

Helen Mitchell Somerville JP, CA (1883-1978)

SI Edinburgh

Helen was born in 1883 in Edinburgh where she attended St Margaret's College, later becoming a Governor of the College. She was the daughter of the Procurator Fiscal for Edinburgh, George Somerville. Until 1934 she resided in Edinburgh when she moved to a house built for her grandfather in Aberdour, where she fully appreciated having an outlet for her passion as a keen gardener.

During World War 1 she began an apprenticeship in the family firm D C Wallace and Somerville Accountants. In 1925 she was fully qualified – the second lady in Scotland and first lady member of the Edinburgh Society. She became a partner in the company with her brother Sir John Somerville. During her career she actively encouraged the young female apprentices and members to achieve their potential. In 1975 she celebrated her Golden Jubilee described as her 'red letter day' and acknowledged by David Flint, President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants. He was well aware of her encouragement of women in the profession and wrote 'You must, I am sure, be particularly pleased at the women's record in the Institute's examinations in recent years when, as you know, in three years out of five recently the Gold Medal was won by a woman.' Helen retired in 1967 aged 84 years.



The first record of Helen in SI Edinburgh is a letter describing the hair raising voyage on the Danube from Vienna to Budapest for the 1936 "Peace Week", an early indication of her interest in the international aspect of Soroptimist. Apparently the boat caught fire and their luggage was thrown overboard!

In 1938 the club recognised her financial acumen in appointing her Treasurer of SI Edinburgh, a post she held till 1951. However this was the beginning of over 20 years service to the club, region federation (vice president 1951-52) and the international association.

In the years leading up to 1948 there had been discussions on the formation of a First Sister Plan to encourage correspondence and co-operation with Soroptimists in other countries. When it was agreed in 1948 to form the First Sister Club, Helen was chosen to be the first Chairman, a post she held till 1952.

Discussion had been ongoing about the constitution of the Soroptimist International Association (SIA) especially concerning the Governing Body (the International Board).

In 1952 it was agreed that the President and Secretary should be from one Federation and the Treasurer from another. The first President and Secretary appointed were from the American Federation and Helen was appointed from the British Federation as the first Treasurer of the Soroptimist International Association. She held the post till 1956. All this service was acknowledged in 1960 by the award of Honorary Membership of the Federation.

Helen played a much appreciated part in the administration of numerous women's organisations locally. She played Hockey with the Edinburgh Ladies and may have played for Scotland. She received a plaque from the Scottish Hockey Association. Golf was also an interest first in Edinburgh as captain of Kingsknowe Club, then later Aberdour where she founded the golf club. There is a plaque commemorating her opening of the clubhouse in 1965.

Helen died on 27 November 1978 aged 88.