

100 years of women

The Early Years

St Hugh's can lay claim to two of the most influential and pioneering female lawyers in the past 100 years: Gwyneth Bebb (Jurisprudence, 1908) and Baroness Heather Hallett PC (Jurisprudence, 1968).

Indeed, the journey in Law of the 'brilliant' Miss Bebb started more than 100 years ago when in 1911 she was the first woman to attain Class I in Jurisprudence in the University, reputedly with the highest marks. The *St Hugh's Club Paper* of 1911 illustrates the effect: 'Such an achievement makes us all shine in reflected glory'. She memorably took on the Law Society in an attempt to qualify as a solicitor, and following the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, for which she had worked tirelessly, was admitted to study at Lincoln's Inn immediately. She was finally awarded her degree in 1920. She was commissioner of the West Midland Division of the newly established National Service for Women, then assistant commissioner for enforcement for the Ministry of Food, Midland Division, until August 1920. Her role was in prosecuting black marketeers for food profiteering. For her prosecution work with the Ministry of Food she was one of the first women to be awarded the OBE in 1921, aged only 31. Her intention was to become the first woman barrister but her journey sadly ended with her premature death in 1924. Her many obituaries attested to her intellectual brilliance and exceptional gifts.

Exactly 60 years after Gwyneth Bebb matriculated, Heather Hallett also matriculated in Jurisprudence. When she retired from the judiciary in 2019, the Rt Hon Lady Justice Hallett DBE was vice-president of the Court of Appeal Criminal Division and became Baroness Hallett of Rye as a cross-bench Peer. Called to the Bar



Gwyneth Bebb

in 1921, she became one of the youngest QCs and was the first woman to chair the Bar Council. She also became College's first High Court judge in 1999. Part and parcel of her judicial leadership roles was a steadfast determination to improve training, equality and diversity. To the public, she may be better known as the highly regarded coroner for the inquests into the '7/7', 2005 London bombings, and of Dawn Sturgess, who died in the 2018 Salisbury Novichok poisonings. Heather Hallett and Gwyneth Bebb both feature in the series of profiles on pioneering alumnae included on the College website as part of the celebrations to mark 100 years of Oxford degrees for women.

However, the story of women lawyers at St Hugh's starts before Gwyneth Bebb - and with a mystery. The first woman to be awarded a Diploma in Jurisprudence (the precursor to the Degree award in 1920) was Ludmilla Von Vogdt in 1907. Intriguingly, the 1909 *Club Paper* refers to one unnamed fresher 'following the lead of Miss Von Vogdt and reading for Law'. That can only have been Gwyneth Bebb.

According to College records, Ludmilla Von Vogdt came from St Petersburg, to where she had returned by 1909. How she came to study at St Hugh's



Heather Hallett

at the age of just 18 is unknown but her entry in the *Register* briefly states that she had studied under Professor Tagantsev. That would have been Professor Nikolai Tagantsev, the foremost criminologist of his day and author of the Russian Penal Code. Unfortunately, the professor's son gave his name unwittingly to the Tagantsev Conspiracy faked by the Bolsheviks in 1921 to expose any intellectuals they could accuse of being disloyal. He was tricked into naming 800 members of the Petrograd intelligentsia, 98 of whom were executed as were he and his wife, and many were sent to concentration camps. Ludmilla Von Vogdt became Mrs M Kholodovsky in 1912, and ceased to be a subscribing member of the Association of Senior Members by 1914. It is so far impossible to tell what became of her or what befell her.

Fortunately, less drama attended the next female Jurisprudence graduates at St Hugh's: Agnes Hart and Elizabeth Crosthwaite who graduated in 1920 and 1923 respectively. The former went to work for the British Social Hygiene Council which had a major public educational role in combatting sexually transmitted diseases. Elizabeth Crosthwaite was reading for the Bar in 1923 then married in 1925, moving to Scotland and later starting a handicraft business.

lawyers at St Hugh's

By Veronica Lowe (Modern History, 1969)



Beatrice Alexander, centre, wearing a choker

Beatrice Alexander graduated in 1930 and was called to the Bar (Inner Temple) in 1934, making her St Hugh's College's first barrister. However, the 1933-34 *Chronicle* recorded that she had 'no present intention of practising and is now taking a secretarial course'. A senior secretarial career did follow including responsibility for the overseas section of the BBC Copyright department, and she may have been an amateur composer.

