Bridport Town Hall soon after the outbreak of war. The meeting was convened by Mrs Colfox from nearby Coneygar, who was a leading member of the local elite. It was a recruitment meeting which set out in detail the money that women and children would get if their menfolk volunteered. Ursula Holden followed Mrs Colfox onto the stage where she gave 'an interesting and telling address'. (Bridport News, 4.9.1914) She spoke as one who knew something of Germany and its government.

She said it was not like the British government, which belonged to the people. She explained her view that our freedom and individuality as a nation would be taken from us if Germany were victorious in this war. She called on all who had any influence to use it to encourage the men to come forward and protect our country. She finished by reading a short poem by Miss Templer, who could not be there herself (BN, 11.9.1914). This is a rare occasion when we hear her voice – confident and very much in the mainstream of public opinion. She did not identify self-consciously as a woman as say Agnes Suttill would have. Yet the presence of Mrs Colfox and the reference to Hebe Templer (an occupant of Mountfield from at least 1871 to 1911) shows that within 2 years of her arrival in Bridport, Mrs Holden was well-networked with some of the leading families in the town. Although she did not speak at a subsequent women's patriotic meeting, she did give £6 to the Bridport Belgian Refugee Fund in October 1914. In November Ursula Holden again spoke at a women's meeting at the Town Hall presided over by Mrs TA Colfox. Now the focus was on Belgian refugees. Ursula Holden's contribution was another 'stirring address', which used a map to trace the progress of the war including 'the over-running of Belgium, the onward rush to Paris and the retreat of the German army' (BN, 6.11.1914).

The Holdens supported a number of local initiatives by lending their home and substantial gardens for meetings and fund-raising events. One of the more unusual ones was a meeting at Mountfield attended by the principal employers from the netting industry, local ministers and other ladies and gentlemen. Most of the leading women active in the town were present as they were married to local manufacturers, businessmen and ministers, many of whom were also town councillors. The purpose of the meeting was to hear a talk about setting up clubs for factory girls who, it was felt, needed careful guidance through the early years of their industrial life if they were going to be profitable and productive workers. It was thought that working-class girls left elementary schools 'rather wild and uncontrollable'. It was suggested that it would be profitable for citizens and employers to provide clubs for these girls in Bridport where they could do military drill, and receive domestic education particularly in cooking. (BN, 9.7.1915)

A ladies committee was set up to confer with representative factory workers about setting up a girls club and hostel in the town. Soon it was decided that creating a hostel was impracticable, although there was a general feeling that a club would make the town more attractive to girl workers (BN, 24.9.1915) Indeed 2 years later when Bridport WI was set up it ran a successful girls club.



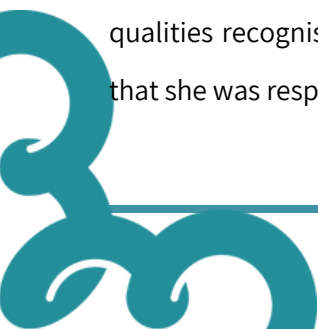
The Bridport WI Choir outside Mountfield, 1920. Mrs Holden carries the baton.

Across the war it was Ursula rather than Lonsdale whose name appeared in relation to various voluntary activities on the home front. She was involved in gathering together shirts made for Red Cross hospitals and opened a YWCA sale when Lady Williams (wife of the local MP) was unavailable. On this occasion Ursula spoke about the present terrible world war, and expressed the view that the war was not because Christianity had failed but because of the want of it, and that it was more imperative than ever to spread the message far and wide (BN, 1.12.1916). In 1917 when a ladies committee of the Bridport and District War Savings Committee was set up Mrs Holden became its secretary – this had the dual function of raising money for the war and also promoting household economy (BN, 4.5.1917).

