WOMEN from HACKNEY’S HISTORY

THE HACKNEY SOCIETY HACKNEY HISTORY

PREVIEW hackney.hk/WoH
Introduction

Here are 113 women from Hackney's history. All lived or worked, were born or buried in today's borough. Just four, each of whose Hackney legacy is a loved legend or institution, break that rule. Other sorts of rule breakers abound.

You will know some of these women but many are not famous. Some achieved against all odds, some hit the heights then crashed, some lived apparently ordinary lives, a ... collective action. Many show us how narrow those possibilities were. A couple were simply bad: we can achieve infamy too.

These are women from wildly different backgrounds although a fair few are dissenters, suffrage campaigners or stars of the stage. None of these women is still with us. Their stories cover five centuries and show us how times have changed for women and for Hackney. But things move fast here and they cannot represent the Hackney of today.

We hope this is an interesting collection. It is not offered as definitive or exhaustive. There will be important gaps but these can be filled. We plan future updates and will be very glad to receive suggestions for inclusion at historywomen@hackneysociety.org.
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Minnie Green

c1870–?

Minnie Green, a young Indian nanny or ayah, successfully used the British judicial system to bring a case against the violent employers who had withheld her wages.

During the British Raj the children of British colonial administrators and plantation owners in India were normally entrusted from birth to the care of ayahs such as Minnie.

Despite the heavy reliance on ayahs and the fond attachments which grew up between them and the children they cared for, the behaviour of most colonials towards their servants was patronising and often abusive. Anglicised names, such as Minnie, were just one indication of the disdainful attitude of colonial employers. Minnie's real identity has been lost.

In Britain the class system was the dominant influence on the relationship between employers and domestic servants. In India religion, race and the indigenous languages added special complications to the power structure. The reminiscences of writers who were boys in India – including William Makepeace Thackeray, Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell and Gerald Durrell – show that ayahs were remembered with great affection. But these sentimental recollections belied the harsh reality of life for most of the women who undertook this work.

Ayahs often travelled back and forth to England, caring for children on the long sea voyage home. Arriving in Britain they hoped to get a passage back to India with another family, but when their services were no longer required they sometimes found themselves stranded. Towards the end of the 19th century there was a growing willingness on the part of Indians to assert their rights, linked to increasing nationalist political activism at this time. This perhaps encouraged Minnie Green to seek redress in the courts.

Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper of 4 September 1892 carried a report of Minnie's case in which she was described as 'an intelligent Hindostani wearing pearls either side of the nose'. Minnie had been employed by coffee planter Harold Denton and his wife Grace to look after their baby during the sea voyage from Bangalore to London. It was reported that:

Arriving at the docks [the Dentons] proceeded to the South of London in search of some friends and then got drunk on the way, she taking charge of the baby. In the Borough they quarrelled and Mrs Denton turned around and struck her on the face. On the voyage, the poor woman added, she had suffered from the violent conduct of the prisoners. Southwark court restored the three shillings wage Minnie Green was still owed for which she appeared very grateful and turning to the Bench said 'I have much to thank you for – you gentleman'.

Minnie was referred to the Salvation Army by the magistrate following the conclusion of the court case and she stayed in their Receiving Home at 27–29 Devonshire Road Hackney before being referred on to the Ayahs' Home at 26 King Edward's Road. The Ayahs' Home had been set up by missionaries aware of the numbers of young women abandoned by their employers. They offered shelter with a heavy dose of Christian practice such as hymn singing. Eventually Minnie found employment with a Mr and Mrs Rose with whom she travelled back to India.
Alma Hitchcock
1899–1982

Alma Hitchcock was a gifted and astute screenwriter and filmmaker whose talents were essential to the creation of the Hitchcock legend.

Alma Reville, future wife of director Alfred Hitchcock, was born in Nottingham on 14 August 1889, one day after her husband. She grew up to be a prolific screenwriter and film editor, who collaborated on numerous film scripts with her husband.

After her father started working at Twickenham Film Studios in London, his position opened the door for Alma to work there. At 16 she was already assisting directors with film editing.

