

Women's Philanthropy and Religion: The Ladies of the Northampton Shoe Trade, 1870-1950

Introduction

When considering the role of philanthropy in society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in relation to the actions of women, it is important to explore the influence that religion and religious groups had. This article will consider the connection between the women of the boot and shoe industry and how their involvement in the various religious organisations, particularly those nonconformist denominations popular amongst the middle classes in Northampton. Religious observance offered a broad variety of opportunities for women to participate in philanthropic activity. By considering the links between the non-conformism of Northampton's religious belief and the boot and shoe industry. It will explore the involvement of the wives and daughters of the boot and shoe manufacturers and question their motivations and influence of the many donations to religious organisations within the town that are still visible today.

It is important to consider that, although the theme is religion, it is not a study of religious worship except when considering religion as a motivation for philanthropic activity. An important line of enquiry when considering the philanthropic activities of women within a religious setting is exploring the link between church and welfare, as well as church and politics. This is not to say that the church had influence over policy and legislation, but when considering campaigns such as those which sought to solve welfare problems was underpinned by the beliefs and teachings of the respective denominations.

This study reflects on the social history, as well as the economics, of church finances.

However, it does not look at the amounts being raised, rather the modes in which they were

raised and utilised. As Sarah Flew (2015) suggests, there is little research about church finances and church historians consider it a subject too sensitive to consider in too much detail. In a similar vein, Brian Heeney (1986), in his work on church feminism in the Church of England, pointed out that women and the women's movement is often ignored by historians of the Church of England. That does not reduce the importance of a study such as this. Much of what is already researched about women's philanthropy links the practice to events in the Church such as bazaars. However, other than a few statements to suggest these happened, little is written about the importance of these events within church finances. Although both Sarah Flew and Brian Heeney focus on the Church of England and this study will focus more on the Nonconformist denominations of Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists, the issues of women's visibility within religious history are similar.

The study will consider Northampton as a case study and particularly the wives of the boot and shoe industry who had a considerable influence on the town and the outskirts. All the women considered, five in total, were middle class either by birthright or marriage, and therefore, this study will centre around the experiences of middle class women. It will consider their motivations for participating in the philanthropic activities of the churches they were affiliated with as well as the legacy which they left throughout the town. It will also give thought to connections to other organisations within the town such as Northampton General Hospital and how their activities raised money for them.

When considering the motivation of why women became involved in philanthropic pursuits it is essential to consider the research into religious motivation. Religious observance offered a broad variety of opportunities for women, particularly middle class. It is seen as an unattractive subject by some feminist historians, however, much of the philanthropic

activities carried out either had influence from the church or were able to develop due to the congregational nature of belief. It must be noted that religious motivation was not exclusive to women.

Women were considered the vanguard of the charitable movement with an estimated half a million women involved in the sector in 1893. (Parker, 2009). Kathleen D. McCarthy (1995) described philanthropy as laying at the causes which they support financially than their male counterparts. Frank Prochaska (1974), who has produced many works regarding women's philanthropic activities, points out that generations of academics accepted women's philanthropic efforts but do not show much interest in the origins or scope of their participation or their impact on social forces. Despite the elitism of monied women, when it came to philanthropic and community efforts many preferred to create a sisterhood such as those created for the suffrage movement. (Johnson, 2017) Joan Marie Johnson (2017) argued that they believed that all women required economic independence and political equality no matter their class or origin of their wealth (p. 10).

One of the key debates within women's history is the emergence of 'separate spheres' and the cross over into gender history. The concept of public and private spheres can be seen as a basic generalization with the ideology of Jurgen Habermas that men dominated the public sphere by participating in law, politics and economics while women identified as the more domesticated private sphere of home making and motherhood has many blurred lines and makes the broad definition questionable. However, it is important to consider that these ideals can be linked to the morals and practices of philanthropy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period in particular saw many activities move from what would be considered the private sphere to the public sphere, especially amongst the women of the

middle classes, who growing in number as a consequence of industrialization, found themselves having no place within the domestic sphere nor the public sphere of political activity.(Thompson, 1987) In British History, this theory is not seen to cross over to the aristocracy or the working class, in part because the working class could not afford to forego earnings and the aristocracy found them irrelevant. (Steinbech, 2012) Catherine Hall (1992) argues that the middle class was treated as male and that women played no part in public events which structure the middle class consciousness. She also argues that the ideology of spheres played a crucial part in the formation of the middle class which in turn separates them from the aristocracy and the working class.

