

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH



Her Story:
Notable women with
Merton Links.



**Priscilla Pitt (shown far right)
pictured with her family in Mitcham, 1860s.**

Priscilla Pitt, Quaker, Philanthropist and Temperance Campaigner.

Born in Peckham in 1829, Priscilla was the daughter of draper and eminent Whitechapel Quaker, John Finch Marsh and his wife, Hannah. At the age of 19 she nearly died from meningitis – an experience that led her to appreciate every aspect of her life from that point onwards.

During the 1860s, Priscilla married draper, George Pitt and moved to a property off London Road, Mitcham (now the site of a local Poundstretcher store.) Tragically the couple lost five children in infancy (including the two shown in the family photo displayed here.) Fortunately the birth of another son, John, brought renewed hope to their lives.

A devoted Quaker, Priscilla was committed to improving the lives of others. She raised funds, organising social and educational events for the local community and founded the Berkeley Teetotal Society to save Mitcham people from the demon drink.

She was keen to experience the world, journeying undaunted across Europe, Africa, the Middle East, China and India at a time when few people travelled for pleasure. When she died in 1899, her husband said *“there was not another woman in England like her, for she never complained, did not mind roughing it and was always cheerful.”*



Josephine Butler drawn by George Richmond, 1851
(National Portrait Gallery)

Josephine Butler, Social Reformer

Born in 1828, Josephine was the daughter of John Grey, a wealthy landowner. She was also a cousin of Earl Grey, British Prime Minister from 1830-34.

Josephine's father was an active campaigner for social and Parliamentary reform. Raised with firm religious and moral Principles, she also had a strong dislike of inequality and injustice.

In 1852 Josephine married George Butler, a schools examiner and Vice President of Cheltenham College. The couple had the same views and at the time of the American Civil War, (1860-5) faced public hostility for supporting the anti-slavery movement. The Butlers had four children but in 1863 Josephine witnessed the fatal fall of her six year old daughter - an event that left her traumatised. Unable to cope with her grief, she threw herself into charity work, visiting workhouses and rescuing child prostitutes. (Child prostitution was then common in Victorian Britain.)

During the late 1860s, as President of the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women, Josephine fought to persuade Cambridge University to provide more opportunities for female students. She succeeded in obtaining more lectures for women and this led, ultimately, to the foundation of Newnham College, a women's faculty at the university.

Josephine was a spirited public speaker and a talented writer. She used her skills to campaign and publish carefully argued books on the need for better education and employment opportunities for women.



Josephine Butler, pictured in 1876

Despite her comfortable upbringing, Josephine was not blind to the misfortunes of others. Between 1869 and 1886, she campaigned tirelessly against the Contagious Diseases Act. Originally introduced to reduce venereal disease in the army, this legalised the humiliation of women, suggesting that they alone were responsible for the illness. The Act allowed police to arrest women in garrison towns and force them to undergo intimate medical examination, merely on “suspicion” of prostitution.

Josephine shocked “respectable” Victorian society by touring the country, openly discussing sexual matters and lobbying for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act. By 1885, together with Florence Booth of the Salvation Army and pioneering journalist, W T Stead, Josephine was also leading a major campaign to highlight the evils of child prostitution and human trafficking. Public outcry at the evils this exposed led the 1886 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which raised the age of consent in the UK from 13 to 16. The dreaded Contagious Diseases Act was also repealed in that year.

By the 1890s, Josephine was living at 8 North View, near Wimbledon Common. The latter years of her life were spent writing books and articles. She was also a dedicated supporter of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, believing that voting rights for women were “*vital to the morality and welfare of the nation.*” This prompted criticism from Queen Victoria, who said “*she is very clever and a great speaker; but she has done herself a great deal of harm by violently taking up a subject which had better be left alone ...*”

Josephine died in 1906. She is buried in Northumberland.



**Militant Wimbledon suffragette, Edith Begbie.
Pictured in the garden of Dorset Hall,
Kingston Road, Merton Park**

Edith Begbie, Suffragette.

Born in 1866, Edith had a tough childhood.

When her mother died, she was left to care for her 13 siblings. It is not clear if her father was around but Edith was sent to a series of orphanages, first in Holloway, then Winson Green.

Edith's life appeared to take a happier turn when she married and had several children of her own, including a daughter (also named Edith.) However she was widowed, whilst still young and again left to care for a large family, single-handed.