Progressing to become a script writer and director’s assistant in an era of filmmaking where it was rare for a woman to be in these roles, Alma moved to Paramount’s Famous Players-Lasky, in Poole Street, on the border of Hackney and Islington, in 1919. The studio was later taken over by Michael Balcon and became Gainsborough Film Studios. Here, she met Alfred Hitchcock, then working at the studio as a graphic designer before he became an art editor, and a partnership for life was formed.

Alma and Alfred were married on 2 December 1926, and soon after their daughter Patricia was born. Becoming a mother did not stop Alma from work, and she gained her first screenwriting credit when she co-wrote The Ring with her husband in 1927.

The next couple of decades were filled with numerous screenwriting projects for Alma, not just for ‘Hitch’, but with other directors. But after a move to Hollywood, Alma focused primarily on preparing and adapting her husband’s scripts, including Rebecca (1940), Foreign Correspondent (1940), Suspicion (1941) and Saboteur (1942).

Without Alma, Hitchcock’s body of work would not have been the same. Film critic Charles Champlin wrote in 1982: ‘The Hitchcock touch had four hands, and two were Alma’s’. When Hitchcock picked up his AFI Achievement Award in 1979, he said he wanted to thank: ‘... people who have given me the most affection, appreciation and encouragement, and constant collaboration. The first of the four is a film editor, the second is a scriptwriter, the third is the mother of my daughter, Pat, and the fourth is as fine a cook as ever performed miracles in a domestic kitchen. And their names are Alma Reville’.

Alma died at the age of 82, two years after her husband. As well as leaving behind a canon of screen classics which are considered works of genius by many, Alma’s strength of personality is still remembered: in 2012 Imelda Staunton and Helen Mirren were both award-nominated for their portrayals of Alma in The Girl and in Hitchcock.

Verena Holmes
1889–1964

Verena Holmes was a brilliant engineer and inventor who dedicated much of her time to encouraging the development of women engineers.

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Born in Ashford, in Kent, Verena was the daughter of the chief inspector of elementary schools for England. As a child she was fascinated by simple concepts of engineering, and would even take her dolls apart to see how they worked.

After leaving school Verena worked as a photographer. But with the outbreak of World War I many women were employed in engineering to replace men called to the front and Verena started working on the manufacture of wooden propellers at the Integral Propeller Company in Hendon. It was to be the introduction to a career she would continue for life, and she built upon it straight away with night classes at Shoreditch Technical Institute on Pitfield Street, Hoxton.

After a move to Lincoln to become an engineering manufacturer Ruston and Hornsby apprentice for the female employees, Verena completed an apprenticeship at the company, and by 1919 she was working in the drawing office. The same year she became one of the founding members of the Women’s Engineering Society (WES), later becoming its President.

In 1922 Verena entered Loughborough Technical College to complete her degree in engineering, then during the late 1920s and 1930s she worked for a number of companies including North British Locomotive Works and Research Engineers Limited. She was during this time that she achieved notable firsts for a woman in her field: awarded membership of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, the Institution of Railway Engineers and the Institution of Locomotive Engineers. Each of these professional organisations had previously been men-only.

Verena took on an influential role during World War II when she was appointed Headquarters technical officer for the Ministry of Labour, setting up the Women’s Technical Services Register and a training course for women munitions workers.

In 1946 Verena co-founded her own engineering firm, Holme and Leather, which employed only women. Using Verena’s own design, the firm created the first safety guillotine for attic fireplace flues, which was declared safe for use in schools. By the end of her life, Verena also held patents for 12 inventions, including a pneumo-tore apparatus for the treatment of tuberculosis patients, the surgeons headlamp, a poppet valve for steam trains and rotary valves for internal combustion engines.

In 1955 Verena compiled the Training and Opportunities for Women in Engineering booklet for the Women’s Engineering Society, and when she died in 1964 her legacy continued, with WES ‘Verena Holmes’ annual lectures taking place in schools across Britain for the next 40 years. A Verena Winifred Holmes Award has been issued by The Institute of Mechanical Engineers since 2015.

Brilliant in her field, Verena Holmes worked tirelessly throughout her life to support and promote women in engineering. Every year, her birthday of 23 June coincides with International Women in Engineering Day and she is commemorated as part of its celebration.
Elsie Hooper
1879–1969

Elsie Hooper was a pioneering pharmacist, active suffragist, businesswoman and lecturer.

