

MARGARET ASHTON : MANCHESTER'S 'FIRST LADY'

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In the *Manchester Guardian* of 16th October 1937 there appeared the obituary of 'Margaret Ashton : Woman Suffrage Pioneer : Long Record of Public Service' which marked the end of the life of a remarkable woman who has largely been forgotten. Who was this remarkable woman, and why and how did she become Manchester's 'first lady'? Margaret was born on 19th January 1856, the sixth child to the Liberal mill-owner Thomas Ashton and his wife Elizabeth. Margaret was one of a family of nine, six daughters and three sons. She and her sisters had a governess and then went to school for a short period. Her sisters and brothers all married, and she was left the daughter at home.¹ However, at the relatively late age of 44 this personification of middle-class affluence became involved in the Manchester Women's Suffrage Society and the Women's Liberal Associations, rising to become a leading light in both associations, and eventually to become the first woman city councillor for Manchester. For these reasons Margaret Ashton deserves proper historical recognition and a prominent position amongst the ranks of those women who so zealously worked for women's suffrage and for social reform (in the promotion of women's interests, child welfare and education) for forty years.

To understand Margaret's interest in education, politics and public service, it is worth mentioning her family background and in particular her father, Thomas Ashton.² He had inherited the Ashton Brothers cotton mills at Flowery Fields in Hyde and the merchants' business in Manchester, and lived at Flowery Fields House. He carried on the family tradition of being an employer who realised his responsibilities to the men and women who worked for him. He enlarged the school, built a church at Flowery Fields, enlarged the village built by his father and he established scholarships at the Hyde Mechanics' Institute and the Technical School which enabled students to go to Owen's College and to the Manchester Technical School. On his move to Ford Bank in Didsbury, when Margaret was two, he soon became a figure of note in Manchester society. He funded many projects, was regarded as the second founder of Manchester University and he reconstructed the Hulme Trust which resulted in the establishment of Manchester High School for Girls in 1874. He was also an active member of the Manchester branch of the National Educational League which did much to prepare the way for the passing of the 1870 Act. During the Cotton Famine he gave full employment to his workpeople and his work on the Relief Committee was one of the reasons that the City Council gave him the freedom of the city in 1892.

As well as his many activities in Manchester, he served as Mayor of Hyde, High Sheriff of Lancashire and he was also a magistrate for Cheshire and Lancashire. A leading member of the Liberal party in Manchester — it was commented that he was the Liberal party in Manchester — he nevertheless declined invitations to become a Member of Parliament. In 1882 he declined a baronetcy offered to him by William Gladstone, who subsequently stayed at his house when he came to Manchester to deliver the keynote speech to the



Margaret Ashton (Aged 50). Official photograph on the occasion of her election to President of the Lancashire and Cheshire Union of Women's Liberal Associations, 1906. (Ashton Collection. Manchester Central Reference Library)

National Liberal Foundation meeting at the Free Trade Hall in 1889.³ Thomas Ashton's status as a leading Manchester Liberal meant that Margaret was often allowed to attend party meetings and discussions held at Ford Bank, and it is hardly surprising therefore, that in later life Margaret's political views were predominantly Liberal.

Being the daughter at home, Margaret was very much the companion of her father up to his death, and had the greatest affection and respect for him, and so, until he died, she probably found more fulfilment in her life than did some other Victorian women 'rebels'. Through him, we can assume, she learnt much about the running of the family business - indeed she had very much wanted to be involved — as she put it "my brain is as good as my brother's"⁴ — but, progressive as her father was, concerning working women, he stuck to the conventional line of male succession, and refused to allow her to become a member of the firm. Despite this rebuff, she kept an eagle eye on its welfare policy. She became very interested in the conditions the workers had to live in, and made great study of building techniques, sanitation and accommodation requirements. Indeed, when the expansion of Flowery Fields village was being undertaken in 1884, she supervised the construction of the houses, after finding that, when the houses were half-built, the number of bedrooms was insufficient. In the words of one who was present, she "marched down to the

site, raised hell and made the builder pull down what had been done and rebuild them to her own design".⁵

Margaret had also wanted to train as a nurse, a profession that Florence Nightingale had 'made respectable for women', but being regarded as a 'delicate' person, she was unable to pursue this career. In 1875 however, she did manage to persuade her father to allow her to take over the management of Flowery Fields School, and thus began her life-long interest in education.⁶

Throughout her home life she enjoyed all the advantages of the best provincial society, meaning the intelligent, well-to-do and prosperous middle class, and her social life was full and varied. The Ashton circle included the staff of the growing university, C. P. Scott (founder of the *Manchester Guardian*) and his wife, the Gaskells and the Philips of Prestwich Park. Manchester's emigrés were also included in the Ashton circle, notably Charles Hallé, the founder of the Hallé Orchestra.⁷ Her sisters had married leading business men, Charlotte Sir Edward Tootal Broadhurst, Grace Mary Philip Kessler, both municipal leaders, Harriet Gertrude and Katherine Arthur and Charles of the Luptons of Leeds and Elizabeth Marion the Rt. Hon. James Bryce (who had come to Lancashire in connection with his famous enquiry into secondary education).⁸ Connections through which Margaret became interested in municipal affairs.

In 1884, like many young Victorians, Margaret undertook a 'Grand Tour'. However, her particular tour did not follow the oft-tread route to Europe. Instead, she and a fellow compan-

ion, Elsie, armed with letters of introduction, set off for America, stopping first in Cork and then on to New York. Her letters home to her mother of the voyage, arrival in New York and subsequently her tour up to Victoria Falls and into Canada, the Rockies and West Coast America are all full of social comment, as well as fascinating descriptions of the flora and fauna she encountered.⁹ She was particularly fascinated by the differences in the structure of class and education — and reported her discussions on these matters, although she felt that the Americans didn't appreciate her questions on these matters — 'not becoming of a woman', she complained to her mother, and felt that she was being 'fobbed off'. There are also some humorous comments. Of the native Americans she wrote: "They are quite fascinating with their red skin and long, shiny black hair. I am only a little upset to find them wandering around the streets with their suits and bowler hats on, I was so looking forward to seeing their warpaint and feathers".¹⁰ The letters belie the image of a 'delicate' daughter at home: she emerges as a strong-minded woman, often given to forthright comment, a lively interest in and a keen observation of all she saw on her travels. Throughout the six months of her tour, she was accorded a great deal of respect and generous hospitality by her American hosts. Nonetheless, it was clear from the letters that Margaret looked forward to her return to her beloved Manchester in the early months of 1885 and resuming her familiar social round.¹¹

When her father died in 1898, Margaret might have continued to live a leisured life, doing conventional charitable work like her contemporaries. Instead, at the age of 44, she plunged into the career of a public woman, leading to the suffrage cam-



William Gladstone and his wife at the Ashton family home, Ford Bank, Didsbury, 1889. Margaret is standing in the doorway on the left. (Lord Ashton Private Collection)

paigned and fighting for the position of women in public life. Margaret had found her purpose in life. When her brother, now living in London and an MP for South Bedfordshire,¹² asked Margaret and her mother to live with him, Margaret opted to stay in Manchester. She felt that now, free and independent, she had to live her own life and to follow, allowing for the changing conditions of the times, in her father's footsteps.¹³ From him she had inherited her love of freedom and hatred of injustice, her interest in education and civic affairs, and it was only natural that in her day, given her temperament and character, she should be led to pioneering work, and the obvious pioneering work for an intelligent woman of the 20th century was in the realm of women's rights. As she herself said: "Born and brought up on the city's atmosphere of public service, who could escape the inspiration of, and joy of, work for the prosperity and progress of the people".¹⁴

Margaret moved to Fairfax House in Didsbury and thus began a remarkable career in public service and the women's movements.

