

Story of The Queen's Institute

It is hard now to imagine that over 150 years ago, society frowned on middle-class women who worked. For example, it was thought that financial independence would make such women less likely to marry. Certainly a woman who worked would no longer be obliged to accept the first offer of marriage – and that would never do.

The world of business was also considered a dirty place. It was just about acceptable for a gentleman to go into business, but it was certainly no place for a lady. Moreover money was tainted and even those brave enough to work might shrink from receiving their pay openly, preferring to have it conveyed to them surreptitiously.

The only acceptable job for an educated lady was that of governess, but many women wanted more. Daughters of Anglo-Irish families faced a double stigma if they had to seek employment from a “lower order” Catholic employer. Ironically then, working-class women had greater options and probably greater freedom.

Job applicants

So it was that a survey of women job applicants in 1860 considered that “the most helpless” were not the poor, but the daughters of the middle-classes, of clergymen and civil servants. These ladies may have had their “accomplishments” but they were otherwise unskilled and ignorant of the ways of the world. If their financial support should ever be cut off by a husband or male relative, they were incapable of fending for themselves.

Thus in 1860 the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women in Dublin began as a kind of “job club”, matching suitable applicants with vacancies in charitable institutions and the like. But they were quickly inundated with applicants and clearly something else was needed. The result was the Queen's Institute for the Training and Employment of Educated Women, started in 1861 by Mrs Anne Jellicoe, a campaigning Quaker from Mountmellick, and Dublin businessman Henry Walker Todd.

Their pioneering college was the first of its kind in Europe and similar enterprises were soon established elsewhere. The institute offered classes in telegraphy, engraving, architectural drawing, book-keeping and woodwork, among other things. By the time it closed in 1881, vocational education for middle-class women had become a recognised part of national educational policy.

Mrs Jellicoe had already helped train women in Mountmellick as seamstresses, and in Dublin she investigated working conditions in factories. If more middle-class women were employed in the workplace, she hoped conditions might improve for everyone. She later founded Alexandra College for Girls and as this came to take more of her time, the management of the Queen's Institute fell to Miss Barbara Corlett. Less egalitarian than Jellicoe, Miss Corlett refused to run night classes for women and did not welcome the daughters of trades people.



Then - a college for the training of educated women:

Now – Buswells Hotel

Trembling delicacy

The institute took premises at 25 Molesworth Street, across the road from Leinster House, then the headquarters of the RDS. The women on the organising committee enrolled themselves and their daughters in an effort to make the college look acceptable. And “with trembling delicacy” they approached the applicants at their job club and asked if they would like to attend classes.

The aim was to provide useful training which it was hoped would lead to employment. And indeed, in its first two years, half of the institute’s 360 students found work. Among the companies supporting the initiative were the British & Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company and Belleek Pottery, which had just been opened in Co. Fermanagh by the local landlord to provide local employment.

The telegraph company supplied equipment and an engineer to give the classes, and even paid a small grant to a number of students who were subsequently employed as telegraph clerks. Belleek Pottery recruited a number of women who had learned how to paint porcelain at the institute.

Despite such commercial support and the royal patronage of Queen Victoria and grants from the Department of Education in London, the college was always hampered by lack of money. In the 1870s a number of more commercial subjects were added to the curriculum, including French and music, in a bid to attract more students.

Now a hotel

The Queen’s Institute finally closed in 1881 after 20 years of good work, and a year after Anne Jellicoe died. Buswells Hotel took over the premises where it continues today. For a few years in the 1880s an Irish Association for the Training and Employment of Women ran similar classes from Kildare Street, before affiliating with the new technical college for artisans. Among those registering for the first plumbing class at the technical college were two women cookery teachers. Miss Corlett might not have been pleased but Anne Jellicoe would surely have smiled. Anne Jellicoe is buried in the Friends Burial Ground at Mountmellick.