

## Mary Sharpe – a woman's work

Mary Brigg was the youngest child of Sir John Brigg, the MP for Keighley, who made his family home at Kildwick Hall.

She married in 1896 and went to live with her husband, Cecil Sharpe, in Derbyshire. Sometime later, following her husband's early death, she returned to live at Kildwick Hall with her two brothers; the twins Walter Anderton and John Jeremy. This allowed her to become the lady mayoress of Keighley when Walter Anderton was elected mayor in 1912, a position he held until 1916 – a record four-year term of office.



This photograph accompanied a news report in the Keighley News dated 20<sup>th</sup> June 1914 describing a garden-party held at Kildwick Hall to celebrate the re-election of W.A. Brigg as mayor of Keighley. It shows (amongst others): W.A. Brigg (centre), Mary Sharpe (to his right), the Lady Mayoress of Bradford (to his left), and the Lord Mayor of Bradford (behind, with chain of office).

There are suggestions that Mary might have been sympathetic to, if not an actual supporter of, the Women's Rights movement.

Towards the end of August 1914, when the number of men volunteering to serve in the Army had dropped-off significantly after the initial enthusiasm, a large recruitment meeting was held in the Keighley Municipal Hall. During this meeting, Mayor Brigg and many other senior members of the council made an appeal for volunteers to come forward. But perhaps the most remarkable speech of the evening came from the Mayoress, who put forward very forcefully the feelings of women who were denied opportunities to act on their own account. After being introduced by her brother she said:

*You men stop us as much as you can from taking the lead. (Laughter.) The least you can do is fight for us. (Hear, hear.) There are Yorkshire women as well as Yorkshire men, and I can assure the lads left behind that they will get nothing like the welcome when the struggle is over that will be given by the girls to those who have been to war. (Laughter and applause.) When I see an able-bodied, well-built young man walking about the streets enjoying himself I am ashamed of him. (Cheers.) I call on you men of Keighley to respond to the call of duty. I know all of you cannot enlist for many reasons. But I ask you to do something for your country at this time. (Cheers.)*

Mary Sharpe clearly believed that, during wartime at least, a woman's place need not be in the home. On the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1916, the Keighley News reported that she had joined the Red Cross as a nurse and was serving in a hospital near her late husband's home in Darley Dale, Derbyshire. They celebrated her action by publishing a quarter-page photograph of nurse Sharpe in her uniform.



Mary's radical views were again on show at the beginning of 1918, during a presentation made by the Town Council to commemorate the four years that William and Mary had served as Mayor and Mayoress. During the speeches, the former Mayoress expressed the hope "that not many years would pass before they might possibly have a woman as Mayor". It was a suggestion that was, as reported in all the local newspapers, greeted with laughter.

In 1918, the Representation of the People Act gave women restricted access to the vote, with full equality with men coming in 1928.

Mary Sharpe continued to live at Kildwick Hall for the rest of her life. She outlived both of her brothers, and died in 1946.

In 2003 Councillor Nancy Holdsworth became lady Mayor of Keighley.