Margaret Ashton and Liberalism

During the late 19th century women with Liberal leanings, attracted by Gladstonian policies, were recruited through increasingly effective party machinery, and had formed local Women's Liberal Associations (WLA) by the time the Women's Liberal Federation (WLF) was established in 1886.¹⁵ In towns such as Manchester, a new association would be formed by calling a public meeting, by visiting wives of Liberal sympathisers and by house-to-house canvassing, and it was through such an encounter that Margaret Ashton was persuaded to join her local Association in Didsbury. Muriel Eckhard recollected asking her to join: "Is it fitting...that such an Association should exist almost at your gate, you not being a member?" to which Margaret replied, "Very well!". She was then thirty-eight.¹⁶ In the early years, as a member of the WLA, Margaret's role was largely that of a local campaigner and canvasser for the candidates at elections and fundraiser-organising bazaars, 'at homes', tea dances and similar events. The Lancashire and Cheshire Women's Liberal Association was established in 1889. By affiliating with the London-based Women's Liberal Federation the Lancashire and Cheshire Union was allowed to send delegates to the Annual Council Meeting, with the right to forward resolutions, discuss policy and vote officers to the Executive Committee.¹⁷ Margaret Ashton became an active campaigner for the Lancashire and Cheshire Union of Women's Liberal Associations (henceforth referred to as the Lancashire and Cheshire Union) and by 1905 had become President. Already an active member of the North of England Suffrage Society, Margaret used her position as President to push for the Liberal Party to take a strong lead — suffrage should be made an 'official' objective, and she was confident that, when the Liberal Party came into power, they would give women the vote.¹⁸

In 1905 it seemed highly likely that an election would be called, and through the Lancashire and Cheshire Union, Margaret organised numerous meetings to promote Liberal policies. One particular meeting in October 1905 at the Free Trade Hall, which was to be addressed by Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey, two prominent Liberals who could reasonably expect cabinet positions should the Liberals be returned, threw Margaret into the national spotlight when it was disrupted by Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney of the Women's Social and Political Union.¹⁹ The demonstra-

tors challenged the speakers by asking "Will the Liberal Government give votes to women?" and unfurling their 'Votes for Women' banners. This action had them thrown out of the meeting.²⁰

Their action was lauded by the Independent Labour Party, which, at their next public meeting read out letters of support — including one from Philip Snowden, then Chairman of the Independent Labour Party in which he and his wife congratulated Christabel on her bravery: "We are all proud of her and her friend Miss Kenney. Their action on this occasion has done more for the women's cause than all the continued work of such as Mrs Mills and Miss Ashton."²¹ The latter, as members of the North of England Society pursued, the persuasive and moderate approach of working for suffrage, rather than the more aggressive campaigning of the Pankhurst faction.

Margaret Ashton was particularly incensed. As President of the Lancashire and Cheshire Union, she took personal exception to what she saw as Labour attacks on Liberals in the name of women's suffrage. The criticism of her work provoked a strong reaction. She wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* to defend her party line and to point out that Liberal women deplored, "the method used by the Women of the Independent Labour Party...as calculated to retard rather than hasten the extension of the franchise".²² Margaret was equally enraged a few months later when she read a letter from Mrs Fawcett, the President of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, making public her acceptance of the Free Trade Hall incident. Margaret despatched a letter of protest:

*Dear Madam:...I am sure that you cannot have the fact of the case about these suffrage questions before you, or you together with the North of England Suffrage Society and the Women's Liberal Association would have been compelled to condemn the action of these few violent women who have so much injured the reputation of women politicians in Lancashire...It has been most deplorable from all points of view and has made it more difficult to approach the Government with dignity than ever before...we Women of Lancashire have suffered much from these disturbers who have spent their time shouting while we have been at work.*²³

With the return of the Liberals in 1906, suffragists attempted



'Lancashire and Cheshire of The Women's Franchise Deputation to The Prime Minister, 1906. Margaret Ashton is seated at the end of the second row on the right hand side.' (Nelson Library, Lancashire)

to put pressure on Campbell-Bannerman and his new government. The new Prime Minister had a reputation for personal sympathy to women's suffrage. Plans for a deputation were drawn up among the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, the Women's Liberal Federation and other women's organisations including the Women's Social and Political Union.²⁴

The deputation was scheduled for 19th May 1906 and approximately 350 attended. Two MPs, Keir Hardie and Mr A Cameron Corbett, introduced a delegation of eight women and Sir Charles McLaren.²⁵ Each of them made an impassioned plea for the parliamentary franchise. Margaret Ashton, as a member of the delegation, represented 641 Women's Liberal Associations with a membership of 99,000 women. She stated that, as party women who had loyally served the party for years, they asked that: "We may have the promise of legislation that shall give us some measure of enfranchisement. We ask it as Liberals from a Liberal Government and as Liberal women, we ask it from the present Parliament".²⁶

Campbell-Bannerman was not so easily persuaded. In a long speech extolling the virtue of their campaign so far, he concluded by stating that even though he supported their claims on a personal level, he felt that the women should be patient, not do anything rash or hasty that would damage the cause, and to continue with their fight. Having already waited 50 years, these comments made it clear to the women that Campbell-Bannerman had absolutely no intention of introducing any measure during his government. Margaret's disillusionment was bitter, for she had strongly believed that this Liberal government would extend the suffrage to women.²⁷

In 1908, Campbell-Bannerman was replaced as Prime Minister by Herbert Asquith. His attitude towards women's suffrage was similar to Campbell-Bannerman's. However, the government did announce that an Electoral Reform Bill would be presented before Parliament, which was to be drafted in such a way as to allow the inclusion of Women's Suffrage, by accepting an amendment giving the vote to women. Margaret doubted the genuineness of the proposal. If the Government was seriously intending to enfranchise women, why was the requisite legislation only being proposed as an amendment to the main bill? Indeed, her exasperation at the continual rebuttal of the claims for women's suffrage changed her position in the Lancashire and Cheshire Union. It soon became apparent that the Union would have to concentrate its efforts on persuading the government to include the franchise in its policies, and Margaret threw her energies into appealing to the Union to adopt her policy.²⁸ At a conference in February 1908 Margaret spoke on the theme of Women's Liberal Associations and Party Allegiance:

*We have come, it seems to me, into an entirely fresh position as regards the party. We shall have to consider very seriously if in future we are going to accept the dictum of the party absolutely or whether we are going to hold our own banner of Liberal principle and to put principle before party.*²⁹

Margaret continued in this vein throughout 1908 and tried without success to get the Women's Liberal Federation to adopt a resolution on the subject of votes for women at its annual conference in June.

At the 4th Conference of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance at Amsterdam in June 1908 Margaret reported that, though she was the president of a large body of Liberal women, she had decided that it was useless to work further for her party unless it would enfranchise women. Margaret further stated that women had held the Liberal party together and had given patient, hard work for years to their party:

Women in England have worked for 60 years for this party and now, if they will gain their own liberty they must refuse to lift hand or foot for it until it will enfranchise them... Though we have a Liberal cabinet and the pledges of a majority of voters in a Liberal parliament, it has not given us the franchise. The Liberals have practically told the women, 'We do not represent you. You are not our constituents!'³⁰

The Liberal papers reported that the women were 'in revolt' and party managers sent word to headquarters: "We can no longer hold the women unless the party does something for them".³¹

Margaret became more and more frustrated over this issue, and finally, at the Annual Meeting of the Council of the Lancashire and Cheshire Union in October 1908 she tendered her resignation as President. She was persuaded to allow herself to be nominated again, but a second candidate was put forward, a Mrs Stewart-Brown. Margaret warned the Council that in choosing between the two candidates, it would be deciding in a large measure on its policy on women's suffrage. This election would decide whether they would have a very progressive policy which included that of no longer working actively at elections for Liberal candidates, unless the government showed signs of adopting suffrage as policy, or follow the Women's Liberal Federation policy which urged women to carry on working for men who would not grant them liberty.³² In response, Mrs Stewart-Brown pointed out that in view of Margaret's speeches and her actions at elections the Union ought to have the opportunity of showing whether or not they were in sympathy with her views. Quite clearly they were not, for Mrs Stewart-Brown was elected as President.

In handing over her presidency, Margaret hoped that: "You will never forget that this Union stands far more for Liberal principles than the Liberal party. It was, after all, principles that we banded ourselves together to support and not the party". She noted that Mrs Stewart-Brown and she differed in the ways of achieving Liberal principles:

She [Mrs Stewart-Brown] feels it is to be attained by working for the party - I believe in giving a lead to the party when it falls short. That is my sole reason to refuse to work for a party which sacrifices its principles so far as we women are concerned:... I stand for principles. This vote of yours has set me free to work for Liberal principles in my own way and not to work for them as part of an electioneering agency...³³

Margaret had an abiding faith that the Liberal party would eventually grant the franchise and urged the Union to continue their efforts to get the franchise extended to women. However, she could no longer continue with the Union. In leaving the Union Margaret drew a line under this phase of her life - disillusioned by the party political manoeuvring and the lack of progress, she decided to go her own way and also resigned her membership of the Liberal Party.³⁴ This was not,

however, to be the end of Margaret Ashton's involvement in the suffrage campaign.