Elsie, born at 174 Amhurst Road and one of five children, was educated at Pond House, Clapton, and the North London Collegiate School. She enrolled as a student at the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (PSGB) in Bloomsbury Square and in 1901 passed the Minor PSGB examination registering as a chemist and a druggist and in 1904 the PSGB Major examination registering as a pharmaceutical chemist. She was one of the first women to qualify as a pharmacist.

She also became the first joint Secretary of the National Association of Women Pharmacists, founded to further women’s employment within the profession. At this time she was living at 52 Clapton Common.

In 1905, after working during the day and studying at night, she graduated from London University (Birkbeck) with a degree in botany and chemistry. The next year she studied for her Institute of Chemistry qualification which she passed and in 1908 became a Fellow of the Institute.

Truly a pioneer, Elsie was also the first female recipient of two major PSGB scholarships. She became one of the most prominent women researchers and analysts, working for the British Medical Journal, King’s College and the first British Pharmaceutical Codex before joining Portsmouth Municipal College as a lecturer where she set up and led the pharmacy course. She held this post between 1910 and 1914.

During World War I Elsie worked in Cheltenham as an analyst. After the war ended, she opened a retail chemist shop in the same town called Ladies Chemists Ltd.

In 1920 she returned to London to teach at her former tutor Margaret Buchanans, School of Pharmacy for Women, in Gordon Square. She married the same year, aged 40. In 1925 she took over the running of the school alongside her colleague Kathleen King and remained there until 1942.

Recognising the continued prejudice against women in pharmacy, she opened two pharmacies in London: at 12a Belsize Terrace and at 1 Flask Walk Hampstead, specifically to provide women with work experience.

While working in Portsmouth she took part in one of the most important marches in the women’s campaign for suffrage. The event that became known as the Coronation March took place just before the coronation of George V and demanded women’s suffrage in the coronation year.

An estimated 40,000 people joined the March from Westminster to the Albert Hall and it drew together all of the suffrage organisations. It was the largest march of the campaign. There were 700 women dressed in white to represent those who had been sent to prison for the cause, and one leading suffragette dressed as Joan of Arc.

Elsie and other members of the National Association of Women Pharmacists joined the March. The profession’s main journal covered the event and carried photos, saying that Elsie was in the Science section and that she and ‘several other’ women pharmacists completed the two and a half hour walk.

From 1920 until 1942 Elsie (now Higgon) worked at the Gordon Hall School of Pharmacy, Gordon Square, London, first as a lecturer and then as proprietor, changing its name to the College of Pharmacy for Ladies in Gordon Square.

Elsie died in a nursing home in Paignton, Devon in May 1969.
### Chronology by date of birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane Shore mistress</td>
<td>c1445</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cecily Heron courtier</td>
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<td>Helen Sadler housekeeper</td>
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<td>Jane Danieli blackmailer</td>
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<td>Elizabeth de Vere courtier</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Stuart Queen of Bohemia</td>
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<td>Hannah Wolley writer</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Creswell brothel keeper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katherine Milton muse</td>
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<td>Mary Dering composer</td>
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<td>Anna Trapnell visionary</td>
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<td>Katherine Philips poet</td>
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<td>Susan Har Perrich musician</td>
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<td>Celia Fennies traveller</td>
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<td>Anna Letitia Barbauld poet</td>
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<td>Mary Wollstonecraft writer</td>
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<td>Margareta Beaufroy mathematician</td>
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<td>Mary Lamb writer</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Fry reformatrice</td>
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<td>Susanna Carder educator</td>
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<td>Betsi Cadwaladr nurse</td>
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<td>Isabella Massie abolitionist</td>
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<td>Joanna Vassia abolitionist</td>
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<td>Emily Bowes Goose religious writer</td>
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<td>Emma Wallington innate and emigrant</td>
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<td>Grace Aguilar writer</td>
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<td>Augusta johnstone music hall artist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna Sewell writer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara Lane actor and theatre manager</td>
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<td>Alice Marriottt actor and theatre manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catherine Booth salvationist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helen Taylor writer and actor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mary Ann Plummer suffragist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cecily Rissa journalist</td>
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<td>Kate Greenaway illustrator</td>
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<td>Rebecca Jarrett child abuse campaigner</td>
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<td>Hypatia Bonner securant</td>
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