

Our early female medical students

To celebrate the upcoming Bicentenary of the Sheffield Medical School in 2028, and to establish a more equal, diverse and inclusive representation of those who have contributed to the school's 200-year history, MA History student Joseph Newman has researched some of the early female medical school students. Here, their stories about their achievements whilst studying and what they did after graduation provides an insight into some of the early pioneering women who studied medicine and carved their own career.

With such a long history, the stories of those who trained at the University of Sheffield's Medical School are an integral part of the school's legacy. Yet the walls of this room, known as the Heritage Boardroom, is filled with portraits of distinguished medical men, which offers little visibility on the women who also studied, qualified, and made vital contributions to medicine, respectively. We aim to resolve this imbalance.

Through research using the University's archives, Special Collections, and Heritage Collections, the stories of some of the earliest female graduates of Sheffield Medical School have been uncovered. Alongside their words, images, and achievements, we have brought together personal stories linked to their studies and careers which has enabled us to identify these women and their place further.



Lydia photographed c.1920 wearing her *Croix de Guerre*, awarded for her service during the First World War.

Lydia Henry (30th June 1891 - 27th March 1975) was the first woman to graduate from the Medical School and the second M.D. graduate. After completing her degree in 1916, her career took her to the battlefields of France where she worked as an Assistant Surgeon at the Royaumont Hospital near the Western Front. Lydia was awarded an honorary degree (DSc) in 1978 during the 150th anniversary of the medical school. Her research and public health work shaped early approaches to women's healthcare while advocating for their inclusion in the profession.

Winifred Wells (c.1894 - c.1951) graduated in 1917; she excelled in her studies and later practiced medicine alongside her husband in Lincoln, whom she met whilst studying at Sheffield. Winifred received four bronze medals for completing her years of study, alongside the Gold John Hall medal, awarded twice in 1916 and 1917. These achievements reflect both her academic success and her determination to make her mark in a profession that was still dominated by men.



Photograph of Winifred in later life

Ethel White (1896 - 1990) graduated from Sheffield in 1918. She was later known for her clinical expertise in paediatrics, conducting research into childhood rheumatic disease which she wrote her PhD thesis on in 1933. She was then awarded the M.D. Her career focused on her interest in public health which is a key example of how women contributed to advancing medical knowledge at a time when they were often excluded from recognition.

(LEFT) Hand-painted photograph of Ethel during her graduation in 1918.

Later in 1922, **Mary Prowse Gell** (16th April 1894 - 31st October 1978) graduated and began her career that took her to China where she navigated political upheaval and conflict to work as a doctor and teacher. Mary continued to provide medical care even while detained in a civilian internment camp during the Second Sino-Japanese war. Mary's life reflects the profound sense of duty, resilience and humanitarian spirit that defined Sheffield's early female medical pioneers.



Photograph of Mary (centre) with three nurses in China c.1930. (MS301 /1)



In 1930, **Constance Jenkinson** (21st April 1908 – 14th August 1986) graduated from Sheffield with a First-Class Honours BSc where she was one of eleven women out of a cohort of forty-three students. Constance then gained her M.D. in 1933 for her thesis on 'The Importance of the Parathyroid Glands and how they affect muscle function' and received the Walter S Kay Gold medal in 1930. After graduating, she then worked as a Pathologist at the Fir Vale Hospital (now the Northern General Hospital) from October 1931 by recommendation from Professor John Beresford Leathes.

(LEFT) Photograph of Constance on her graduation standing in the quadrangle of Firth Court, 1928.

Although each of these women had a distinctive life and career, together they demonstrate the diverse paths that Sheffield's first female doctors forged. They were pioneers, not anomalies. Further research has revealed many more women whose contributions deserve recognition, and these words mark only the beginning of their stories being restored to the school's history. We know of female tutors and lecturers whom we aim to research and further our knowledge of these women and include their achievements alongside many other female graduates.