

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



*This story was written in August 2023 as one of a series resulting from the 'A Few Forgotten Women Friday' collaborative research project, investigating the lives of women who enrolled in the first two cohorts [1908 & 1909] of Trainee Teachers at the Cheshire County Training College, Crewe [CCTCC]*

## **Helen Blankley's Story**

The history of the Cheshire County Training College [CCTCC] and the achievements of its students and academics over the years, is a story that weaves together those small, discrete, individual life threads as they are embroidered into the historical tapestry of teacher training in the UK, which in Cheshire formally began in 1908. This was a pivotal time for young people in this country, especially for women who were struggling for parity in both terms of suffrage and educational opportunities.

As Margaret Roberts and Sarah Webb have observed, the women that enrolled in the first two cohorts of students at CCTCC in 1908 and 1909 could be viewed as the academic daughters of those who had previously fought for further education for girls. Women like Frances Mary Buss and Dorothea Beale who established the North London Collegiate School for Girls and Cheltenham Ladies College respectively, as well as those who advocated for women's access to higher education, such as Emily Davies who founded Girton College, Cambridge.<sup>1</sup>

CCTCC was founded as a direct result of the 1902 Education Act, which basically created the county Local Education Authority [LEAs] system in the UK and put these LEAs in charge of

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, M and Webb, S. *Women Educating Cheshire in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Accessed via <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/business-school/research/research-centres/vote100/exhibition/>

providing and controlling all aspects of their own education delivery, so everything from building and maintaining of schools and colleges, to the training of teachers.<sup>2</sup>

It is against this backdrop of exciting change and new opportunities for women across the country that Helen Blankley becomes the very first female recorded in the inaugural student register of 1908.<sup>3</sup> Helen was born on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1890 in Baguley, now part of Manchester but historically in Cheshire. She was baptised at the local parish church on 18<sup>th</sup> November, when her father George was noted as being a salesman.<sup>4</sup> George had married Annie Maria Kilvert in 1884<sup>5</sup> and the couple had seven children altogether of which Helen was the middle child.

In 1891, when Helen was just 5 months old, the couple are living with Annie's widowed father, George Kilvert, a retired pork butcher. The family lived in Grosvenor Square, Altrincham [Ashton upon Mersey]<sup>6</sup>, which is where Helen would spend all her unmarried life. Ten years later, still at the same address George is now head of the house following the death of his father-in-law and recorded as an iron monger and draper, Helen is noted as being 10 years old.<sup>7</sup>

In 1904 Helen was among those girls who passed the Class 1a examination, for those who wished to become what was known as pupil teachers,<sup>8</sup> following a course at secondary school. The report states that the number of pupils wishing to sit the scholarship had markedly increased since the previous year and the pass mark was set at 60%. Helen was one of 304 girls examined, of which just 101 reached or exceeded the required grade.<sup>9</sup> Helen moved to Sale High School, from where she sat and passed the Preliminary Certificate in 1908 and was able therefore to enrol at the Training College in September 1908.<sup>10</sup> The Preliminary Certificate was a two-part examination, the compulsory Part 1 needed to be passed before the student could continue onto Part 2. In Part 2 subjects such as English, Geography, and History were compulsory with candidates then choosing options from three groups – Elementary Maths, Elementary Science, and Foreign Languages.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Webb, Sarah and Roberts, Margaret (2019) *A Library in Green Fields: a History of the Cheshire County Training College, Crewe and later Manchester Metropolitan University Cheshire Campus Library Service*. Cheshire History, 59. pp. 141-193. ISSN 0141-8696. Accessed via <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/624259/>

<sup>3</sup> CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History of Cheshire, Crewe

<sup>4</sup> Manchester, England, Church of England births and baptisms 1813-1915. Accessed via [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>5</sup> GRO Marriage indexes: 1884, December Quarter, Northwich Dist, Vol 8a, Page 341

<sup>6</sup> 1891 England Census, RG12, Altrincham, Cheshire, Folio 118

<sup>7</sup> 1901 England Census, RG13, Altrincham, Cheshire, Folio 12

<sup>8</sup> For a good history of pupil teachers see [https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/sites/history-in-education/files/attachments/teacher\\_training\\_-\\_up\\_to\\_the\\_1960s.doc](https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/sites/history-in-education/files/attachments/teacher_training_-_up_to_the_1960s.doc)