Margaret Ashton and the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage

As with the Women's Liberal Association, Margaret had joined the Manchester National Suffrage Society comparatively late in life. She wasn't at this time (1894) particularly interested in women's suffrage, and unlike many women working for the cause, she didn't become a suffragist because she was a feminist in principle, but because her work for women proved to her the necessity of the vote.³⁵ She became an active campaigner for the Society and Chairman in 1906. She believed that the North of England Women's Suffrage Society (the Manchester Society renamed with the formation of Mrs Fawcett's national society) had to speak at street corners and in public squares and parks; give out handbills in the street; stand all day in the gutter collecting signatures to the voter's petitions; and that it had to take an active part in all elections and suffragist processions. She didn't enjoy these activities, but neither did she shirk them. Neither did she enjoy public speaking, but she hurled herself into it; her abiding concern for the lives of common people, the welfare of children, for the special wrongs of women gave her unlimited material for speeches. She travelled from end to end of the country speaking indoors and outdoors, and was assiduous at the meetings of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies Executive in London.³⁶

The North of England Society was made up of women from all shades of the political spectrum, whether Liberal, Conservative or Independent Labour women. Indeed members originally included such people as Mrs and the Misses Pankhursts, Eva Gore-Booth, Esther Roper and Selina Cooper. These women, through their radical campaigns amongst the Lancashire textile workers, in particular their launch of a petition to be signed exclusively by working women in the Lancashire cotton mills in order to show the rest of the country how powerful the demand for the vote really was among industrial women, focused national attention on the North of England Society. However, the success of the radical campaigns brought its own problems. The respectable Liberals (Margaret Ashton et al) who still provided the bulk of the North of England Society funds were becoming increasingly concerned over associations with the labour movement and the Labour party. As the suffrage movement had been run on careful non-political lines, they could see no advantage in supporting the least influential of political parties. Nonetheless, the North of England Society did assist in helping get the petition to all the mills in the county.³⁷ It wasn't long before the radicals found themselves hampered by the 'traditional' stance of the North of England Society. It took Christabel Pankhurst's action at the Free Trade Hall, the banner-waving incident, to split the suffrage movements completely. Margaret, by now a very influential member of the North of England Society, had deplored Christabel's actions and she represented the opinions of the great majority of Society members, all united in their condemnation.³⁸ The radicals left to form a separate independent group - the Women's Social and Political Union, and these two societies coexisted for a short while.

The well-documented story of the subsequent activities of the WSPU once it moved to London bear little on Margaret Ashton's involvement with the North of England Society. By 1906, Margaret, now serving on the Committee of the North

of England Society, was elected President of the Society following this division, and the Society became ultra-respectable. The new committee severed its contacts with trades unionists, textile workers or Labour politicians and settled down to working for suffrage along its previous lines.³⁹

The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1907 adopted a new constitution and formed an impressive executive onto which Margaret Ashton was elected. Margaret now had a role in both the major women's movements, namely President of both the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage and The Lancashire and Cheshire Women's Liberal Association. As part of her role on the NUWSS Executive, she organised the great suffrage demonstrations in Manchester. All the women's societies in Manchester at this time came together in demonstrations to support the call for suffrage.⁴⁰

During 1908, another Women's Suffrage Bill was to be put forward to Parliament by Mr Stanger, MP for North Paddington. Margaret, along with Helena Swanwick, toured all the local branches to campaign for a petition to be sent to the House of Commons in an attempt to persuade MPs to take the bill to a second reading. As with previous bills, Margaret was well aware that the bill might be wrecked in Committee, however she believed it would give those members who were pledged to the principle of women's suffrage a chance to record their votes. She therefore urged all members at the various meetings to write to their MPs and ask them to support Stanger's Bill.⁴¹

As Margaret had supposed, Stanger's Bill was 'talked out'. Disappointing though this further failure was, the North of England Society were not defeated. A deputation was sent to meet with Asquith, the Prime Minister, to urge inclusion of suffrage in his forthcoming reforms. Not able to attend herself, although she was in London for the Executive meeting of the Women's Liberal Federation, Margaret had studied the verbatim report of the meeting, and was not as easily satisfied with Asquith's comments as the deputation appeared to have been. From what she had read of the meeting, "All he [Asquith] says with regard to women is that they will not be included in the Reform Bill...His pronouncement concedes nothing except the right to introduce another measure in this Parliament. It has not given us what we asked for more than anything else..."⁴²

Asquith, however, continued to prevaricate over women's suffrage, stating that no reform could be introduced unless women showed that the great majority of women desired it. Margaret took up Asquith's challenge and began organising a 'great demonstration' in favour of women's suffrage. Margaret stated that:

*This demonstration is intended as a direct answer to the request made by the Government, through the Prime Minister, that the women of the country would show that they really wanted the vote...And we are going to demonstrate in our thousands in Manchester....All men and women who believe that it is just that women should have the vote are asked to join in the Manchester demonstration.*⁴³

The 'Great Demonstration' took place over the weekend of 23rd and 24th October 1908. On the Friday night a large meeting was held in the Free Trade Hall, to which a large number of MPs had been invited to attend. Only one, a very

'faithful servant of the women's cause' put in an appearance (Lord Courtney of Penrith). Not one of the Manchester or Cheshire MPs came. According to the report in the *Manchester Guardian*, "they seem, when they got their invitations, with one consent to have set about making excuses".⁴⁴

From the chair, Margaret Ashton put the case for women's suffrage in sentences that were telling in their directness. Women should have the vote, she stated, so that:

Women may have the right to protect themselves so that they may bring a larger influence to bear on the work of social reform, and so that a better sense of proportion may be secured in handling matters that affect intimately the lives of women and children.

The call for the vote was seen by Margaret as the greatest reform since 1830. It would, when granted, affect a larger number of citizens than any other reform, for it was to enfranchise not a class, not a section of the community, but the whole of one sex, and it was this particular point that Margaret saw as "the greatness of the demand". As part of a great nation and under-representative government, the only means of effecting legislation was by achieving the vote. It was an oft repeated cry. Women such as Margaret were told time and time again to apply themselves to the social reforms and to leave the vote alone. But it was because of their interests in education, temperance, children - indeed all the 'great' questions being faced by Government and reform agencies - that women felt that they had a chance (and a right) to call for the vote in order to have some say in changing and influencing the reforms:

Year by year, as the legislation comes into our very homes, does it not seem right that the home-makers should be consulted?...we think that we should have the right to speak in the councils of the nation.

The anti-women feeling of parliament was very well evidenced by the fact that none of the Cheshire and Lancashire MPs came to the meeting. Margaret candidly pointed out that had they been men asking for some reform none of the MPs would have dared to decline the invitation to the meeting. For the women at the Free Trade Hall this was symptomatic of "the privileged classes who stand in the way of the unenfranchised". In this case, it was the 'manhood' of England who were the privileged classes.⁴⁵

On Saturday 24th October, the 'Great Demonstration' took place. The women gathered in various streets around the Free Trade Hall, and at 2.30pm they proceeded into Albert Square. The North of England Suffrage Society led the procession, with Margaret at the front, followed by numerous other women's societies, and women who represented other walks of life, for example, the University Settlement women, clerks, typists, girls from the mills - altogether, about 5,000 women were involved in the procession - none of whom possessed the vote. Also included in the procession, hidden behind white shawls, were the veterans of the fight for women's liberty - Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy and Isabella Mills. With bands and banners, the women proceeded through Manchester and out to Alexandra Park. The *Manchester Guardian* reported that the men and women in the crowds watching this procession were "two miles of debaters for and against the suffrage". On reaching Alexandra Park, more crowds gathered to hear the various speeches. There were separate platforms for speakers on topics of interest to women: on housing and health; peace; temperance; education and school management; the vote; prison reform; working women; labour legislation and, Margaret's platform on Women and the Poor Law. At the end of the afternoon, each of the meetings was called to move a resolution from the platform in support of women's suffrage, and with very few exceptions, the crowds in Alexandra Park supported the resolution.⁴⁶

Margaret believed she had achieved her aim of proving to Asquith that the majority of women desired the vote. However, Asquith remained steadfast in his refusal to incorporate women's suffrage into the Reform Bill. The official response was, "on behalf of women's suffrage...Mr Asquith...is not in a position at present to add anything as to the future action of the Government".⁴⁷ The government's attitude towards women's suffrage remained invariable over the years up to the First World War, and during that time Margaret was tireless in her efforts to press the case for women's suffrage, carrying the campaign all over the country, locally to Glossop, Macclesfield, Marple, Knutsford and elsewhere, and further afield to Edinburgh, London and Bristol.