Historians such as Janet Thomas (1988) and Amanda Vickery (1993) have questioned the dominance of the separate spheres ideology. Vickery argues that the assumption that man needed a woman at home and the glorification of domesticated womanhood was causation of the deterioration of the public power of women. Thomas agrees, suggesting that the ideology of the domestic sphere was forced upon women by the expulsion of women from craft unions and the changing of the work conditions brought about by legislation such as the Factories Act 1847.(Thomas, 1988, p. 536) James Vernon (2009) also suggests that public spheres marginalized women by the 1830s and even when they were involved in public life, their inclusion was restrictive. However, although the ideal of separate spheres, that women were part of a private, more domestic sphere, is no reflection on the reality of nineteenth century women's lives, it has formed much of the basis on women's history. (Gleadle, 2001) Alternatively, Vickery (1993) argues that we should refrain from theories that suggest that women's work was ostracized on the basis of capitalism and in fact, as Bennett (1988) also suggests, that the history of women's work is a history that 'stands still'.

Kathryn Gleadle (2009) argues that in fact the public sphere can be separated into two distinct spheres, the public and the parochial. This is particularly apparent in the case studies of the ladies of the Northampton boot and shoe industry. Many of those ladies, as will be seen have links to what could be argued as parochial activities; church activities, visiting, local fundraising and mothers meetings. These would often be committee based and the women would be at the forefront of the organization for these and therefore in a public role, however, it could be argued that as this would be voluntary, it would be parochial rather than public by Habermas's definition.

Although there are questions about the ideology of separate spheres, this is not to say that there is not evidence that women, particularly the middle classes, did not naturally conform to some of the ideals. Female involvement in philanthropic activities was just that, something that could draw together a community of women with a common cause, be it political, social, economic or religious motivation. (Gleadle, 2001) Some of these are naturally interlinked and as Gleadle argues, this mix of cultural influences gave women the confidence to engage with the 'public sphere'. (p. 154) As a result, despite the ideology of separate spheres, many middle class women engaged in philanthropic activities outside of the family home. (Moore, 2016, p. 149) The obligation and duty to serve the wider community did have a tendency to operate as a gender based defence but as Digby (1992) argues, public and private spheres are a moving boundary. Considering social issues not only allowed middle-class women to take advantage of this 'social borderland' but as Summers (2012) notes, it also enable to middle-class to emancipate the social classes beneath them. Therefore it could be argued that when considering the history of women's philanthropy, class divide is a more important enquiry than the gendered debate of separate spheres. This is not to say that there is not a place for the consideration of spheres. However, as Gleadle

argues, it may be more important to consider the split of public sphere rather than squeezing women into the private domestic sphere. As will be shown the women in these case studies were in the public sphere.

Philanthropy in Religion

As with much of the literature regarding women's philanthropy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a lot of the works consider how their actions link to the crossover from the private to public sphere, and how the domesticity of women limited their activities. However, religious philanthropy enabled many women to overcome these barriers. Much of the work surrounding the church involved a sense of domesticity and therefore lent itself to women. Also, it must be noted that much of the existing literature focuses on the nineteenth century rather than the early twentieth century. Many historians argue that the start of the twentieth century saw the religious influence on the Victorian values that are embedded into the philanthropic activities within religious organisations began to dissipate and this study will explore that view further.