If there is some disappointment at only three Jurisprudence graduates in the 20 years following Gwyneth Bebb's first, and their decisions not to pursue a career in the Law, Doris Bushnell demonstrated progress. She graduated with Class II in 1932 then as a Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL) in 1934, and MA in 1937. Called to the Bar (Middle Temple) in 1934, she had already made the interesting career move of joining the police force in Birmingham where by 1940 she was superintendent in charge of the Women's Police department. She then became a solicitor probably in 1945, started her own practice 5 years later but sadly died at the age of 56 in 1964. She was most probably the College's first solicitor.

One year after Doris Bushnell graduated, Hilda Skidelsky took a Class II in Jurisprudence in 1933, and was the winner of the Winter Williams Law Scholarship for Women. She married Akiva Persitz, a lawyer, immediately on graduation. According to the *Chronicle* of 1933-34 she hoped to continue to read for the Bar although had moved to Tel Aviv in the then British Mandate of Palestine where her husband belonged to a prominent Zionist family who owned a major Hebrew language publishing house. The remaining Oxford link was her son Raphael who studied at Balliol and was an international chess champion.

Ellice Hearn CBE (Mrs Eadie) deserves a separate profile of her own. Also a winner of the Winter Williams Law Scholarship for Women and a number of other prizes, she graduated with a first in Jurisprudence in 1934 then the next year with a first in the BCL. She was second in merit in the first class in her final Bar exams, and was called to the Bar (Gray's Inn) in 1937. Of her many achievements, she became deputy parliamentary counsel in 1956, the first woman to achieve under-secretary rank as a lawyer in the Civil Service, then parliamentary counsel in 1968. She drafted ground-breaking divorce reform and pensions legislation, and revised the Supreme Court Rules. On retirement she became the first female standing counsel to the Church of England Synod, again with a modernising approach. She was described in her *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry as 'a role model for other women in the Law'.

The third St Hugh's graduate awarded a first in Jurisprudence was Betty Harris CBE (Lady Johnston) in 1937 - another outstanding alumna with a career in public service. With echoes of Ellice Hearn, Betty Harris took the BCL in 1938, and was placed in the first class in her final Bar exams in 1939, winning the same

scholarships and prizes at St Hugh's and at the Bar as her predecessor. She was called to the Bar (Gray's Inn) in 1940, and became assistant parliamentary counsel in 1942 for six years then later deputy parliamentary counsel attached to the Law Commission as Ellice Hearn had done. On retirement, she also became standing counsel to the Church of England Synod. For many years she was involved in six organisations promoting the education of talented girls with modest means, in line with St Hugh's own ethos.

The first St Hugh's Jurisprudence graduate to start her own practice at the Bar was Rachel Howard, then only for three years before taking various legal and administrative posts. She graduated in 1939, and was called to the Bar in 1941.

In a perceptive article in the 1938-39 *Chronicle* on 'Women and The Legal Profession', one 'ER' wrote: 'At the moment the legal profession is not one to be entered lightly by women. It is an enthralling occupation for those who can afford it and have patience and adaptability. For those who must earn money immediately it is not advised unless they are lucky enough to have sympathetic friends or relatives already in the profession.'

On the other hand, 'The value of a legal training to women is immeasurable. The mental training teaches discipline, clarity of thought, application of principles to particular facts, and the capacity for making unbiased decisions devoid of emotion.'

Of the 11 Jurisprudence graduates by 1939, five were the daughters of solicitors and five pursued a legal career. Two lawyers were awarded CBEs and one an OBE, a further testament to the pioneering spirit and public service of St Hugh's women.

To be continued.