With the outbreak of war in August 1914, the suffrage societies suspended their political activities, although the NUWSS, of which Margaret was a member of the Executive, decided that they should direct their efforts to the service of the country and do as much as they could for "the relief of distress" caused by the 'great national crisis'. As soon as war had been declared, Margaret had offered the services of the staff of the Manchester and District Federation and the Manchester Society to the Local Relief Committee, the War Office and the Red Cross. This offer was immediately accepted and the Manchester Suffrage Office became the registration



Front Page of the Official programme for The Manchester suffrage Demonstration, 23rd to 24th October 1908'.

office for volunteers. About 300 voluntary women workers registered.⁴⁸

With women working in all aspects of public life during the war years, it was obvious to members of the NUWSS, that the introduction of women's suffrage was inevitable. In May 1918 a Bill was presented to Parliament with a clause relating to Women's Suffrage. The Bill was accepted by the House of Commons and passed to the next stage of its journey to become legislation. Various attempts by the Government to defeat the Bill at the Committee and Report stages were overcome due to vigorous protests from supportive MPs from all parts of the House, and finally the Government withdrew all its objections, and women's suffrage became an integral part of the Reform Bill and law on 6th February 1919.⁴⁹

Margaret Ashton and the Women's International League

Margaret by this time was no longer directly involved in the suffrage movement. In 1915 she and ten others had resigned from the National Union Executive over the failure of their resolution before the Council of the NUWSS for, inter alia "discussion with women of other nations to promote the establishment of a stable system of international law and mutual understanding".⁵⁰ Margaret became a member of a group who concentrated on working for a negotiated peace, and helped to form the Women's International League, of which she became Chairman. At the start of the war, a few British women had gone to Holland to attend a meeting at the Hague of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, and met other women from Europe and America who believed in the solidarity of women, even in the face of the "greatest tragedy the world has ever seen". This meeting passed a resolution calling for an International Congress on peace, and this was set for April 1915 in Amsterdam. On their return to England, these women very quickly convened an Executive Committee, and commenced campaigning for delegates to a British Committee to attend the Congress.⁵¹

The British Committee selected delegates to attend the Congress representing over thirty organisations including the Independent Labour Party, the Women's Cooperative Guild, the Manchester Public Health Society, the Women's Freedom League, and Margaret Ashton, as Chairman of the Women's International League. However, the government, along with the press, believed that their actions were "anti-nationalistic", and the government, in particular, made every effort to frustrate the British contingent's efforts to attend the Congress. The women of the British Committee made representations to the Home Office, and persuaded the Government to reconsider their decision. Despite the government's prevarication the British Committee were advised that they could travel on a boat leaving Tilbury on the 20th April. However, they heard that an order from the Admiralty had been issued, closing the North Sea, and that there would be no sailing. Despite this, the women waited in Tilbury to take the first boat that might cross. Margaret Ashton, along with the other delegates, had to make overnight journeys to arrive in London in the early hours of the morning, only to be frustrated by delays over permits. The Government's efforts at frustrating the Peace Congress had succeeded, in this country, for the British Committee remained in Tilbury until the Congress was over. Despite the lack of British delegates, the Congress was a success, and significant in that it was the first time women had met to protest against war.⁵²

To work for peace in the middle of a war was to be branded as a "traitor to your country" a "pro-German" and worse. These comments were particularly hurtful to Margaret, but she showed her leadership qualities by encouraging her colleagues: "Go on, no turning back. The need of truth is too great, people don't know yet what war means...If we go into public life we must take what the public gives us, plenty of knocks and little praise. Never show you mind, work on, our Peace message will be needed later".⁵³

During the war years halls were refused for League meetings. The press, with the exception of the *Manchester Guardian*, was hostile, but Margaret persevered - the work of the League continued to gain more members as the war progressed and the Manchester Branch made headway. After the war, the League continued its action. In 1922 Margaret became the President of the Manchester Branch, and through her dogged determination the movement gained more and more members until gradually the Peace Movement became firmly established. She continued her association with the League until her death in 1937.⁵⁴

Margaret was vilified because of her work for the League and the hostile City Council, in a demonstration of 'patriotism', turned her off the Education Committee. Deeply hurt by their action, though never showing any open bitterness, Margaret resigned from the City Council, and 'retired' to the country for a couple of years, to her brother's home in Gloucestershire.⁵⁵

Margaret Ashton and Manchester City Council

By the end of the 19th century a host of women's organisations were encouraging women to stand for elected office.⁵⁶ Local government seemed to offer a sphere of work and a way of going about it particularly suited to women. It embraced the 'domestic work' of the nation:⁵⁷ "We want the home and domestic side of things to count for more in politics and in the administration of public affairs than they do at present".⁵⁸ As local government enlarged its responsibilities to include such areas as the care of the young and old, poor and sick, and moved from the private to the public domain, so did women. Yet local government was more than just practical rate-funded philanthropy. It required women to seek election, mobilise an electorate, gain the endorsement of political parties and the confidence of local interest groups, accept the obligation of canvassing and committee work, the exposure in the press and on the public platform and the discipline of liability. Local government, in other words, offered a multiplicity of routes through which women could advance their rights, plead their cause, pursue their duties, fulfil their mission and lay claim to full citizenship.⁵⁹

Margaret Ashton's route into local government had, in effect, started with her appointment as manager of the Flowery Fields School in 1875, for being involved in education, she was ideally placed to argue for improvements. She had also been a Governor of the Manchester High School for Girls since it was inaugurated. In 1900 she had been elected to the Withington Urban District Council and was a member of their Education Committee.

In 1906 with the return of a Liberal Government, and in particular with the election of John Burns, President of the Local Government Board and a long-time sympathiser with the women's cause, Women's Local Government Societies made further appeals for their bill to be adopted by government - allowing all women to stand for local authorities. In

August 1907 the Government did adopt the bill and women ratepayers could at last seek election to the country's borough and county councils. All daughters, and most married women were automatically barred from office. As Margaret stated, "Picture yourself a council from which all married men were excluded - who would be left?" As an unmarried woman herself, she "wished to emphasise that it was the married women who were needed on town councils...they were the most valuable in public work".⁶⁰

Council elections in Manchester were set for 1 November 1907, giving very little time for a sustained and comprehensive campaign. The *Manchester Guardian* stated that these elections would have some 'new features':

Taking advantage of the privileges conferred on women ratepayers by the Act recently passed through



Caricature of Margaret Ashton in the *Manchester Evening Chronicle's* 'Men of Mark Series No. 54', 28 October 1907

*Parliament, giving women the right not only to vote but to be candidates at municipal elections, Miss Margaret Ashton, who is well known in Manchester public life, has consented, in answer to a request, to be a candidate for the representation of Hulme's St George's Ward... She has had much experience [also] in other forms of public service.*⁶¹

The seat she was contesting, as a Liberal candidate, had been held by the Conservatives since 1901, and interest in the contest was substantial. Her campaign was comprehensively recorded throughout in the *Manchester Guardian*. Her first meeting was crowded and her speech set the tone of the campaign:

*People were asking what women could do on a town council...If she was elected...she would like to serve on three committees - the Sanitary Committee, the Watch Committee, and the Education Committee. As to the Education Committee she pointed out that she had been connected with the work of education all her life. The question of women's lodging houses was one that the Sanitary Committee ought to take up...She wanted to be on the Watch Committee because she felt it was a dreadful thing in this twentieth century...in a large town like Manchester there were streets in which respectable women could not walk without fear of insult and molestation...Every improvement in the condition of women meant an improvement in the condition of the whole community.*⁶²

Throughout her campaign, Margaret emphasised her intention, if elected to the City Council, to improve the social conditions of the people of St George's Ward. In an enumeration of the special classes of work in which a woman could prove her worth on the Council, she spoke of the ill-effects on women and children when overcrowding of houses, lack of cleanliness and fresh air and the bad lighting of streets and backyards continued unchecked. Wherever she spoke, Margaret re-stated that her thirty years experience of public life made her familiar with the subjects which would require her attention as a member of the City Council. Of such questions as drainage, sewerage, housing, and the framing of by-laws she had made a special study and 'kept her eyes open'. "Don't expect the millennium when women get into the Council, but what one vote can do to improve this district of Hulme that I will do".⁶³

On the eve of polling day, the *Manchester Guardian* summarised the campaign:

*The most interesting of the contests is no doubt proceeding in the ward of St George, where Miss Ashton is the first woman candidate for a seat in the Manchester Council Chamber. If crowded meetings and the enunciation of a definite programme offer any indication of the result of an election Miss Ashton's candidature ought to succeed. She has laid before the electors definite views on progressive municipal work connected with good housing, clean air, and other principles of sanitation. She has also pointed out that a town council has now to undertake many duties associated with questions which especially concern women. That the public are interested in these is shown by the increasingly large attendances at her meetings. It remains to be seen what effect the novelty of a woman candidate will have on the poll.*⁶⁴

In spite of her untiring work and considerable support among the electorate she was defeated.