The religious studies, such as *The Death of Christian Britain*, (Brown, 2001) focuses on the twentieth century often discusses the decline in religious practice. When considering what is written about women's involvement constitutes of much less with brief references of visiting and Sunday school teaching, despite references to the opportunities for women to participate in church activities. The case studies will show that the women of the boot and shoe industry were in a privileged position, mainly thanks to the notoriety of their husbands, which, as will be explored, gave them the benefit of more involvement.

Historians of religion have suggested that the social history approach has led to misinterpretation. By always attributing religious beliefs and behaviour to their social and economic context, it has had the tendency to strip that behaviour of its religious meaning. It is also important to consider, as has been discussed in previous studies, that not all philanthropic activity involved donations, and voluntary contributions to the churches and chapels. Brian Harrison (1966) described nineteenth century churches and chapels as being 'unformalised friendly societies, spawning their Dorcas clubs, thrift associations, Band of Hope, and discussion groups'.(p. 356) Whilst many of these groups were examples of the range of activities that women were involved in within the church, Harrison's description fails to consider the benefits of these groups to both the women who ran them as well as those who they attempted to assist. As with the involvement of women in politics, philanthropic activities within the churches and religious organisations did not just include fundraising and donations. Voluntary commitments were also an important part of the running of most religious organisations.

Philanthropy, particularly during the Victorian era, has always had links to religion and as discussed by Frank Prochaska, the boundaries between philanthropy, mutual aid and religion, were often crossed. (Prochaska, 2006, p.11) Prior to the emergence of the welfare state in 1945, religion played a large part in social welfare, as well as health and education. All denominations have a concept of charitable giving and serving worthy causes. However, the emphasis of these varies on denominational splits. For example. When considering the nonconformist religions that will be the focus of this study, unitarians promoted educational causes, whereas Congregationalist and Baptists promoted the temperance movement.

Methodists on the other hand were considered pioneering in district visiting.(Prochaska, 2006, p.12-13)

The evangelicals saw “good works” and charitable activities as the true sign of conversion, although doctrine did not suggest this (Prochaska, 2006, p. 3) Women held an important place within the evangelical movement, finding themselves excluded from a male dominated church based institution, the evangelical movement allowed them to show their enthusiasm for family and personal religion. As Prochaska (1980) states, ‘that each person worked out his or her own salvation was very much in accord with the *laissez-faire* ethos of the secular world’. (p.8) Because of the emphasis on the moral qualities and women’s duty to motivations were often motivated by their own agenda, which in turn influenced the type of philanthropic activities carried out by the women involved. For example, Kathryn Gleadle (2001) discusses how the Unitarians considered Sunday schools as a way of encouraging working classes to think and reason for themselves. Whereas evangelicals discouraged the teaching of reading to working-class children.(p.67) Many voluntary religious organisations gave women a primary opportunity to increase their involvement in public life. It can be argued that women’s involvement in the church, particularly in the Nonconformist denominations, was the only option for many and as discussed by Bebbington, the community created around the chapel gave women a meaning to their lives. (Bebbington, 1982, p.6) However, this view, as with much that is written about women’s involvement in religion (and also in philanthropy in general) glosses over the involvement and importance of their works within the church.

Margaret Preston (2004), in her work on women and language of charity in nineteenth century Dublin, claims that the goal of most organisations was the eradication of sin.

However, as this study considers the motivations of the individual, it could be argued that this is an assumption that cannot be made to organisations in England, particularly in the locality of Northampton. That said, it must also be considered that organisations such as the YWCA did, as argued by Susan Mumm (2010), 'target the reduction of sinful behaviour' by emphasizing the importance of Christian values, although she points out that those involved were not 'depraved' by what she considers 'conservative activists' (Mumm, 2010, p.63).

