

Mary Elaine Sykes (1896-1981)

Mary Sykes was born on 24 August 1896 and died on 25 February 1981. She was a British solicitor, politician, Soroptimist and magistrate, and was one of the first women solicitors in England and Wales.

Mary read English at Royal Holloway College (now Royal Holloway, University of London) and graduated with second-class honours in 1917, and 'without any very clear idea about a career'. Mary initially had no ambition to become a solicitor. As she later recalled, it was 'circumstance connected with the Great War and the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919', which enabled her to become one of the first women solicitors in England and Wales.

When Mary's elder brother, Eric Turner Sykes, was killed on the Western Front in May 1917 she determined to train as a lawyer and join her father, a partner in his own firm of solicitors, in Eric's stead. Mary's entry into the legal profession in this way was not unusual. In 1918, Mary enrolled to study law at Leeds University.

Having been articled to her father, a partner in his own firm of solicitors in Huddersfield (Armitage, Sykes and Hinchcliffe), in November 1922, along with Mary Pickup, Carrie Morrison (both Soroptimists), and Maud Crofts, Mary was one of the first women to sit the Law Society's Final Examination, the first time the examination was opened to women following the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. In December 1922 Mary was one of the first women to pass the final examinations of the Law Society, although Carrie Morrison was the first of them to finish her articles, and was the first woman admitted to the role of solicitor. At 25 years old, Mary was the youngest of the four, passing with honours, no small achievement. Mary Sykes was admitted as a solicitor in 1923. She worked for her father's firm until 1930, when she set up her own firm, Mary E Sykes & Co. She remained in practice as a solicitor until 1968 and in 1980 Mary E Sykes & Co merged with Ramsdens Solicitors. Mary was elected president of the Huddersfield Law Society in 1951 and in 1955 was appointed as a magistrate.

Mary Sykes was one of the 16 women who founded SI Huddersfield and became Founder President, 1935 - 36. She was also a founder member of the Huddersfield branch of the British Federation of Women Graduates, and a member of the Women's Luncheon Club, the Business and Professional Women's Club.

In 1935 she was elected as a Labour councillor on the Huddersfield Borough Council. In 1938 she became Huddersfield's first woman alderman, and in 1945 she became the first woman to be elected as Mayor of Huddersfield. She was a member of the Labour Party and served as President of the Huddersfield Labour Party.

She was friends with the renowned naturalist Phyllis Kelway. She married Richard Harry Browne in 1953.

Recognising the value of her own education, which enabled her to pursue a career she enjoyed, and gave her the satisfaction of helping others through her legal work and also the economic freedom to pursue her work as a local councillor (later mayor) and in other voluntary positions, she saw access to education as the key to ironing out inequality. Although she did not call herself a feminist, she sought specifically to improve living conditions, education and access to the professions for women. In her legal practice, Mary employed a number of women (at one point she employed only women) and, in practical ways, she encouraged the generation of women who followed her to pursue a career in the law, training at least three other women to become solicitors.



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Sources: Wikipedia and 'A rather independent manner' by Katie Broomfield, Law Gazette, 17 June 2019