



York Civic Trust
Promoting Heritage - Shaping Tomorrow

PRESS RELEASE

York Civic Trust

announce the unveiling of a blue plaque to

EDNA ANNIE CRICHTON

First Woman Lord Mayor of York

The unveiling will be performed by

The Right Honourable Lord Mayor of York

Councillor Barbara Boyce

AT

Thursday 22 June 2017

12 noon

Outside 30 Clifton, York, YO30 6AE

By kind permission of the owners Mr & Mrs Akyol



Preview of the blue plaque, prior to installation. (Credit - York Civic Trust)



Image of Edna Annie Crichton as Lord Mayor – image in the public domain

York Civic Trust

York Civic Trust is a membership organisation open to all who wish to protect and enhance York's architectural and cultural heritage, to champion good design and to advance the high place which York holds amongst the cities of the world. Founded in 1946, it has the key objectives of “Promoting Heritage—Shaping Tomorrow” at the heart of its work. Over the years the York Civic Trust has put up over a hundred information plaques to the places and people of York and continues to do so today in collaboration with its City Enhancement Fund, with the aims to preserve, restore, enrich, enhance and sustain the city of York.

For further details, contact

David Fraser Chief Executive York Civic Trust

davidfraser@yorkcivictrust.co.uk

01904 655543 or 07860 706282

BIOGRAPHY – EDNA ANNIE CRICHTON

By Pat Hill (York Civic Trust Historian)

Edna Annie Crichton was the first woman Lord Mayor of York 1941-42, Member of York City Council from 1919, Alderman and awarded honorary freedom of the City in 1955.

Edna Crichton was born on 8 May 1876 to the Quaker family of Joseph Marshall Sturge and his wife Anne or Annie, née Burke, who had met on the West Indian island of Monserrat where the Sturges had property and Annie Burke's family had also settled. The Sturges were an old Quaker family dealing particularly in the corn trade, prominent in pharmacy, railways, shipping and whale oil but also noted as radicals and philanthropists. Marshall and Anne returned to England and settled in Gloucester where they had four children, Charles, Mary or May, Vida and Edna Annie. Her father was described as 'merchant cashier' on her birth certificate. Edna attended the Quaker school at Sidcot, Somerset from 1889 to 1892, one of the first co-educational boarding schools in England. She was 'artistic but not particularly academic' according to the Sidcot archivist, but failed at mathematics which may explain why she did not continue her education at The Mount School in York, unlike her sister, May.

From 1892 until her marriage in 1901 Edna lived with her sister, May, in East London and worked at the Passmore Edwards Settlement. She may also have assisted May in social work projects in West Ham. It was presumably through this activity that she met her husband David Sprunt Crichton who was the sub-warden of the Mansfield Settlement in Canning Town, West Ham, and not a Quaker. Edna was married at the Quaker meeting house in Charlbury, near Kingham, Oxfordshire where Edna had lived with May and her husband. David Crichton was 31, Edna was 25. Edna Annie Crichton then moved to York which was to be her home for nearly seventy years, and with a large Quaker community to support her. Her sister and brother had attended the Quaker schools of The Mount and Bootham in York. Her first cousin, Helen Winifred Sturge, was a teacher at The Mount, then headmistress for a long period. A more distant cousin, Francis Sturge, taught at Bootham close to Edna's new home in St. Mary's, and Francis was later to marry into the Rowntree family. Edna's husband, David, worked as the first welfare officer at the Rowntree Cocoa Works from 1900 and Edna's childhood friend, Bertha Watson, married J.B. Morrell, Director of Rowntrees. So Edna and David were part of the large Quaker business community in York.

Edna was a member of the Quaker meeting at Clifford Street (now known as Friargate) and also a member of a small number of Quaker committees for a short time but her name is largely absent from minute books. Her energies were mainly devoted to her public life but she continued to think and speak of herself as a Quaker. David Crichton was, like his wife, a remarkable person. He was born in Dundee, studied at Edinburgh then Oxford where he undertook a three-year course in theology at Mansfield College from thence to his post as sub-warden at the Mansfield Settlement in West Ham until moving to York and Rowntrees. He was an accomplished sportsman winning medals for athletics, encouraging choral societies, amateur dramatics and founding editor in 1902

of the Rowntrees house journal, the Cocoa Works Magazine (the C.W.M.). He contributed an article on education to the Liberal *Yorkshire Gazette* in 1905-6 together with well-known York Liberals and he was a non-elected member of York Council's Education Committee, representing the University of Leeds.

Edna had a daughter, Vida in 1902 followed by a son, David in 1906. Both had a Quaker education followed by Oxford University. Vida qualified as a barrister and worked from 1946 until her death in 1969 for the Westminster group of newspapers in York as head of its inquiry bureau, the chairman of the group being the family friend, J.B. Morrell. David attended Carnegie College of Physical Education in Leeds before teaching physical education at Oakham School, Rutland.