It was also in 1917 that she helped to found one of the earliest branches of the WI - in Bridport. She was elected its first President, serving from 1917-20. She opened her home and gardens to members for meetings and for events. On one occasion the play “A war committee” was performed in Mountfield’s drawing room followed by refreshments served on the terrace. This was much enjoyed by members, according to the WI Minute book entry for August 1920. By 1919 she was Chairman of the Dorset Federation of WIs – the county now had 50 WIs. Holden regularly spoke at meetings of the Federation, for example in 1921 she argued for speakers’ classes for members to learn how to speak clearly and concisely before their fellow members. She also called for more intimate co-operation between Institutes. At the end of 1921, she retired as Chairman of the County Executive. Fulsome tributes were paid to her:

when they formed their County Federation with 16 Institutes in 1916, Mrs Holden was almost a stranger to the county. Frances, Lady Portman was made president; Mrs Sheridan, vice-president; and Mrs Holden who had the statesmanship to see what the movement meant, and to start a branch at Bridport, was made acting chairman. From that day to this she had simply been one of the main-springs of the Institutes. Her quiet advice, her restraining influence, her magnificent example, had never failed. Mrs Holden’s courtesy, tact, patience, kindness and efficient craftsmanship had made her office a very difficult one to follow. (WG, 2.12.1921)

Ursula Holden continued to be part of the Bridport WI, speaking at other Institutes, and attending Dorset Federation meetings throughout the 1920s, particularly supporting crafts by judging competitions and organising concerts. The Federation expressed their condolences to her when Lonsdale died in 1927: ‘They had always received her unbounded sympathy and affection in all their interests’. The assembly passed the vote by standing in silence (WG, 3.6.1927). In 1930 her pioneering role in the Federation was recognised at a visit of Princess Mary to Dorchester where Holden was among those from the WI presented to the royal visitor (WG, 2.5.1930). The personal qualities recognised by fellow WI members and the skills she developed through the movement not only meant that she was respected locally but must have contributed to her selection and practice as a magistrate.



Ursula Holden as a magistrate

Ursula Holden was 72 when she began sitting as a magistrate at the County Petty Sessions in Bridport. Often her neighbour Lt Col TA Colfox chaired the Bench and it is his voice rather than hers that is heard in newspaper reports. Taking an example of the session reported in May 1925, Holden was the only woman on a bench of 3 plus the Chair (WG, 29.5.25). Together they adjudicated on a range of cases: licensing issues; a gypsy encampment at Wootton Fitzpaine; the width of a heavy motor; cattle straying; disorderly conduct; and a man failing to disclose all his income when applying for an old age pension. Women gave evidence but were not the central figures in any case until the magistrates were asked for an affiliation order by a single woman in respect of the paternity of her child. She was an unmarried mother. This was the kind of case that campaigners for women's admission to the judicial process had argued required the presence of women within the court. We don't know what role Holden played in 'the considerable time' given to this particular case when a number of witnesses were called on both sides. The Bench agreed to order the defendant to contribute 10s a week towards his child's maintenance until it attained the age of 16. He was also ordered to pay the costs connected with birth (£4 17s), together with a number of witnesses' fees, court costs and a guinea for an advocate's fee (WG, 29.5.1925).

Later that year Ursula Holden sat at Bridport County Police Court with Mrs Sparrow, again under the chairmanship of Lt Col Colfox. Amongst those accused of being drunk and disorderly or of speeding, there was the case of a young woman who had abandoned her 11 month old baby girl 'in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health'. The woman was told that if she agreed to go into St Gabriel's Home in Weymouth for 2 years she would be spared prison. This was a home for unmarried mothers and their children. Again this was the kind of case that many had felt would benefit from the presence of women on the Bench. Indeed when the Wareham County Petty Sessions welcomed its first lady magistrate, it was said that the presence of ladies on the Bench was much appreciated as there were many cases where their help and knowledge could be of great assistance to the Court and the administration of justice (WG, 12.1.1923). Occasionally this was visible in the reporting of local cases. In 1926 at the Quarterly Sessions held in Dorchester a man was accused of the indecent assault of an 8 year old girl. The victim was called to give evidence and was too reticent to speak in the courtroom. It was said that at an earlier hearing a lady magistrate had been able to get the girl to answer questions. However, at the final hearing there was no-one to encourage the girl to speak and the man was acquitted (WG, 8.10.1926).