<sup>9</sup> Runcorn Guardian, Saturday 11 June 2904, page 8

<sup>10</sup> CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History of Cheshire, Crewe

<sup>11</sup> See Reference 6

The course at CCTCC was over two years, the stated aim being to prepare students for actual schoolwork. The curriculum covered the Theory of Teaching, which included Discipline and Organisation, Child Study, the History of Public Education, General Methods, and Methods of Teaching Individual Subjects. Handiwork, Physical Exercise, Music, Hygiene, Drawing, English, History, Geography, Maths, Field Work, Rural Science, and Scripture were among the myriad of other subjects the students were expected to master. Students were sent out on actual teaching practice to local schools in their second year.<sup>12</sup>

The female students were expected to dress smartly, in long-sleeved, high-necked blouses and ankle length skirts, with their hair 'upswept' and securely fastened. The image below shows some of the female students on an end of term trip to Llanberis in North Wales in 1909, in which they are dressed in the style required



*Image reproduced courtesy of Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe*

During her time at CCTCC, there is evidence that Helen played for the college hockey team, she is named in this image of the team from 1908 – 2<sup>nd</sup> from the left in the middle row

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<sup>12</sup> Cheshire County Training College, Crewe, Prospectus 1908-1914.



*Image reproduced courtesy of Family History Society of Cheshire, Crewe*

Helen was passionate about women's suffrage and alongside her fellow student and friend Hilda Gee, they were very vocal about the campaign, with Helen reported as *'pleading the cause of woman's suffrage.'* Indeed, in later years one student recalled this time in answer to an examination question suggested that you *'Look up your history assignment and trace the growth of the suffrage movement, paying particular attention to masculine logic as expounded by Miss Gee.'* A male student, Henry James Dickenson recalled the occasion in 1910 following the unexpected death of the MP for Crewe when during the ensuing by-election there was some campaigning by women. Dickenson, as a prank fixed a label to the door of the male common room which read, 'common room for suffragettes' and apparently giving the female campaigners *'the fright of their lives when ushered into the presence of a crowd of hostile males'*. Dickenson's stunt was mild compared to the violence and harshness often inflicted on the suffragettes.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts, M and Webb, S. *Women Educating Cheshire in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* See "Ellen, the College Library and a 'General Election'" accessed via <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/business-school/research/research-centres/vote100/exhibition/>

Helen passed what was referred to as the Final Exam for the Training College in 1910<sup>14</sup> and in the 1911 census she was living with her parents in the family residence, Russell House, Grosvenor Square, the return noting that she was a schoolteacher at Northenden Council Schools.<sup>15</sup>

The suffrage-supporting Helen obviously didn't bear any ill feeling towards Henry Dickenson for his trick in 1910 as she married him a few years later, on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1912 in the Wesleyan Chapel, Sale. On the marriage certificate Helen has no occupation noted, in fact that box is struck through with a line, Henry is recorded as a School Master.<sup>16</sup> The report in the local press states that the wedding had attracted some considerable interest, the bride being a member of the teaching staff of the Northenden Council Schools and she was also a teacher at Sale Wesley Sunday Schools,<sup>17</sup> which begs the question why her occupation wasn't noted on the certificate!

At the time Helen graduated from CCTCC, once a woman was married, in line with the strict conventions of the day she had to give up her teaching career after her wedding. Whether this situation influenced the couple's decision to move to South Africa is perhaps one that at this distance in history will never be known, but what is known is that Henry and Helen moved to Cape Colony sometime after their marriage and before the birth of their first son Kenneth on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1918, when the couple were living in Cape Town.<sup>18</sup> Keith, their other child was born on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1924 in Grahamstown, Ailwal North, when two of the witnesses were Helen's married sister Nellie and her husband Frank Lloyd.<sup>19</sup> Helen seemed to carry on in her chosen profession for some time, as it was reported in CCTCC 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary booklet, published in 1929, that she was teaching at the High School in Ailwal North, South Africa.<sup>20</sup>

The couple returned to visit the UK on two occasions that have been documented. In 1928 along with their sons, when the couple gave the address of where they would be staying as Russell House, Grosvenor Square in Ashton upon Mersey, which was still the Blankley family home.<sup>21</sup> In December 1935 Helen, along with Henry and youngest son Keith returned for a visit, the passenger manifest show them returning to South Africa aboard the Dunbar Castle.<sup>22</sup>

