

HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK**MARY MURDOCH, DOCTOR, SUFFRAGETTE AND PIONEER**

Image : Hull History Centre

"The poor have suffered the most, in their crowded tenements, and one big drapery establishment was entirely gutted. We had no casualties at our station, so I got out my car and drove about the town for some hours, without lights, to try and pick up the injured. Our School for Mothers had every window blown out, and several ceilings fell; but we got out the Sister-in-Charge and the Cook uninjured. I was in no danger myself, though I saw the bombs thrown out, and

feared one had struck the Children's Hospital. However, they were all safe when I went to them"

Dr Mary Murdoch, on life as a doctor in Hull during the 1st World War

When Murdoch's Connection – the futuristic looking white footbridge which spans the A63 and links the city centre to the marina, waterfront and fruit market – opened in 2021 there was some grumbling locally about the choice of name.

The bridge was named after Dr Mary Murdoch, who became Hull's first woman doctor and took up a wide range of political and social causes, not least the women's suffrage movement which campaigned for the vote to be extended to women. The complaint was that Dr Murdoch was not born in Hull – in fact she was Scottish – but her contribution to medicine and public health in the city, particularly on behalf of children and women, was incalculable; all the more so when you realise that she was a pioneer in what was at the time very much a man's world.

Mary Murdoch was born into a well to do family in 1864 in Elgin. After her father died when she was only twelve she was educated in London and then Switzerland. She was considered a gifted student, despite developing a gastric illness which was to afflict her for most of her life. After a period spent caring for her ailing mother she entered the London School of Medicine for Women. At this time there were very few female doctors and those that there were encountered much suspicion and prejudice. Nevertheless Mary qualified in 1892, and soon became House Surgeon at the Victoria Hospital for Sick Children on Park Street in Hull. After a spell at the Tottenham Fever Hospital in London she came back to Hull to become the city's first female GP, firstly on Spring Bank and then at 102 Beverley Road. An exceptionally hard worker who is reputed to have frequently managed on no more than four or five hours' sleep a night, she also had consulting rooms in Grimsby and continued her association with the children's hospital, becoming recognised as an expert paediatrician. In 1900 she appointed an assistant – Dr Louisa Martindale – and the two remained close throughout Mary's comparatively short life.

Dr Martindale's mother (also Louisa) championed causes such as improved education and career opportunities for women and her daughter brought the same values to her work with Dr Murdoch in Hull.

Together they took up a wide range of political and social causes, including founding a school for mothers, a crèche, the Girls' Patriotic Club and a lodging house for women in Lister Street. In particular the two doctors took up the cause of votes for women, setting up a Women's Suffrage Movement. Mary became the founding President of the Hull branch of Millicent Fawcett's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in 1904 and their monthly meetings attracted audiences of a couple of hundred members. She later broke with the NUWSS which refused to support the more militant methods of the Women's Social and Political Union, which she then joined. As her influence grew she was invited to address the International Suffrage Alliance in London and was elected as a delegate to the International Council of Women, attending meetings in Toronto, the Hague and Rome.

Despite her workload as a GP and her indifferent health she tirelessly promoted the cause of women's suffrage, believing that enfranchisement and improvements to women's status and opportunities would help to alleviate the harsh economic and social conditions in which many led their lives. Her outspokenness earned her enemies as well as supporters, for example landlords went to considerable lengths to try to silence her when she spoke out about poor housing conditions in the city. But she had a clear understanding of the link between environment and health and championed the cause of good hygiene and good practices in childcare. She encouraged men to play a more active part in looking after their children, standing on an upturned box at Hull docks in order to exhort the workers to hold their babies for two hours every Sunday. She told them this was good for the babies, but no doubt also hoped to gain a short respite for exhausted mothers. It is claimed that the men had tears in their eyes listening to her!

Mary Murdoch was also the first woman in Hull to own a car – a De Dion – which she apparently drove fast by the standards of the day, being convicted of driving at nearly 20 miles an hour whilst driving to visit a patient. But in 1916 she was called out to treat a patient after a Zeppelin raid and contracted influenza after wading through deep snow. She died a few weeks later aged only 51, and her funeral procession, which attracted thousands of people, was headed – at a suitably stately pace – by her De Dion car.

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