Possibly as a result of the hardships she faced, Edith became a committed suffragette, determined to improve the lives of women and children through political enfranchisement.

She took part in numerous suffragette demonstrations, including the infamous "Black Friday" march of 1910, when she and many of her female comrades were verbally and physically abused by police and opponents of women's suffrage.

Edith was arrested and jailed more than once for her militant campaigning. Together with a Mrs. Martin, she was sent to Holloway Jail for breaking the windows of Home Secretary, Winston Churchill. (She blamed him for the harsh treatment of suffragettes and his opposition to votes for women.) Prison only made Edith more determined - like many of her fellow suffragettes, she staged several hunger strikes in protest and was force-fed by prison staff - to the detriment of her health.

Edith played an important role in the Wimbledon Women's Social & Political Union, often deputising for its leader Rose Lamartine Yates. She appears to have emigrated to South Africa in 1925 but died in Surrey in 1932.



**S O E Agent, Violette Szabo,
pictured in 1944.**

Violette Szabo, SOE Operative, World War II

Born in Paris in 1921, Violette was the daughter of Brixton car Dealer, Charles Bushell and his French wife, Reine. She grew up in Stockwell and was remembered by family and teachers as a tomboy, with a strong sense of leadership, who would often fight off school bullies to protect her friends.

Unable to train as a hairdresser, due to limited family income, "Vi" worked for a French corsetiere in South Kensington, where her fluent French proved as asset. She had a range of jobs in London shops and spent her free time cycling, swimming and shooting. Her rifle skills made her unpopular with shooting arcade owners, from whom she would regularly win prizes.

Violette was in Pont Remy with a French aunt when World War II started and hurriedly returned to Britain. Her younger siblings were evacuated and her older brothers joined the army. Wanting to make her own contribution to the war effort, Vi joined the Land Army and also worked as a London telephonist.

She met an married Free French officer, Etienne Szabo but soon after her honeymoon, he was posted overseas. During a brief week of leave, Violette fell pregnant but she was never to see her husband again. Frustrated by restrictive jobs such as cooking, waitressing and laundry, she joined an ATS anti-aircraft battery, where she was highly regarded by her officers.

Etienne was killed at El Alamein in 1942, shortly after the birth of his daughter. Violette spent part of 1942/3 making aircraft parts for the RAF at the Rotan engineering works in Morden but grew increasingly determined to avenge her husband by actively fighting the Nazis.

Violette now joined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry and soon afterwards, was recruited to the Special Operations Executive. They were responsible for covert work and espionage, supporting Resistance forces in occupied Europe. Violette's strong character, language skills and knowledge of France made her an ideal recruit.

Following training in navigation, weaponry, unarmed combat, demolition work and radio operation, Vi was deployed as an SOE agent. In April 1944 she was parachuted into France, under the code name "Louise." She helped Resistance forces to attack Nazi forces, sabotage enemy access routes and report on factories producing materials for Hitler's Germany.

Violette also worked as an SOE wireless operator, receiving and transmitting messages in code. This was dangerous work, as operators were under constant threat of discovery. Eventually Vi and her comrades were betrayed to the Germans. They fought a pitched battle to avoid capture but Violette was seized and taken to the infamous Gestapo interrogation HQ at Avenue Foch, Paris.

Despite frequent beatings and torture, Violette refused to betray her SOE colleagues. In late 1944 she was sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp and forced to do hard labour. She was weakened by ill treatment, malnutrition and exhaustion

In January 1945, as Allied forces fought deeper into German occupied Europe, 23 year old Violette was executed by the SS, together with 3 fellow SOE agents.

Violette was awarded a posthumous George Cross, which King George VI presented to her 4 year old daughter in 1946.



Tania Szabo, pictured with the posthumous George Cross awarded to her late mother, 1946



Councillor Edith Macauley MBE,
pictured with her award following the presentation
at Windsor Castle.

Councillor Edith Macauley, MBE.

A resident of Morden, Edith has devoted her life to public service. She spent over thirty years working for the legal affairs department of the Communications Union in Wimbledon and has also been a local magistrate.

She has been a Labour councillor for the Lavender Fields ward in Mitcham since 1998 and has held a number of posts from Cabinet Member for Housing, to Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities and currently Cabinet Member for the Voluntary Sector and Partnerships.

She currently sits on the Appointments Committee, the Colliers Wood and North east Mitcham Community Forum and is Chair of the Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minorities.