As a result of her standing for election, Margaret, who had been Chairman of the Withington District Education Committee when Withington was amalgamated with Manchester, and had been co-opted onto the city Education Committee, was unceremoniously replaced on the Withington Committee by Mr James Heald, a local businessman. This action initiated a debate in the *Manchester Guardian*, and a petition was sent to the Lord Mayor, from people of all shades of political opinion, asking for Margaret's reinstatement. The Lord Mayor referred the matter back to the Withington Committee, where a Mr Kemp spoke of the "misfortune to the city" in losing "the expert services of an expert in elementary education". He went on to state that:

*[He] thought that the key of the opposition was in fact that Miss Ashton was — should he say? — indiscreet enough to contest one of the seats held by the member of the Council. If that were so, if her rejection by the Withington Committee were a matter of vindictiveness, he could only say he was sorry at the smallness of soul thereby indicated.*⁶⁵

Correspondents to the *Manchester Guardian* held the same view.⁶⁶ However, the petitioning was to no avail. The Withington Committee steadfastly refused to accept her as their nomination and James Heald was appointed. Despite the obvious 'snub', Margaret was not deterred. As she stated after the election, "I hope that, next year, when I stand again, I shall not stand alone, but that other women colleagues will come forward at the same time."⁶⁷

Margaret did stand again. As her father was a Liberal, so was she, but as the Liberal party refused to enact women's suffrage, this time she was standing for independent liberal principles and not the Liberal party, reflecting her sense of betrayal. She now suggested, ironically, no doubt, that mu-

nicipal council work "was not entirely suitable for women" but she was "anxious to be allowed to try her small share of it". She didn't talk about her expertise in drains and ventilation this time, but about the needs of women and children for homes, schools, clean water, baths and wash-houses: "Surely such things affected women even more than men...who had to suffer if houses were ill-built, ill-drained, short of water and dark, ill-paved courts and alleys outside them?" She also campaigned for adequate street lighting and safe trams.

A few days later, in case the electors had missed the point, she was insisting that "if she were returned there would be no necessity for her to encroach upon the men's work." Not that it was clear what she had left them to do - as there was so much only a woman could see to: "Matters of great importance to women had been overlooked...Women councillors could do a great deal in pointing out the many small things that stood in the way of decent life in the home."⁶⁸

In 1908 Margaret stood as the candidate for the Withington district against the incumbent Conservative. She won, in a straight fight.⁶⁹

Once elected women met with little or no hostility from fellow councillors, although soon after Margaret Ashton was elected to the City Council, an elderly councillor proposed to her at a Town Hall reception. Her response was disconcerting to the councillor in question: "Good Gracious Mr X, you surely don't think that after taking all this trouble to get elected, I am going to give it up to marry *you!*" Even at this time, married women were not eligible as councillors.⁷⁰ There was however a deeper resistance to women from voters - a voter was heard to have pulled down the blinds when Margaret won in Withington saying "A Suffragette is elected" - and also from party agents. Women recognised this and, searching around for explanations, blamed it on the militant tendency of the suffragettes. Margaret wrote angrily to Millicent Fawcett that women candidates were finding



Margaret Ashton on her campaign trail, Withington Ward, October 1908

themselves damaged "by the action of those few violent women who have so much injured the reputation of women politicians in Lancashire".⁷¹

Margaret was elected to the Education Committee and the Sanitary Committee.⁷² Education and public health were two predictable committee interests of women members. Margaret, along with many other women who had been co-opted onto education committees, had given her views and had had to watch, unable to take any part in the final stages of her proposals, whilst her schemes had collapsed in Council. Margaret now felt that, being on the council, she would at last be able to get some "good work done". She was elected to be the City Council's representative as a Governor of Manchester High School for Girls, and she took a keen interest in both the girls and their teachers. Margaret set herself two principal aims: one, to ensure that good educational facilities were provided for girls as well as boys and the other, that teachers were properly trained and paid in accordance with their duties.⁷³

In 1910, she called attention to a resolution passed by the Elementary Education Sub-Committee as to the appointment of married women teachers. At the time, there were, in Manchester, 28 married women teachers in provided schools and 120 in non-provided schools.⁷⁴ According to the minutes of the Sub-Committee's meeting, it was proposed to recommend to the Education Committee that:

1...in future the appointment of a woman teacher should terminate on marriage; 2 That no married women other than widows be engaged by the Committee as teachers; and 3 That no action be taken regarding married women teachers now in the employ of the Committee.

Margaret entered a protest against disqualifying women for the office of teachers when they married. She believed that, until a woman teacher proved herself inefficient, it was an injustice to force her to retire from the profession for which she had been trained. The effect, Margaret stated, was to reduce her to the level of an unskilled worker: "Once you are married you become nothing but a general servant for no pay". In such cases, she pointed out, these women teachers lost their chance of a pension; there was no certainty that their husbands would remain alive, and as widows they were put in a serious position as there was no provision for them. As long as the woman was an efficient teacher, she argued, the Committee had no right to interfere. She hoped that the Committee would treat the married women as human beings, consider them on their merits, and not penalise them because they married. Unfortunately for Margaret, the Committee did not agree with her, and her proposal was defeated, and the recommendations were sent to the full Council Meeting in February.

A large and influentially signed petition against the recommendations had been sent in to the Council. It maintained that the teacher's position would be rendered even more precarious than it was, and would tend to make young women half-hearted in their training and subsequent work and so ultimately injure the teaching profession, if the recommendations of the Committee were generally adopted. Speaking against the recommendations, Margaret stated that national schools needed the best teachers they could get, and that the proposed restriction in choice would entail the loss of valuable members of the teaching profession who had the experi-

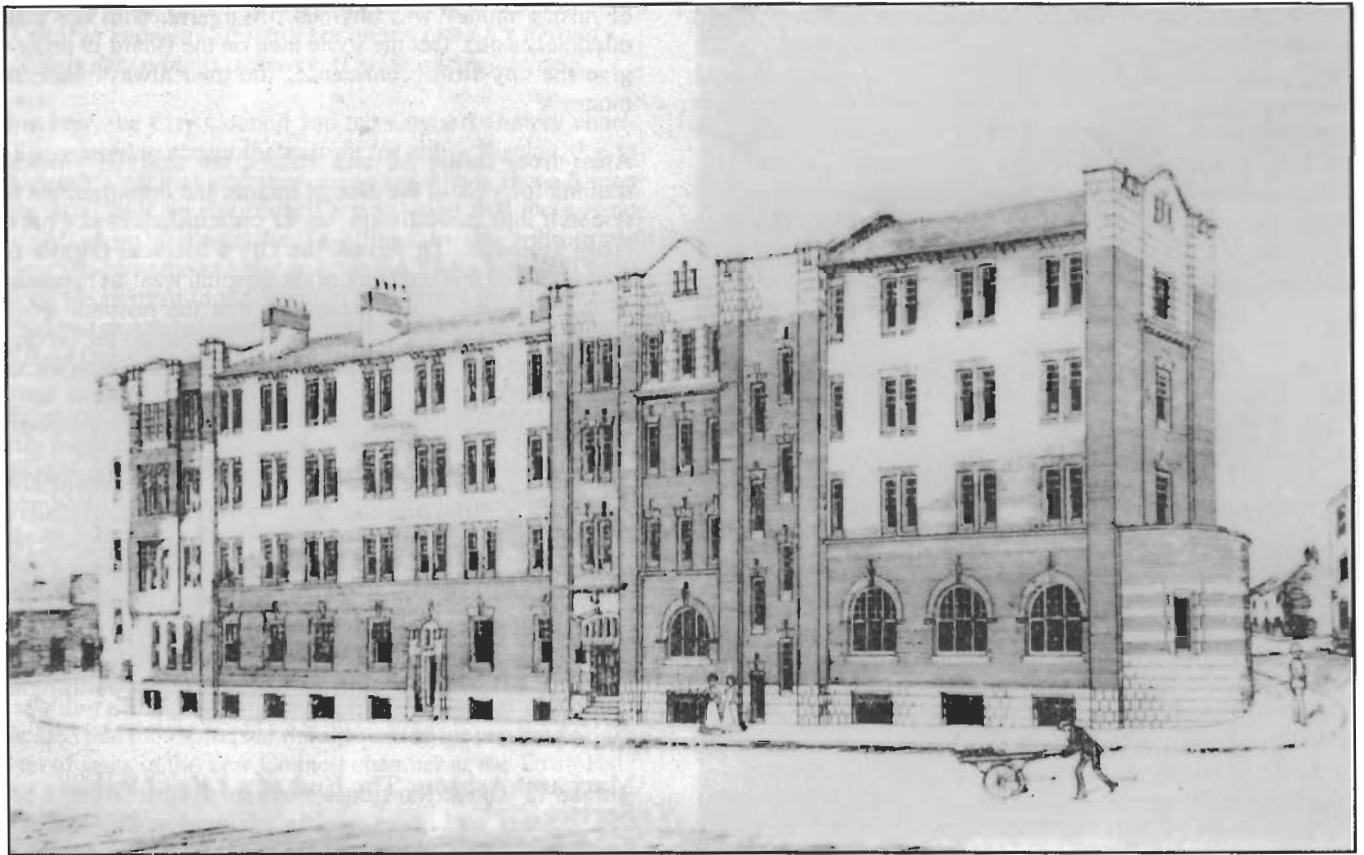
ence and who had already proved themselves.