Religious Philanthropy in Northampton

Religion in England during this period saw the Church of England as the established church. However, there was also a substantial number of nonconformists made up of Methodists, both Wesleyan and Primitive, Baptists, Congregationalist and Quakers among others. . Northampton was no exception in this, and many of the women in the case studies were Primitive Methodists and Congregationalist. There are few records which give accurate numbers of those who attended church during the period of 1870 and 1950. The 1851 religious census, although outside our timeframe, is the only official investigation into religious participation. The accuracy of the census with the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce questioning whether the collation of data would result in false reporting as he argued Church of England returns would be underreported whereas Nonconformist returns would be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the information for the 1851 Religious Census is useful, reporting that there were 592 places of worship in Northamptonshire and of these 300 were non-conformist churches. From the individual breakdowns of churches in Northampton itself, nine of these were within the Town. By 1891, the Kelly's Directory for Northamptonshire listed twenty six non-conformist churches and by 1914 the Kelly's

Directory showed that this had increased to thirty two. This figure fluctuated between 1914 and 1940 with one or two churches merging throughout this period.

As with women's religion during this period nationally, little is written about religion in Northampton. Many of the sources for this study is from local newspapers such as *Northampton Mercury* and *Northampton Independent*. There are also a sizeable number of records held at the Northamptonshire Records Office regarding a number of the churches which are the focus of this piece. Whilst these include both financial records and minutes of meetings which can provide useful insight into the funding of the churches at the time, it is important to remember that women in these records are often omitted, particularly in the case of Northampton where, as will be explored, much of the money was donated by the men on behalf of the women rather than directly from the women themselves. It is important to consider that access to church membership records is difficult due to GDPR restrictions and therefore we are unable to gain an accurate idea of how many people, and women in particular, were attending the churches at the time. Because of this, this article will consider the types of philanthropic activity rather than any quantitative data of involvement. Apart from small, commemorative works for several churches within the town little is written about religion in Northampton, especially with regards to women and philanthropic activities. Much that is written comes from newspaper reports and church minutes.

When considering the motivation of why women became involved in philanthropic pursuits it is essential to consider the research into religious motivation. Religious observance offered a broad variety of opportunities for women, particularly middle class. Much of the

philanthropic activities carried out either had influence from the church or were able to develop due to the congregational nature of belief.

It must, however, be considered that philanthropic motivations did not derive solely from Evangelicalism. As suggested, all denominations, be it Quakers, Unitarians, Methodists etc, had a concept of philanthropy and benevolence. As we see with the ladies of the boot and shoe industry, much of the work they carried out was linked to the Methodist or Unitarian church and Congregationalist Church.

Northampton's religious organisations were linked to many charitable organisations as well as the philanthropic activities that took place within the confines of the church itself. These were often linked to welfare causes and, in that capacity, gave the opportunity to support local community. Some organisations such as the Girls' Friendly Society and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) were supporting organisations that promoted the value of the churches. Those such as Bethany Homestead were created by the churches to help provide homes and support to the town's elderly. There was also the involvement of the churches in the local hospital week fundraising, particularly on Hospital Sunday, a fundraising event whereby the congregations of the local churches donated funds to the hospital.

Records do, however, show a variety of examples for the wives of the boot and shoe manufacturers having both an influence and an involvement in religious philanthropy in the town. Even in the present day, there are church buildings standing which were built due to the impact of these ladies. For example, when the Unitarian Church and school buildings on the Kettering Road in Northampton opened in 1897, Sir Philip Manfield attributed the inception of the church, reported to be circa £5000 (approx. £654,700) together with a fund

for perpetual maintenance, to his wife and partner, Lady Margaret Manfield, saying that he “was only too willing and too anxious to do anything not only that would please and gratify her, but anything that would help to establish their [Unitarians] causes more in the town”.

(*Northampton Mercury*, 8th October 1897) It must also be considered that Rev. Ireson of the Unitarian Church was married to Lady Manfield’s sister and therefore it could be suggested that this also had an influence on a donation of this magnitude. (Field, 2002)

Similarly, when Mrs. Elizabeth Arnold died, her husband, William Arnold of Arnold Bros Ltd., donated £5000 to the Kettering Road Primitive Methodist Church to fund the building of a new church on Park Avenue. In offering this gift, he insisted that it was not his gift, but that of his late wife, stating “it is what she would have given to the good cause and to the community if she had been able to go about doing good”. (*Northampton Daily Echo*, 1st February 1923) From this, it can be argued that the motivations for Philip Manfield was to appease his wife whereas William Arnold’s motivation was that of memorial. Both, however, were influenced by their wife’s faith, motivation and affiliation with their respective church.

