



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

THE GISSINGS DESERVE A BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE...

the Gissings dedicated their lives to educating young people and passing on their considerable skills to Wakefield's next generation. The Gissings were not ones to claim the spotlight, yet their contribution to education in the city serves as an example of how progressive curricula with a pupil-led focus can allow children to flourish.

REMEMBERING

THE GISSING SISTERS

Margaret & Ellen
Gissing
1863-1938
Forward Thinking
Educators



MARGARET



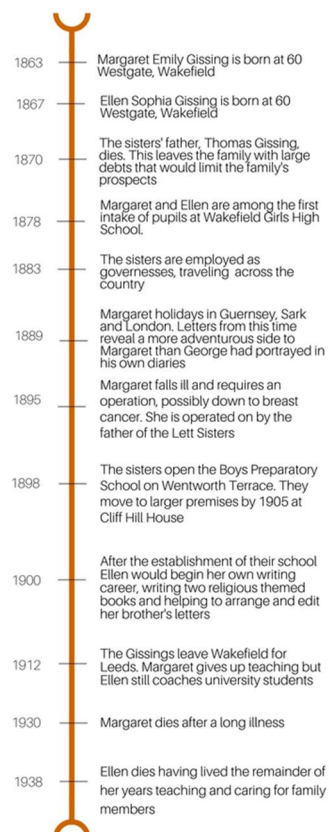
ELLEN

SELFLESS EDUCATORS

Out of all our women I have met from our past so far these two make me feel the most sad. They struggled their whole lives and despite everything they did for our city they truly have been overshadowed by a man - their own brother. I can almost imagine the only time they were really happy was out on those muddy fields, whistle in hand, refereeing the football they themselves introduced to the curriculum of Wakefield schools. I love the contradictions they present in their actions and the fact that no matter what seemed to happen to them, be it illness or the social stigma attached to the behaviour of their brother's constant social, economic and personal faux pas, they just got on. The words of Clifford Brook stay with me, 'The two Gissings of that generation who made the most mark on the town were Margaret and Ellen'.

-Sarah Leah Cobham, CEO Dream Time Creative

TIMELINE



A VOICE FROM THE PAST

"After I left the school I didn't keep in contact with the two sisters... but I remember an occasion during the war. I had just left the Marconi building in Leeds ... and was wearing my brand new uniform. There I met Little Gis (Margaret) and tears came to her eyes as she said "No, not you Harry"; obviously a reference to her surprise that I was old enough to be called up for war service. "

-Mr. H. B. Webster, "The Gissing Newsletter"

FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD



SISTERS IN EDUCATION

BY NICKY HARLEY

For over a century the Gissing name has been synonymous with the city's radical wayward novelist George--until now. George may have helped put Wakefield on the map alongside Victorian literary heroes such as Thomas Hardy and HG Wells, but it was his passionate and hardworking younger sisters Margaret, known as Madge, and Ellen, referred to as Nellie, who persevered to give something back to the city by setting up an elite prep school.

Highly educated but constrained in their career choices due to their sex and social standing, the pair trained across the country as governesses before returning to the city to create the prestigious Boys Preparatory School. Hundreds of boys passed through the doors of the small school which took only the brightest youngsters. Originally founded in 1898 in their home on Wentworth Terrace, it was forced to relocate to larger premises at Cliff Hill House, on Sandy Walk, seven years later due to demand for places.

Teaching in two classrooms, the sisters were known as Big Gis and Little Gis, due to the age of the children they schooled. In 15 years more than 700 children were trained by the sisters until the school's closure due to the opening of QEGS junior school.

At a time when parents were forced to send their children to study miles from home due to a lack of educational institutions locally, the sisters filled a much needed gap in the market. Former pupils described how it 'rapidly grew in esteem' helped by the sisters' modern approach.

The Gissing sisters were among the first females to referee football games. Dressed in long skirts with high-necked blouses and chokers, it's hard to imagine them on a football field and umpiring cricket matches but the accounts from their former pupils speak in awe at the 'genteel' pair 'marching them down to the pitch' with their whistles. In addition to this sporting instruction, their pupils were educated to the highest standards in Latin, English, music and maths, and many pupils went on to further study at the country's top establishments.

Following the school's closure, the sisters moved to Leeds where Ellen continued to teach university students. In 1923 they retired to Aysgarth, where Margaret died following a long illness in 1930 aged 63. Ellen then moved to Westmorland where she was joined by her nephew.

In later years she wrote two books, 'Angels and Men: The Nature and Purpose of Heavenly Beings as revealed in the New Testament' and 'The Hidden Life of the Blessed Virgin'. Ellen only returned to Wakefield once to unveil a plaque to her brother above the family home.

The sisters were born, Margaret in 1863 and Ellen in 1867, above their father's chemist shop in Thompson's Yard. The front of the shop, now the NatWest Bank, is on Westgate.

When Margaret was aged just seven her father died suddenly leaving their mother with five children aged under 14 and large debts. The family were forced to move from the privileged life they had enjoyed to smaller premises. Despite this setback the sister's were both incredibly bright and were two of the first pupils at the newly established Wakefield Girls' High School in 1878.

Scholars previously only knew of the pair as 'the girls' through their brother's diaries and letters, in which he painted them in a dim light. Once describing Margaret as 'bitterly religious', adding: 'My poor sister is a Puritan and we can talk of nothing but matters of fact.'

But, in reality, family came first and George helped to fund the setting up of the Boys Preparatory School and paid for its advertising. The respect and esteem he held his sisters in is apparent, when after a string of disastrous relationships he entrusted the care of his sons, Walter and Alfred, to them. Writing in his diary of his decision, he said: 'I have no option but to leave him [Walter] here to be tamed.'

Sadly Walter was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916. In later years Alfred moved back to live with his aunt Ellen in the final years of her life.

Their birth place and childhood home at Thompson's Yard was physically saved from demolition by former secretary of the Gissing Trust, Clifford Brook, in the 1970s.

An expert on novelist George, he recognised the importance of the sisters' achievements when he wrote: 'The two Gissings of that generation who made the most mark on the town were George's sisters Margaret and Ellen.'

Their home, a snapshot of a bygone age, now has the unfortunate claim of being one of the least visited museums in the country, with just 118 visitors in 2014. A sad legacy for one of the city's most talented families that surely must now change.