The debate turned on the second clause of the Education Committee's recommendations, that no married women other than widows be engaged as teachers, and a resolution was moved referring it back to the Committee for further consideration. Those who had argued for the recommendations, had stated that it was unfair to the scholars, to the women themselves, to their families, and to their husbands. Margaret, on the other hand, had argued that the question of what married women should or should not do was entirely a domestic matter - as she stated: "In what other profession do you clear out the experienced persons to make room for the juniors?" The amendment to remove the second clause was defeated by sixty-five votes against thirty-six, however one concession was won, that being that the Chairman of the Education Committee had agreed that, "in the case of a husband incapacitated from work, the wife, for the purposes of employment by the Committee, should be treated as a widow".⁷⁵ It was obvious that Margaret's criticisms of the status of married teachers in Manchester were bitterly resented, but her arguments and recommendations, so often defeated, were substantiated in the reports of HMIs.⁷⁶

Experience had taught women that healthy homes needed healthy streets, that private health depended on public health. Working on the Sanitary Committee Margaret already had made a thorough study of sanitation and building regulations before she was elected to the Council. As local authorities began more vigorously to inspect workshops, laundries, offices and shop premises, checking their hours, conditions and sanitation, so women sanitary and factory inspectors begged women to come into public life so that they would have women members to report to; women councillors for their part tried to get more women sanitary staff appointed, and Margaret particularly supported the opposition of any curtailment of the power of chief lady inspectors.⁷⁷ Together, women sanitary staff and women councillors such as Margaret, took the lead on their councils in exposing and denouncing sweated labour.⁷⁸ In this connection, Margaret helped to organise the Anti-Sweating Exhibition which took place in Manchester, and focused the attention of the public on the conditions of women workers in this area.⁷⁹

Another aspect of her work on the Sanitary Committee involved the provision of 'clean' housing. The crowded, gloomy enclosed courts and alleys, as found in Ancoats and 'Little Ireland', were rotting into disrepair and needed to be replaced by open-ended streets, which allowed light and air in. Apart from clearing the slums, the council had to prevent instant slums being built in their place. Builders now had to conform to by-laws requiring them to construct cottages with at least four rooms, piped water, separate sculleries, privies, and often internal WCs, with higher ceilings and larger windows, soundly built with damp-proof courses below, a yard behind, and a decent respect for the building line in front.⁸⁰ At the annual meeting of the WLGS, a Dr Slater stated that local authorities needed to have women on committees so that they didn't merely confine their concern to construction but also to care about design, and to consider not only sanitation but also architecture:

...the home is a woman's shelter and workshop and its design determines the fate of the wife and mother...it seems that only women councillors notice that larders should be on the coolest not the warmest wall; that rooms with too many doors are impossible to furnish;



Architect's perspective view of Ashton House — Women's Lodging House, opened 1910

that to have the dustbins sited next to the larder window is unhealthy; that squared corners collect dust, that steep narrow stairs are dangerous, that living rooms should be positioned to get the sun; and that children needed space to play and grow.⁸¹

Manchester had established its city architect's department in 1902; from 1904 it was building two-bedroom cottage estates, and Margaret became much involved with the work, at last able to use her expert knowledge of drains and ventilation systems. Under her supervision, the Council, by 1910, was building semi-detached cottages, many with three bedrooms and bathrooms.⁸²

There was one housing question in Manchester that Margaret made exclusively her own — a municipal lodging house for women. As she had stated in her election campaign of 1907,

...there were 400 homeless women walking the streets of Manchester night after night. I hope to see a women's lodging-house provided. I want the house to be an hotel for the poorest, without any inquiries being made into their character, where they slept the night before, or what they have been doing with themselves.⁸³

Margaret had realised the lack of suitable accommodation in Manchester for working women in need of cheap lodgings. She knew of the proposed lodging-house being constructed in Glasgow, and she, together with the Manchester Sub-Committee, went to Glasgow to learn what they could of its construction and its proposed administration.⁸⁴ On her return, both she and a Mrs Clarke (of the Women Guardians and Local Government Association) visited some of the Manchester common lodging-houses on various occasions, espe-

cially at night. They found the conditions shocking: beds were foul and the atmosphere was horrendous. They could understand why some women chose to sleep in the open air rather than stay in the existing lodging-houses. In 1906, the Women's Guardians and the Women's Local Government Association, of which she was Chairman, had sent a deputation to the Sanitary Committee, with the result that in March 1907 the City Council agreed to build a women's municipal lodging house. Land situated behind Victoria Station was chosen as an appropriate site. This land had been acquired by the Improvements Committee at a cost of between £4 and £5 a yard. In 1908, once elected to the Sanitary Committee, Margaret steered an application forward for appropriation of this land, and a transfer was agreed. As well as the appropriation of the land, the Council borrowed £13,000, of which £11,000 was spent building the lodging-house and £2,000 to provide the necessary furniture and fittings.

The lodging-house was intended for the accommodation of women of the poorest class, such as charwomen, hawkers, field-workers and mill-workers. It was designed to accommodate 220 women, each of whom would have her own cubicle in a self-contained apartment. The building was designed to provide all the necessities of life: on the ground floor there was a large dining hall, recreation hall, a fully-equipped kitchen and a shop where the women could buy basic necessities. Also situated on this floor was the superintendent's house. The basement provided laundry facilities, locker rooms to store private possessions, water closets, washbaths, and a boot cleaning room. The first, second and third floors were divided into dormitories, each containing between 7 - 14 cubicles, with access to water closets on all floors. The charges for staying were 4d, 5d or 6d, depending on which floor the women were accommodated.

The lodging-house was opened on 2 September 1910, and was unique in that it was the first *municipal* enterprise of its kind in England, and quite simply would not have happened if Margaret had not worked so hard for it. Fittingly, the building was named Ashton House as a tribute to her efforts.⁸⁵

The most sensitive indicator of the nation's health, 'the thermometer of the city', was infant mortality. Despite advances in the field of medicine, the infant death rate in Manchester was as high as 152 per 1,000 births; in the poorer parts of the city, it was as high as 300 per 1,000.⁸⁶ Margaret became Chairman of the Maternity and Child Welfare Committee in 1915 and she was responsible for the reorganisation and coordination of the various activities which had been doing child welfare work in the city. Despite closing privies, making the supply of milk more hygienic, and recruiting health visitors to educate mothers in baby care, infant deaths remained stubbornly high.

In 1909, Manchester opened its first School for Mothers, where doctors checked the newborn babies and health visitors were sent to the homes. Within a year, Margaret had six clinics under her supervision and worked alongside Dr Niven, the Medical Officer of Health, and women doctors such as Catherine Chisholm and Janet Blair Zimmer.⁸⁷ Women of Manchester were offered free classes in elementary hygiene, cut-price fresh and dried milk, and the loan of prams. Though initially a voluntary scheme, Margaret persuaded the Council to fund it.⁸⁸

In May 1914 Margaret, having recently pressed for an enquiry into infant mortality, heard of a scheme formed by the medical women of Manchester about getting hospital care for dozens of babies suffering from malnutrition and epidemic diarrhoea. Infant mortality from nutritional disorders was extremely high, but treatment for babies under one year of age was strictly limited. Margaret had tried without success to persuade the Council to release a wing of the Old Infirmary for a baby unit, and saw this scheme as an ideal opportunity to establish a Babies' Hospital. Following discussions, Catherine Chisholm drew up a modest plan - the acquisition of a small house, with 12 beds, which would become the Manchester Baby Hospital. The nurses were to be well paid and comfortably housed, and the hospital was to carry out scientific work into the treatment of not only malnutrition but also rickets in children under two years of age. Margaret's reaction to this plan was characteristic: "Can you start this summer? I have £300 ear-marked for a Diarrhoea Clinic, and if you will begin at once, I will collect the rest".⁸⁹ The Babies Hospital was opened in August of 1914, in a private house in Clarendon Road, chosen and funded by Margaret.⁹⁰

The hospital had three declared aims: 1) to provide an institution where babies suffering from disorders of malnutrition could be treated - these often included epidemic summer diarrhoea and rickets; 2) to train girls in the care of infants (a very specialised field of nursing hardly explored up till then); 3) to provide opportunities for research in these, its special areas. By the end of the first year the house had been overwhelmed by the sheer volume, and again with Margaret's help, they moved to premises in Slade Lane, capable of taking 30 babies, whilst a neighbouring house was used for the Nurse's Home. This accommodation was also insufficient to meet demand, so the hospital made a third move to the mansion, then known as Cringle Hall, standing back from Burnage Lane.⁹¹ When the hospital had succeeded in showing that it was going well and was really needed, the necessity

of raising money was obvious. Margaret, with her usual directness said, "Get me some men on the Board in order to give the city firms confidence; the men always have the money".⁹²

Apart from caring for sick babies, the hospital provided training for girls in the care of infants and opportunities for research into malnutrition, under circumstances not previously available. Dr Niven, the city's Medical Officer for Health, stated that the work of the hospital was "as necessary as it was unique", and he hoped that the hospital would "enable a further step to be taken in linking up the medical work of the city by providing systematic instruction for the health visitors, and thus enabling them to continue in the homes of the children, the good done to them in the hospital".