With two children at school, Edna stood for election to York City council in 1919. She had become a leading figure in the Women's Citizen's Association, a non-partisan organisation urging the case for election of women to municipal office. She maintained her non-party stance throughout her time in local government. Edna said that women were more knowledgeable than men 'in such questions as housing, education, maternity and child welfare.' She took a stance as a strong housing reformer. Standing for Bootham, then one of only six wards in York, she came top of the poll. She had served only a year when her husband died suddenly in 1921, aged 51. Although not a member of the Society of Friends he attended Quaker meetings and was buried in the Quaker burial ground at York. Edna was returned top of the poll again in Bootham ward in 1922. By the time of the next election in 1925 there were twelve wards and she was returned unopposed for the new ward of Clifton and did not have to contest another election until 1934. She moved from St. Mary's to 30, Clifton amongst her constituents living there for the rest of her life.

She was to chair the Housing committee for twenty years. By the time she was elected chair of the reorganised Housing committee in 1931, 2,482 council houses had been built or were under construction. The major development was the Tang Hall estate on which 1,650 houses were built. An article in the *Gazette* in 1931 called her 'one of the most useful members of the Council' who was listened to attentively by her colleagues. 'She is an attractive speaker, who, ignoring the frills, gets to the heart of the subject'. In both 1934 and 1937 she came top of the poll at Clifton, Edna insisting, 'I sincerely believe I can best serve you by keeping clear of party politics' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 1937). In April 1939 the Housing committee was told that 5,063 houses and flats had been built and well over a thousand slum properties had been demolished. Seeborn Rowntree wrote approvingly in 1939 that 'all the worst slums which existed in 1900.....most of [the demolition has taken place] since 1933' (*Poverty and Progress: a second social survey of York*, 1941). It was said that Edna visited every house to be taken down.

War broke out in 1939 and two years later Edna Crichton was elected by her colleagues to be York's first woman Lord Mayor after the second tragedy in her life. Her son, David, a subaltern in the Gordon Highlanders, engaged to be married, died in a German military hospital in Friesburg, near Munich, of cancer, in 1941, after being captured in fighting near Dunkirk in 1940. The tradition of male mayors in York had lasted for over 700 years, 'York breaks with tradition' was the headline in the *Evening Press*. In 1941-2 there were 52 members of York city Council, two of whom were women. In 1955, Edna's last year on the council three of the 39 councillors were women and

one other woman besides Edna among the thirteen aldermen. Edna always stressed the need for women councillors saying 'thoughtful men and women [should] elect a Council representative of all sections of the community.'

Her year in office was to be the most dramatic in the modern history of York. In April 1942 York was bombed in the so-called 'Baedeker' raids. Up to a third of homes were destroyed or badly damaged, as many as 90 people were killed and about 200 injured. The fifteenth century Guildhall was hit with Edna living next door in The Mansion House. She went from bombed home to home unperturbed. The *Evening Press* said that she had been 'an inspiration to citizens... working untiringly for about 18 hours, superintending A.R.P. arrangements, visiting hospitals and first-aid posts and generally alleviating distress among victims' (YEP, 30 April, 1942). The Conservative councillor, H.E. Harrowell, told the council to cheering: 'There is, to my mind, one individual who ought not to have to wait for an acknowledgement of the magnificent example and service which was set to the city, and that is the Lord Mayor.' In 1942, she was elected as alderman, the first woman in York's history.

As Lord Mayor she was ex-officio member of almost all Council committees and her attendance record was remarkable. She remained Chair of the Housing Committee and chaired all its monthly meetings in the year. She attended all meetings of the Health Committee and almost all of the Education Committee. She remained on the Council for ten years after the war, an extremely difficult time with acute demand for housing. In 1945 it was estimated by the Housing Committee that at least 4,000 new houses were required in York including 2,000 for slum clearance. In 1945 Labour took control of the Council and a year later Edna was no longer Chair of the Housing committee which she had run for so many years but in 1949 the Conservatives took back control and Edna was reinstated as Chair of Housing with her old friend, J. B. Morrell, as Lord Mayor. It was not an easy time to be Chair of Housing with vociferous, angry protests from council housing tenants in 1954 and Edna escorted through the crowd by the chief constable. Her service to local government ended but in September 1955 she was awarded the honorary freedom of the City of York, only the second woman to be honoured, the first being Mary, Princess Royal, in 1952.

Her years of retirement were spent in York where she died in a nursing home at the age of 93 in March 1970. Her ashes were scattered on her husband's grave in the Quaker burial ground in York. A room in the West Offices Council building is named 'The Crichton Room' and a street in York, Crichton Avenue, is named after her.

Source:

David Rubinstein, *Homage to Edna Anne Crichton*, (Quack Books, York, York, 2013.)