

Dr Elizabeth Casson OBE (1881-1954)

(Courtesy The Bristol Post)

Elizabeth (Elsie) Casson was a member of SI Bristol for many years. In addition to her Soroptimist work, she was a pioneer in the field of occupational therapy and was recognised nationally for her work with mentally ill patients.

Ignoring opposition, Casson enrolled in the Medical School in Bristol in 1912 and obtained her Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1919. In her role at the West Hertfordshire Hospital in Hemel Hempstead, she noticed that patients in the women's wards were enjoying using their artistic talents, and realised these pursuits not only kept the patients occupied but also helped them gain self-esteem and work through their issues. She gained a diploma in psychological medicine from the University of London in 1922 and obtained her Doctorate of Medicine from the University of Bristol in 1926 (becoming one of the first women to do so).



In 1926, whilst on holiday, Casson visited an Occupational Therapy Centre in New York City, and decided to establish a similar facility in England. In 1929 she set up Dorset House in Clifton, Bristol, as a residential centre for women with mental health issues and limited means. In 1930, she expanded Dorset House to include the UK's first occupational therapy school. The school's courses taught not only medical subjects such as anatomy and physiology, but also occupational treatments such as weaving, bookbinding and other crafts, as well as how to organise activities such as country dancing and how these activities applied to occupational therapy. She advocated an ordered life and a happy atmosphere for everyone.

This remarkable woman also organised a psychiatry clinic at Bristol General Hospital and took honorary posts at Southmead and Ham Green Hospitals. In 1927, she won the Gaskell Prize from the Royal Medico-Psychological Association. She was awarded an Honorary Degree from Bristol University. She was a Fellow of the British Homeopathy Society. In 1951, Casson was awarded an OBE for her work and was made an honorary Fellow of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists. A memorial lecture was set up in her name by the College of Occupational Therapists, and a psychiatric care unit was named after her.

As a Soroptimist, Elizabeth Casson championed many causes. During her Presidency (1938-1939), she urged the Club to support the Walker Dunbar Hospital Committee to raise money to fund a Medical Annexe for elderly poor women who were unable to look after themselves and in need of nursing, as a memorial to Dr Elizabeth Blackwell. She willingly lent Dorset House for fundraising events and loaned the beds used at the Residential Club for Service Women at 15 Belgrave Road. During the nearly three years of its operation (1941-1944), this SI Bristol endeavour provided accommodation and meals to over 10,000 members of the Forces. Elizabeth Casson was a key member of its working Committee.