Margaret was a ceaseless campaigner for the hospital to the end of her life, persuading city firms to donate funds to provide adequate facilities for the training of medical students in infant diseases and ailments.⁹³ The hospital continued to flourish, subsequently changing its name to The Duchess of York Children's Hospital, and was renowned for its pioneering work in the area of research of childhood ailments and diseases until its annexation by Withington Hospital.

Margaret Ashton: The End of a Life of Public Service

Margaret left the City Council in 1921 at the age of 65 years and on medical advice 'retired' to her brother's home in Gloucestershire. Evidently she found this period of inactivity extremely irksome. In a letter to her friend, Marie Eckhard, during a period of enforced bed-rest, she wrote, "I feel so dreadfully cut off from everyone here". Two years later, in 1923, she returned from the brief and reluctant retirement and settled in Didsbury at 'The Hawthorns' where she soon resumed her work for the International League, the Babies' Hospital and Manchester High School for Girls for a further fifteen years.

Over the last few years of her life, she was hampered by partial blindness and the heart trouble from which she had always suffered became worse. In 1928, she went abroad for four months to Italy to recuperate. But, despite her failing health she continued with her commitments. In a letter dated 14 June 1928, she wrote to Marie Eckhard:

...I shall be at home till about July 25, when the WFL Anglo-American Crusade meeting is in London...I have promised to take in guests for the Fed. of Univ. Women June 28 - July 2 and foreigners for WFL July 21 -23...I am well — but at the moment cumbered with much serving. All sorts of potty little things, Sales of Work, annual and other meetings, tea parties of my own (9) for high school teachers and so forth...⁹⁴

A portrait by Sir Henry Lamb was presented to Margaret as a commemoration of her 70th birthday. Margaret's reaction to this tribute was characteristically modest, as stated in a letter to Mrs Robinson, who made the presentation:

That the work which has meant so much to me — been indeed my very life — should have won me this sympathy and understanding is, in itself, so wonderful that I am truly grateful to you all. My opportunities have been so great — I am so conscious of shortcomings

*and of failure often to grasp occasion as it is offered, that to know my efforts were appreciated far beyond their deserving is a source of pride and rejoicing.*⁹⁵

However, the City Council and the City Art Gallery churlishly refused to accept the portrait for public display, due to Margaret's pacifist activities, an action which Shena Simon saw as a "blot on the council's reputation that there is no record of so distinguished a citizen in the appropriate place".⁹⁶ Nonetheless, the portrait did find a home: "I have given the portrait to the Women's Union of the University, who I had reason to know were anxious to have it...It will hang in their Debating Hall in the Union Building".

Margaret died on 15 October 1937. Friends and colleagues who paid tribute to Margaret in a special issue of the *Manchester and Salford Woman Citizen* in December 1937 remembered her as a woman who inspired others with her great devotion to ideals, and the great sacrifice she made for those ideals. Those who counted themselves as her friends felt it to be a privilege.⁹⁷

After her death, a memorial fund was set up by friends, admirers and colleagues. It had been hoped to provide a travelling scholarship. However, the memorial committee decided that monies raised should be used for two memorials: a set of seats in the new Council chamber at the Town Hall, and a public lecture on some aspect of national or international affairs to be given at least every two years.⁹⁸ The inaugural lecture took place on 20 March 1941, when Mrs J. L. Stocks gave a lecture on 'The Victorians'. The Chairman, Alderman R. G. Edwards, the Lord Mayor of Manchester commented in his introduction to the lecture that:

*It is fortunate that the first woman member of the Manchester City Council was a person of the standing of Miss Ashton — cultured, educated and possessed of an intense desire to serve the City. I am sure that if a less suitable and less qualified person than Miss Ashton had been elected as the first woman Councillor, the result could well have been disastrous to the cause of the representation of women on public bodies...but more important...she is remembered by those who knew her best...in her achievement in helping to make it possible for women to take their full share of responsibility in public life.*⁹⁹

The greatness of Manchester was in the creation of distinctively great citizens, and there was almost a definite species of such citizens — 'Homo Sapiens Mancuniensis'. Margaret Ashton was undeniably just such a citizen — distinguished, influential, courageous and resolute in pursuing her objective, and yet a most 'womanly' woman, compassionate and kindly. As the Dean of Manchester Cathedral stated in his address at a memorial service to her, "Like all really great people, she never put herself in the centre of the picture; the cause was everything and she was nothing. Wherever she touched the lives of other people she uplifted them".¹⁰⁰

Margaret's life spanned an era of great social and technological change: the first Education Act was passed in 1870; the Factory Act of 1878 and the Reform Acts of 1868, 1885 and 1918. Telephones, motor cars, photography and cinema were all developed during her lifetime. The first Women's Suffrage Society was formed when she was eleven years old, and she lived to see its ultimate success when all women of 21 years and over were given the franchise in 1929. She was to



Portrait of Margaret Ashton at 70, painted by Sir Henry Lamb

see women becoming Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, and holding the highest civic posts in local government, but not in her beloved Manchester.¹⁰¹

It is difficult to realise now what it meant for the daughter of a freeman of Manchester and member of the privileged classes to defy the conventions of her upbringing. Ties of family and friendship meant much to Margaret, and her involvement in the suffrage campaign must have made relations between her and her brothers-in-law, James Bryce, a prominent anti-suffragist, and Edward Tootal Broadhurst, a prominent Manchester citizen, very difficult. Both openly disapproved of her actions and opinions. Certainly she described all her public work as the outcome of her 'tiresome conscience'. It is not, therefore, very surprising that, in her frustration at being denied a higher profile in public life because of her gender, and her perception that women in all walks of life were equally disadvantaged, she embraced the women's suffrage movements with characteristic enthusiasm and determination. Her charismatic personality attracted enthusiastic feminists who were repelled by the 'militant' movement and believed, like her, that rational persuasion and orderly lobbying would be more effective. During her time as President of the North of England Society she succeeded in placing Manchester at the centre of a reform movement once again.

Her parallel interest in local politics gave her a new impetus when, at the second attempt, she was successful in being elected to the Manchester City Council in 1908 as an Independent, and where she concentrated her efforts into working for those municipal projects in which she had a particular interest and for which she worked strenuously to implement in the spheres of education and public health.¹⁰² This was perhaps her most notable achievement, and one for which she

should be remembered, the first woman councillor in Manchester, which opened the way for others to follow. In 1911 Mrs Redford joined her, and for a number of years they were the only women members. Then came Caroline Herford, Annie Lee, Ellen Wilkinson. Ten years after her death, there were 12 women on Manchester City Council out of a total council of 144.¹⁰³

In many ways it would be almost impossible to find her equal. Certainly no-one had ever contributed more in the way of gratuitous labour for great political ideals, municipal administration, higher and elementary education and the enfranchisement of women - perhaps her greatest life-work - and for the Women's International League which evolved during the

1914-1918 War.¹⁰⁴

Today, Margaret Ashton and her many years of working for women's causes and public service are, sadly, largely forgotten. Recognition of her life and work was, in Shena Simon's words, "never adequate". Arguably, her dedicated and relentless campaign for women's causes, albeit less strident and dramatic than her more famous contemporaries, was ultimately the more effective.¹⁰⁵ It is surely time that her achievements were recognised, especially in Manchester, and that she should be granted her rightful place as a prominent figure in the history of the women's movement.

