

# FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD



REMEMBERING

GERTRUDE  
MCCROBEN

GERTRUDE DESERVES A BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE... she used her love of learning to promote a different way of educating that relies less on arbitrary qualifications and more on cultivating a life-long love of gathering knowledge and putting it to good use. Gertrude's holistic approach to a full and rounded education is still an aspiration for our education system today.

## REFLECTING ON GERTRUDE'S LIFE

Raising funds to send an ambulance to the Belgium front and having the WGHS logo on the side so that all the hard work done to make that happen, remained visible, is what I knew of WGHS's second headmistress, Gertrude McCroben. But that was just the tip of the iceberg and is evidence, once again, that the most extraordinary women in Wakefield's history have been forgotten. For Gertrude was extraordinary. Brilliant, visionary, tenacious and undeterred by convention, she forged ahead with introducing elements of the curriculum which encouraged both the girls, and their parent's to aspire to great things. No longer were girls allowed to settle for gaining skills to make them marriageable, but instead, physical education, the arts, geography, literature and cultural studies were introduced onto the curriculum for the first time. Under her watch, Wakefield became a shining example of how women could, and would succeed. Strong networks were formed between old and new girls, the introduction of a history library with a focus on European connections (furnished by Edith Mackie) meant that the glass ceiling was smashed when it came to aspiration. Indeed, the story goes that when Barbara Hepworth, a pupil under Gertrude, and faced with the decision of whether or not to attend teacher training college or travel and attend the school of art in St. Ives to pursue her passion of becoming a sculptor, Miss McCroben positively pushed her to the latter. In her role as a government inspector and implementer of educational reform Miss McCroben's vision for women was rolled out throughout the land. Her mantra was, 'Better be not at all than not be noble' and she certainly walked that path herself and enabled others to aspire to do so.

-Sarah Leah Cobham, DTC CEO



## FWW IN ACTION



Pictured above is The Forgotten Women of Wakefield project's leader, Sarah Cobham, with Mr D. J. Eggleston from Wakefield Girls' High School. Sarah was thrilled to deliver one in a series of talks about the project, about Gertrude herself, and how important it is for young girls to ensure they are in charge of the narrative of their lives so that their contributions do not get erased from the history books. The Forgotten Women of Wakefield project looks forward to future collaboration with Wakefield Girls' High School.

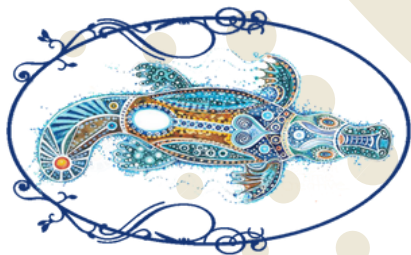
## TIMELINE

|           |                                                                      |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1863      | Born in Bradford, West Yorkshire                                     |
| 1880      | Attends Newnham College Cambridge on a Salt Scholarship              |
| 1884-94   | Teaches Maths at Manchester High School                              |
| 1894-1921 | Gertrude becomes Head Mistress at Wakefield Girls' High School       |
| 1907      | Selected to travel to New York under The Mosley Commission           |
| 1913      | Becomes President of the Yorkshire branch of the English Association |
| 1933      | Dies in Richmond, London                                             |



Gertrude was at the forefront of holistic education and believed wholeheartedly in providing every young woman, no matter her background, a thorough schooling that focused on a love of learning and not just passing exams. This attitude was remarkable for the time, and through the course of our research we have realised just how forward thinking Gertrude was and how even today we could learn lessons from the way she taught.

With this firmly in mind, Dream Time Creative has commissioned local creative practitioners Cuckoo's Egg, who specialize in immersive theatre experiences, to capture Gertrude's spirit and bring her views to life in an immersive theatre piece to be staged in March 2019. This is yet another strand of the project's aims: to empower the local community to explore their roots through creativity.



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## A NOBLE EDUCATOR BY ALEXANDRA VAUGHAN

*Oh, lift your natures up:  
Embrace our aims, work out your freedom.  
Girls, knowledge is power, no more fortune seal'd but  
Dive deep, until the habits of the slave,  
The sins of emptiness, of gossip, spite and slander,  
Die.  
Better not be at all, than not be noble.*

The year was 1906 and Gertrude McCroben had been Headmistress at the Wakefield Girls' High School for 12 years when she penned this poem in that year's Christmas cards to her pupils. An inspiring message that beautifully summarises McCroben's life-long work: the end was the development of character, the training of faculties, and the awakening of the desire for knowledge. The late-19th and early-20th century were battle-ground for women's emancipation in the western world, and Gertrude McCroben was very much a woman of her time.