It is not clear that the particular skills and even empathy that a lady magistrate might bring to the Bench was ever acknowledged in Bridport or, indeed, whether Holden herself made that argument. A similar case was made to try to get Dorset to appoint women police. Although Bridport WI added their voice to the unsuccessful campaign in the early 1920s, it was Agnes Suttill whose name was associated with it rather than Holden. Many in interwar women's organisations felt that it was important that the all-male police force was augmented by women officers with the same powers as other constables. Holden does not seem to have added her voice to this campaign. It is hard to tell what kind of magistrate Holden was as her voice does not survive in the local press nor is it apparent whether the men who served in these traditionally male spaces appreciated the efforts of Mrs Holden or Mrs Sparrow.

Despite her advancing years Ursula Holden remained listed as a county magistrate into the 1930s. In Kelly's Directory for 1935, Holden and Sparrow were joined by Mrs Mary Frances Colfox (1892-1973), the wife of the local MP, Philip Colfox. She lived at Symondsbury Manor, becoming Lady Colfox in 1939. She was active in support of her husband in the local Conservative party but was not in the WI. Her addition to the Bench fits the pattern for the county where only the well-connected seem to have been given this opportunity. It is therefore more surprising that one of the 2 new lady borough magistrates was from a rather different social background. Mrs Bessie Frances Welch (1888-1968) was much younger than Ursula Holden but as Mrs GW Welch had long been very active in the Bridport WI holding a number of offices. Born on Portland, after her father died she was brought up by her grandmother Elizabeth Ackerman (a school cleaner in 1901) in the 4 rooms of 22 King Street, together with her 3 aunts and her brother. By 1911 Bessie was a schoolteacher still living with her elderly grandmother (who had had 11 children in her 52 year marriage, 6 of whom had died). In 1915 she married George Welch and they moved further down King Street to number 10. George was a machine fitter at Pymore Mill and his younger brother Fred, a machine fitter turner at the same mill, also lived with the couple. By 1931 the Welches had moved to 121 Victoria Grove. In 1939 their household consisted of George (now a foreman textile engineer), Bessie (unpaid domestic duties) and Bessie's sister (an incapacitated school teacher). It is not clear how Bessie was selected by the Council to become a magistrate although her name appears in the local press in association with the WI and the Unitarian Chapel. Both were organisations which would connect her with the local elite – for example, the Colfoxes were also Unitarians. What is clear is that she did not share the social background of the other lady magistrates. We have more to learn about Bessie and her experience as a Bridport magistrate where her social class may have marked her out even more than her gender.



The significance of Ursula Holden's achievement

The achievement of Ursula Holden in becoming Bridport's first lady magistrate did not herald a significant change in the gender of the local Bench. Women remained a minority and many sittings were an all-male affair. This was not helped by the fact that after 1926 there were no women town councillors in Bridport who might select or serve as borough magistrates. The stories of other pioneering women in Bridport of Ursula Holden's generation show that realising women's rights was often very slow. Although Bridport's first woman town councillor had been a suffragist and a feminist, none of the women who became local magistrates in the interwar period shared these politics. However, they took this opportunity to engage in civic life. Ursula Holden's involvement in the Women's Institute reinforced this and reflected her interests in crafting and creativity. Unlike her WI colleague Agnes Suttill she does not seem to have wanted to take part in local government or the political life of the town. Women's contribution to their neighbourhood and to fellow citizens can take many forms. Partial women's enfranchisement in 1918 brought some opportunities for women. Ursula Holden stepped up and made her own distinctive contribution to the town. She was another pioneering Bridport woman that we should remember.

Professor Karen Hunt, March 2025

This article draws on the local press (available at www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk and at Bridport Local History Centre/ Bridport Library); the minute books of the Bridport WI; and papers from the Holden family (for which many thanks to Ursula Holden's great granddaughter, Dr Kath Holden). Ursula Holden was one of the women who featured in the 2018 exhibition, *Home Front Home*, at Bridport Museum which told the story of Bridport's home front during the Great War through the lives of 7 women. It was wonderful that Kath and her late father managed to attend the exhibition to see the celebration of their foremother's contribution to the Bridport home front.

Of course, historical research is always being added to as new sources are unearthed and different questions asked - and that applies to Bridport Stories too. In 2018, I had yet to establish that Mrs Holden was known as Ursula rather than Ellen. It was research for that exhibition that prompted me to excavate the stories told here. If you have anything to share or add to these stories, please do let us know at Bridport Museum.



Panel from the *Home Front Home* exhibition, 2018