

Nurse Martha Hogg, JP:

She lived to serve

BY TOM WALSH



It was a very lucky happening for Wigan, when John Robert Chadwick left his home in Henley, Stoke on Trent, to find work in Lancashire. He found lodgings in the Poolstock area of the town, and secured work in a local cotton factory. It was here that he met his future wife, Margaret Birchall also a resident of Poolstock. They married on the 21 April 1869 and set up home in Baker Street before moving to nearby Byrom Street. They had six children, the third being Martha, born in July 1872, the subject of this article.

Martha Chadwick Hogg, was one of the greatest figures to hail from Wigan, or given her achievements, from anywhere in the country. I think she can fairly rank with the likes of the Countess de Markaievicz, the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons in 1918 and Nancy, Lady Astor, the first woman to take her seat in the chamber, the latter being shoehorned in to her husband's constituency (Portsmouth Sutton) on his elevation to The House of Lords.

Not wishing to undermine their commitment to suffrage, they operated from a position of great privilege. Martha, on the other hand, was born into poverty, leaving school at 13 to work in a cotton factory, like her mother and father before. On her marriage to her husband, William Hogg on 29 August 1891, she was forced to leave her employ, as many women in those days were impelled to do. This arcane practise applied even to some of the professions, teachers for example had to leave their chosen calling on taking their nuptial vows. The rule on this now unbelievable dictate was: no questions, no debate, and no exceptions. To my surprise, whilst researching this topic, I found the discrimination carried on until

the 1960s, Barclays Bank for instance only relaxing the rule in 1961. It was this type of unfairness that drove the young Martha Hogg to train to be a Midwife, qualifying in 1912, which was a remarkable achievement for someone who left school at 13 without qualifications. It was this steely determination that would come to the fore later, in her political life.

Martha and William Hogg made their home in Greenough Street, Wigan, where they lived until their deaths, in 1934 and 1941 respectively. They had four children and by all accounts were greatly respected in the locality. This was particularly true for Martha as a result of her work in the community. It was this work, seeing the terrible living conditions and poverty, that drove her to politics and the Labour Party. She was involved with local politics throughout the First World War, sitting on several committees regarding health issues and as a representative of the Guild of Midwives.

She first stood for public office in the election of 1919, when she contested Lindsey Ward for Labour. She lost to the Conservative candidate by only 92 votes. She would have undoubtedly won the seat had there been a fairer voting system in place. Whilst it was possible for some women to vote at 21, in local elections the restrictions with regard to property made a mockery of the process. Universal suffrage was not to come for another nine years. It was her stance in taking on the establishment that makes her stand out as a beacon just as much as Countess de Markaievicz and Lady Astor. In my opinion her light shines brighter. You can only marvel at the courage of a working class woman standing up to the ruling class, an action difficult to imagine, particularly in those days.

Martha was a fighter and undeterred by her defeat in 1919, stood for Lindsey Ward again in 1920, this time successfully winning the seat with a majority of 119

over the Conservative candidate. She became the first woman Councillor for Wigan and one of only a small number in the country. Martha Hogg's victory on 1 November 1920 provided Wigan with another first. Labour became the largest party on Wigan Council for the first time, though a long way from an overall majority. The new council was made up of the following: Labour 23 members, Conservative 21, Liberals 9 and Independents 2, so setting in train Labour's dominance on the council that lasts until the present day.

Martha was not to be a token woman by any means and made her voice heard on subjects including pensions for the blind and for ex-servicemen. She showed great concern for the plight of the mothers she cared for as a midwife. Her contribution to the many Council debates can be read in the Council minutes.

Her exploits didn't stop with her election to the council. She played a notable role on many committees and was so well thought of by her fellow councillors that she was appointed as the first female member of the Watch Committee in 1929. This was a rare honour for any councillor and a much sought after appointment. In February 1931 she was appointed as a Magistrate to the Wigan Bench and whilst not the first woman on the bench, she was one of only a handful. She served in that role with great distinction until her death.

Baptised as an Anglican, in her teenage years she attended the Baptist Church in King Street and was a leading light on the executive committee of the Women's Meeting. Very sadly Martha Hogg has largely been forgotten in Wigan and I must confess that I only learned of her existence by chance, when visiting Wigan Cemetery on another quest. I stumbled on her grave and was intrigued to find out more. With each new discovery, all the more I have been impressed by this very formidable woman.

Martha died suddenly on the 16 May 1934, caring for her patients up to a couple of days before her untimely death. Her funeral brought Wigan to a standstill; such was the esteem in which she was held. On the day of the service her coffin was carried in to the church by four police constables. The Minister, Reverend R.H. Jackson paid tribute to her in his address. He spoke of her Christian piety and the work she had done, especially among the women of the town. He said that this work would not cease with her death as she had left a blueprint for future endeavour. He continued that the best word to sum up her life was 'altruistic', a selfless concern for the well being of others. I am sure the vast congregation concurred

with this sentiment. There were hundreds of floral tributes and the one that I think would have pleased her most was the one from the Women's Labour Party. In attendance were numerous local dignitaries, including the Chief Constable, Thomas Pey.

Members of the Wigan Women's Labour Party walked in procession, including Mrs Ethel Naylor, who many years later was to become Wigan's first Lady Mayor. During my research for this synopsis I placed an article in the Wigan Observer, seeking information about Martha Hogg and was contacted by one of her two great-grandchildren, Tim Jones, from Ashton-in-Makerfield. His help had been invaluable, as has Julie Baker's from Wigan Local Studies.

Tim Jones, his wife Veronica and myself had a meeting and agreed to campaign for Martha Hogg's life to be remembered with a memorial, to be placed in a prominent place in the town. There may be a report on this subject in the next issue.

My wife joked recently that there were three people in our marriage: herself, me and Martha Hogg. If we are successful in our endeavours to have her life suitably marked, I think I will at last, be able to say,

"Goodnight and God bless, Martha!"

Martha Hogg's gravestone