Sometime prior to 1944 Henry gains a position as the Headmaster of the College School in East London, Cape Province and the couple relocate there from Ailwal North. Their eldest son

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<sup>14</sup> CCTCC Student Registers [1908-1935]: CCTCC Archives, Unpublished data, under the care of the Family History of Cheshire, Crewe

<sup>15</sup> 1911 England Census, RG14, Sale, Cheshire, Piece number 21561

<sup>16</sup> Manchester, England, Non-conformist Marriages, 1758-1937. Accessed via [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>17</sup> Northwich Guardian, Friday 3 January 1913, page 7

<sup>18</sup> South Africa, Cape Province, Western Cape, Cathedral of St George, Church of the Province of South Africa, parish registers, baptisms 1899-1921, database with images, *FamilySearch*

<sup>19</sup> South Africa, Cape Province, Grahamstown, Aliwal North, St Paul, Church of the Province of South Africa, parish registers, baptisms 1916-1966, database with images, *FamilySearch*

<sup>20</sup> 1908-1929, Souvenir of the 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary, CCTCC

<sup>21</sup> Passenger Lists, 1879-1960. Accessed via [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>22</sup> Passenger Lists Leaving UK, 1890-1960. Accessed via [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)



Kenneth, who was a member of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, was reported missing on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1942 during an air raid over Germany. His death certificate dated 28<sup>th</sup> August 1944, gives his parents address as School House, College Street, East London, his father is recorded as a headmaster and there is no occupation listed for Helen.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, Henry dies on 18<sup>th</sup> August 1949, when Helen was present at her husband's death, which was also reported in the local newspaper back in the UK.<sup>24</sup> In the 1966 edition of *The Torch*, the magazine produced on an annual basis by the Old Students Association [OSA] there is a note that Helen Blankley [Mrs Dickenson] has left East London, South Africa, and is at present living with her married son at Port Elizabeth. She tells the editor that she missed the British theatre but makes up for it by playing bridge.<sup>25</sup> I cannot locate a death for Helen and there is no obituary in the OSA magazine as was often the case, but the run of the magazine finishes in 1973/4, so perhaps she died after that date.

In many ways Helen and her cohort all dreamed of having an education, a career, and some degree of financial independence. Helen was also a staunch defender of women's suffrage, but she left the UK shores before women gained the vote under the Representation of the People Act 1928. Fortunately, her dreams would be fulfilled, she was enfranchised in her new homeland of South Africa after the passing of the Women's Enfranchisement Act 1920, which gave white women the vote on the same basis as white men. While some of her peers remained independent and single, others went on to marry and have children, therefore not being permitted to remain in the profession for which they had so trained hard.<sup>26</sup>

'*The duty of a married woman is primarily to look after her domestic concerns and it is impossible for her to do so and to effectively and satisfactorily act as a teacher at the same time*', a statement by a senior British judge in 1925, reflected the harsh reality faced by thousands of women teachers in the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>27</sup> It was not until 1944 and RA Butler's landmark act that this law was repealed, of course far too late for those women who had been dissuaded from marrying and now faced poverty in old age with no family to support them.<sup>28</sup> In moving to South Africa Helen was luckier than some and able to combine marriage and teaching in a way that was not possible for those friends and colleagues she left behind.

*Margaret Roberts [Few Forgotten Women Team]*

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<sup>23</sup> South Africa, Cape Province, Probate Records of the Master of the High Court, 1834-1989, database with images, *FamilySearch*

<sup>24</sup> Nantwich Chronicle, Saturday 27 August 1949, page 7: South Africa, Cape Province, Probate Records of the Master of the High Court, 1834-1989, database with images, *FamilySearch*

<sup>25</sup> *The Torch*, 1966, CCTCC Old Student Association Magazine

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, M and Webb, S. *Women Educating Cheshire in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* See "The Conclusion" accessed via <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/business-school/research/research-centres/vote100/exhibition/>

<sup>27</sup> Brecon County Times, Thursday 26 November 1925, page 2

<sup>28</sup> R.A. Butler, The Board of Education and the 1944 Education Act. Accessed via <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24419691>; 1944 Education Act, See <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/educationact1944/>