Louisa Manfield was the wife of Shoe Manufacturer, Harry Manfield of Manfield and Sons and daughter in law of Sir Philip Manfield. Mrs Harry Manfield’s (named in this way to distinguish between her sister in law, also named Louisa) involvement with the Young Women’s Christian Association in Northampton shows her hard working and tenacious manner in the pursuit for charity. She held the position of presidency for twenty years from 1914, only to step down through ill health. During that time, she put the welfare of the girls first and foremost. Her letter to the *Northampton Mercury* on 11th December 1914 brought to the attention of the people of Northampton the need for a suitable premises and the protection, presumably for the war effort, to request charity for the organisation. The YWCA

did achieve their aims of gaining premises of the Memorial Hall, Castilian Street, Northampton which was used as a hostel for the organisation.

Another example of the ladies of the boot and shoe industry and their involvement in religious philanthropy was that of Mrs Sarah Lewis. Her husband, Charles Lewis, one of the owners of C & E Lewis in the St James area of Northampton, was a preacher at the Primitive Methodist church and she was described as a “generous subscriber” to the church.

(*Northampton Mercury*, 8th May 1925). She left several bequests totalling £500 (£31,416.67 today) to various funds linked to the Methodist church including

the Methodist Missionary Society, the Methodist Ministers Widows’ and Orphans Society, the Methodists Orphanage, and the Methodist Local Preachers Aid Fund. (*Northampton*

Mercury, 11 March 1938) Further research into whether Sarah Lewis had a more prominent role within the church or just that as a benefactor is required however, her involvement in the Methodist church was also prevalent in the list of mourners at her funeral in 1937.

(*Northampton Mercury* 3rd December 1937)

Women’s philanthropic contributions to religion were not just limited to donations. Women often took part in a variety of groups and organisations connected with the church for example, Mrs Catherine Lewis, the wife of Charles’ brother Thomas, also owner of C & E Lewis, was a member of the Doddridge Memorial Congregationalist Church along with Thomas and Charles’ brother Edward and his wife Mary. Catherine Lewis became the secretary of the Church Sewing Party at the church. This position was a temporary position to cover illness of Mrs Leach, however Mrs Lewis remained in her position for 30 years!(Poole, 1947).

By considering a few of the activities of these women it demonstrates the involvement and opportunities for middle class women to be involved in the church and religious organisations in Northampton.

Conclusion

There is evidence of a lot more women in Northampton being involved in the churches and organisations discussed in this article. Further research is required to establish whether they had links to the boot and shoe industry and where they sat in the class structure. It is important to consider that the women who are featured are all known to be either the wives or daughters of prominent boot and shoe manufacturers. However, evidence shows that it was not just these women who were involved and a further exploration of the backgrounds of these others may give a sound comparative study for women's involvement in religious organisation in Northampton which has the potential to give a wider understanding of the overall picture within the town during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

As discussed at the beginning of this study, the limitations of women's visibility in the records regarding these organisations make it challenging to give a full picture of the situation in the churches at the time. However, widening the search beyond the particular women of this study gives the potential to give a broader picture regarding women's involvement.

Much of the literature written about religion focuses on the first half of the nineteenth century and assumes that religion played a lesser part in society at the beginning of the twentieth century, as discussed by Callum Brown. However, the case studies focused on in this article show that religion in Northampton played a part in philanthropic motivation much into the twentieth century, particularly when considering the role played by

organisations such as the YWCA and with the development of projects such as Bethany Homestead, which is still serving the town today. Even when considering church building projects, many of these took place in the 1920s, showing that there was still an appetite for religion, particularly nonconformist denominations.

Churches and religious organisations are still reliant on donations from the congregation and fundraising activities such as a church bazaar. It must be considered that philanthropic activities are still prevalent within religious organisations today.

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