Gertrude came from a working class family. Her father, a draper, ensured his daughters had access to good education. His children attended the newly opened Bradford Grammar School for Girls, the first first-grade endowed Girls' Grammar School in the country. In 1880 Gertrude attained distinction in her Cambridge Higher (Local) examinations with essays of English Literature, earning her a recommendation by the Joint University Schools Examination Board. 'The Salt Scholarship' of £55 a year for three years was to be used at 'some place of higher education for women'. Thus, at the age of 18, a young Gertrude entered the Newnham College Cambridge, where she would gain Triple Honours in Maths.

Leaving Newnham college in 1884, Gertrude spent the following 10 years at the Manchester School for Girls teaching maths, whilst at the same time pursuing her love of the arts: becoming Vice President of the school's Debating Society and delivering Lectures on Italian Renaissance painting. The most enduring example of her literary pursuits is her book 'Dante in the Casentino', which she published in Florence in her later years.

In 1894 Gertrude became headmistress of the Wakefield Girls High School, a position she would hold until her retirement 26 years later. One of the first additions she brought in at WGHS was the introduction of Physical Education, a somewhat novel entertainment as described in the Leeds Mercury, which included Three Legged Races, Tug of War, Obstacle Races, High Jump, Potato Races, Shuttlecock & Battledore and Rope Climbing.

An Educationalist who followed Froebelian Education theory, McCroben's work would focus in providing an all-encompassing education to her girls, with an emphasis on a balanced curriculum to include sport, art, music and science. Her first years as headmistress saw more changes being implemented, with the creation of the school's library and The Wakefield High School Review, as well as the creation of the school's motto 'Each for All and All for God'.

In parallel with her work at the WGHS, Gertrude regularly attended educational conferences as both a learner and as a speaker, namely at the Conference on Secondary Education at Oxford, 1898. In 1904 she was elected to represent the West Riding County Council for the Development of Secondary Education and, three years later, was selected to travel to New York under The Moseley Commission to study how the American Education System was succeeding, with a view to implementing strategies in the UK. The year of 1913 saw McCroben taking on two new roles, being elected as President of Yorkshire branch of the English Association and being elected member of the executive committee of the Association of Headmistresses.

However soon the world would be shaken by the start of WWI, and schools were not beyond its reach. At Commemoration Day on November 12, 1914, the headmistress McCroben stressed the challenges to be faced and the values needed for the task: At first all was excitement with a sense of unreality. Now all realise the significance of events, and life has a new meaning. Our sense of proportion is changed. We are possessed by a growing desire to live more worthily and to link past and present in mutual service and help, in self-denial and self-control. Thus and thus only will our schools be a safeguard of our nation.

At WGHS McCroben ensured that pupils were kept abreast of war developments with form rooms having their own War Maps, a contour map of Europe displayed in the hall and articles and pictures on the school's news board. War diaries were kept with strategies of campaigns collected, and regular female guest speakers who had contributed to the war effort invited to the school -- Miss Bacon for example, who was a pilot.

Staff and girls were also engaged in a range of other wartime activities, including working on the land. Old Girls joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and Women's Royal Naval Service, worked in canteens in Britain and France, and served as doctors, nurses and Voluntary Aid Detachment members in hospitals at home and abroad -- Edith Mackie, who lived next to the WGHS, had set up her nurses training centre in 1897 and was heavily involved in the school.

Money was raised for the war effort including The Red Cross, and WGHS families were able to take in child refugees from Belgium. The High School also organised tea parties and social events to raise money and to celebrate festivals, raising £40 for an ambulance that was sent to the front and served the Belgian Army with 'Presented by Wakefield Girls' High School' written on the side. On the 17th of March 1917, the school became a hospital for wounded soldiers as Clayton Hospital was not big enough. Classes were moved to the nearby Technical school and to Edith Mackie's house.

Gertrude McCroben retired from her duties as headmistress at the WGHS in 1920, moving down to London where she became Inspector for the Board of Education. The following years she took on several roles in her capacity as an educationalist, namely as a member of the Court of Leeds university, of the Committee of the North of England Conference, the Education Guild of the City of Wakefield, and Examiner for the Joint Matriculation Board for English. She also toured extensively in her role as a member of the Wakefield Branch of the Froebel Society, giving public lectures on Education.

Gertrude passed away at the age of 70, in London. She had lived a life dedicated to the betterment of girls' future, as expressed in her speech from 1929 at the Tonbridge County School:

'The girls of today had great opportunities in the future, not only as home makers or in professions or business, but also as citizens. I hope all girls will take with them into the larger life all the keenness and enthusiasm and the aim of doing their best in what ever they undertook.'