NOTES

- 1 S. Simon, Margaret Ashton and Her Times, Margaret Ashton Memorial Lecture, 1948, (Manchester, 1949), Manchester Central Reference Library (Henceforth MCRL), Doc.923.2 A155, p.13. Also Hyde Chapel Parish Register, Births.
- 2 For fuller details on Thomas Ashton see, T. Middleton, *Annals of Hyde and District*, (Hyde, 1932), Ch. VII; also J. Bedford, 'The Thomas Ashtons of Hyde: Three Generations of Influence 1800 - 1900', (unpublished BA Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 1993), Ch. 4, pp.47-60.
- 3 Bedford, 'The Thomas Ashtons of Hyde', p.57; also, 'Margaret Ashton, Liberal Suffragist, Councillor: A Woman of Her Time', (unpublished MA Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 1997), p.10. *Manchester Guardian*, 22 Jan. 1898.
- 4 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.15.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.8. Also Bedford, 'The Thomas Ashtons of Hyde', p.48.
- 6 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.43 quoted, Bedford, 'Margaret Ashton', p.10.
- 7 Letter from Elizabeth Ashton (wife of Thomas) to Mary (surname unknown), ASH-ASH Biog.8, M107/4/1, MCRL; also Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.15.
- 8 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.14 and Ashton Family Tree; also Middleton, *Annals*, Ch. VIII, p.153.
- 9 Margaret Ashton, Letters to her Mother, 2 Aug. 1884 - 28 Dec. 1884, MCRL, Doc. 107/2/5/1-27.
- 10 Ashton, Letters to her Mother.
- 11 Ashton, Letters to her Mother.
- 12 Bedford, 'The Thomas Ashtons of Hyde', Ch. 5, p.61; Middleton, *Annals*, p.153. Thomas Gair Ashton became MP for South Bedfordshire in 1895.
- 13 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.15.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 15 C. Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s*, (1993), p.145.
- 16 M. Eckhard, 'Recollections', Margaret Ashton and Her Work, Various contributors, Manchester and Salford Women Citizens' Association, December 1937, MCRL, Doc. M68/25/1, p.12.
- 17 The Executive Committee adopted a fighting strategy over suffrage, calling on the Associations to refuse help to candidates who withheld support. They gave the Federation a reputation for strong feminism. L. Walker, 'Party Political Women: A Comparative Study of Liberal Women and the Primrose League 1890-1914', in J. Rendall (ed.) *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914*, (1987), pp.170-1.
- 18 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Feb. 1908.
- 19 E. S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette*, (1992).
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp.185-6.
- 21 *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 20 Oct. 1905.
- 22 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Oct. 1905. Also J. Liddington and J. Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement*, (1978), pp.194-5.
- 23 Ashton, Manuscript Letter, 16 Jan. 1906, MCRL, Doc. M50/2/1/225. Also quoted in Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.197.
- 24 Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, p.200.
- 25 National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, Women's Suffrage Demonstration, 19 May 1906, p.3, MCRL, Doc. M50/2/21/7.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp.6,13-14.
- 28 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Oct. 1908, p.10; also 23 May 1908, p.10.
- 29 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Feb. 1908, p.9.
- 30 4th Conference Women's Suffrage Alliance, Amsterdam, 15-20 June 1908, MCRL, Doc M107/2/5/7.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Manchester Guardian*, 15 Oct. 1908, p.4.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 H. Swanwick, 'Margaret Ashton: Feminist', Margaret Ashton and Her Work, pp.5-6.
- 35 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.10.
- 36 Swanwick, Margaret Ashton and Her Work, pp.5-6.
- 37 See Liddington and Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, pp.144-5, 159-160.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p.194.
- 39 NESWS Annual report for 1908 stated that: "A most successful little subscription dance was got up in Didsbury...efforts of this kind might well be made in different parts of Manchester for...they show people that an interest in politics does not divest women of their social taste and power", Women's Suffrage Collection, MCRL.
- 40 *Manchester Evening News*, 26 Oct. 1907, p.10.
- 41 *Manchester Guardian*, 12 Feb. 1908, p.8.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 11 March 1908, p.10.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 30 Sept. 1908, p.3.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 24 Oct. 1908, pp.9-10.
- 45 *Ibid.*

- 46 Ibid., 26 Oct. 1908, pp.7-8.
- 47 Ibid., 9 Oct. 1908, p.10.
- 48 NUWSS Provincial Council Meeting, 12 Nov. 1914, Resolution and Federation Reports, Manchester and District. Women's Suffrage Collection, MCRL.
- 49 NUWSS Annual report, 1919, p.13, Working Class Movements Library, (WCML) Doc. WML.F66 Box 5.
- 50 NUWSS Council Meeting, 22 Jan. 1915, Address by Margaret Ashton, Women's Suffrage Collection, MCRL.
- 51 'Towards Permanent Peace', Women's International Congress, 1916, pp.4-5, WCML, Doc.WML.F66 Box 5.
- 52 'Towards Permanent Peace', pp.4-5.
- 53 J.Wagner, 'Struggle for Peace', Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.9.
- 54 Ibid., p.9.
- 55 Simon, 'Margaret Ashton and Her Work, By Friends and Colleagues', Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.3.
- 56 Such as the Women Guardians Society, but also women's temperance, social purity and party political associations.
- 57 Anti-Suffrage Review, Dec. 1908, p.2 quoted in P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914*, (1987), p.6.
- 58 Millicent Garrett Fawcett quoted in P. Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*, (Oxford, 1987), p.14.
- 59 Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.7.
- 60 *Municipal Journal*, 28 Oct. 1911.
- 61 *Manchester Guardian*, 21 Sept. 1907, p.6.
- 62 Ibid., 15 Oct. 1907, p.5.
- 63 Ibid., 20 Oct. 1907, p.10; 30 Oct. 1907, p.12; 31 Oct. 1907, p.9 and 1 Nov. 1907, p.8.
- 64 Ibid., 31 Oct. 1907, p.9.
- 65 Ibid., 12 Nov. 1907, p.4.
- 66 "...the decision of the Withington Committee not to reappoint Miss Margaret Ashton...your readers can read between the lines...Here is a lady willing to place her services at the disposal of a Committee largely instrumental in the training of girls of the city. Cannot one man be spared from this Committee in order to make room for a woman?...Girls' education would be all the more successful if there were a few more lady members on the Education Committee instead of less". Ibid, 4 Dec. 1907, p.5.
- 67 Ibid., 7 Nov. 1907, p.12.
- 68 Ibid., 17 Oct. 1908, p.9; also 29 Oct. 1908, p.8.
- 69 Ibid., 3 Nov. 1908, pp.9-10.
- 70 Simon, Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.3.
- 71 Ashton, Letter to Millicent Fawcett, 16 Jan. 1906.
- 72 *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Nov. 1908, p.4.
- 73 M. G. Clark quoted in Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.10.
- 74 *Municipal Journal*, 28 Jan. 1910, p.64.
- 75 Ibid., 11 Feb. 1910, pp.65-67
- 76 Ibid., 10 July 1908, p.64.
- 77 Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, pp.426-30.
- 78 J. Golding, 'An End to Sweating? Liverpool's Sweated Workers and Legislation 1870-1914', *North West Labour History*, 21, (1996/7), pp.19-20. There had been an exhibition in London on the Sweated Industries, which led to the formation of a pressure group, the National Anti-Sweating League.
- 79 In October 1906, Margaret, through her association with the Manchester, Salford and District Women's Trades Union Council, helped organise the Manchester Sweated Industries Exhibition, which examined the status of regional sweated workers. Mary Quaille quoted in Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.5.
- 80 Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.446.
- 81 *Municipal Journal*, 24 July 1908, p.68.
- 82 Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.447, also Caroline Herford Blake quoted in Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.9.
- 83 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Oct. 1907, p.9.
- 84 *Municipal Journal*, 9 Sept. 1910, p.1.
- 85 *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Oct. 1908, p.11.
- 86 Alderman R. G. Edwards, Introduction to the Margaret Ashton Memorial Lecture, 20 March 1941, p.9, MCRL, Doc.942.08.S35.
- 87 Dr James Niven, Observations on Public Health Effort in Manchester, 1923, p.181 quoted in Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.438; also C. Chisholm and J. Blair Zimmern quoted in Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.11.
- 88 Dr James Niven in Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.438.
- 89 Chisholm and Blair Zimmern quoted in Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.11.
- 90 Manchester Babies Hospital, Annual Report, 1917, p.7, MCRL.
- 91 *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Nov. 1962, p.11
- 92 Chisholm and Blair Zimmern quoted in Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.11.
- 93 *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Sept. 1916, p.14.
- 94 Letters to Mrs Eckhard, Bourton-on-the-Water, 18 June 1922, MCRL, Doc.M14/4/4; Bordighera, Italy, 25 Feb. 1926; Didsbury, 14 June 1928.
- 95 Ashton, Letter to Mrs Robinson, 17 Nov. 1923, MCRL, Doc. MISC.718/36.
- 96 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.18.
- 97 There are numerous eulogies in Margaret Ashton and Her Work.
- 98 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 March 1939.
- 99 Edwards, Introduction, p.9.
- 100 *Manchester Guardian*, 21 Oct. 1937, p.8.
- 101 Simon, Margaret Ashton, pp.5-6.
- 102 Manchester University Council Resolution, 27 Oct. 1937, Margaret Ashton and Her Work, p.13. For her services to the City, she was awarded an honorary MA.
- 103 Simon, Margaret Ashton, p.23.
- 104 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 Oct. 1937, p.8.
- 105 Women such as the Pankhursts, Ada Nield Chew, Sarah Reddish Ellen Wilkinson et al, whose lives and work in the suffrage movements have been well documented.