In 2002 Edith became the first black female Mayor of Merton. She was also runner up (from 100 local authority entries) in the prestigious Mayor of the Year award, having been selected for making the most outstanding contribution to her local area.

Edith's service to the community was recognised in 2012, when she was awarded an MBE from Her Majesty the Queen.



Heather Rabbatts DBE

Chief Executive of Merton Council 1993-5.

Heather Rabbatts,

Lawyer, businesswomen and broadcaster.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1955, Heather moved to the UK when she was three years old. After school, she studied at the London School of Economics and trained as a barrister.

From 1987 she worked in local government, serving as Deputy Chief executive of Hammersmith & Fulham in 1989. In 1993 she became the youngest Chief Executive in Merton council's history, a role she also held in Lambeth Council between 1995 and 2000. Under her leadership, both boroughs saw improvements in housing, educational provision and council tax returns.

From 2000 Heather founded and ran the public consultancy firm imPower. Between 1999 and 2001, she was also a Governor of the BBC, before transferring to become managing director of Channel 4's Education department. She is also a Governor of the London School of Economics, an Associate of the King's Fund, an independent health think tank.

In 2006 Heather became the Executive Deputy Chair of Millwall Football Club. Four years later, she became the first female and first ethnic minority director of the Football Association - a post she held till 2017.

During her colourful and successful career, Heather has been a Director of the Bank of England and on the Board of the UK Film Council. In 2013, she was listed as one of the 100 most powerful women in the UK.

An active opponent of corruption in public life and a campaigner for human rights, in 2016 she was awarded a damehood for services to football and equality.



**London Assembly member Hina Bokhari,
pictured near the GLA building**

Hina Bokhari, Merton councillor and Greater London Assembly representative.

Born in Enfield, Hina is the daughter of Syed “Naz” Bokhari, a pioneering and inspirational headteacher, originally from Sialkot in the Punjab, who moved to Britain in the 1960s.

He suffered racism and poor treatment during his early years in the UK, but through sheer hard work and dedication became the first Muslim headteacher at a British Secondary School - earning the respect and admiration of generations of London students and their families.

Both Hina and her brother, Harris, have followed in their father’s footsteps, with careers in education and youth work. Hina has spent 20 years teaching in some of the Capital’s most deprived areas and has also established two charities to help young people.

In 2018 she became the first female Muslim councillor for Merton and the first from an ethnic minority to represent the West Barnes ward. She also stood for Sutton, Cheam and Worcester Park in the 2019 Election. In May 2021, she became one of the first Muslim women elected to the London Assembly - this was the first Liberal Democrat gain since 2004.

Hina is strongly committed to giving young Londoners a stronger voice and to addressing issues such as knife crime and climate change. She chairs the London Assembly's Economy Committee and is also a member of the Fire, Resilience & Emergency Planning Committee and the Environment Committee. In her role as a Merton councillor, she sits on the Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minority Organisations and the Merton & Sutton Joint Cemetery Board.

Lily Khan OBE

Lily was born into an Indian family, then residing in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. She and her family returned to India following the outbreak of World War II.

Described as an outstanding student Lily graduated from Dhaka University and then entered the teaching profession. Her skill as a teacher was recognised with the Tamgha Imtiaz, the Gold Medal of Excellence for Services to Education, awarded by the President of Pakistan. Lily later attended Harvard University, USA, before moving to London in 1971. Here she resumed her teaching career, launching the UK's first Bengali language class.

In addition to teaching, Mrs. Khan was also a Bangladeshi delegate to the United Nations and a representative for the Commission for Racial Equality.

Mrs. Khan came to Merton in 1975. She was one of the driving forces behind the opening of Merton Ethnic Minority Centre at Vestry Hall, Mitcham in 1991. In her role as Chair, she spent the latter part of her working life developing the Centre's services, helping to expand the number of organisations represented from 12, to more than 60.

A dedicated community worker in both Merton and Tower Hamlets, Lily was a respected spokesperson for the diverse local population. Her hard work was acknowledged nationally in 1995 when she was awarded an OBE for services to the Asian community in Surrey. She died in December 1997



**Councillor Joan Henry,
Mayor of Merton 2022 - 23.**

Councillor Joan Henry, Mayor of Merton 2022 - 2023.

Joan was born in 1954 in Thornton District, St. Thomas, Jamaica. Like many members of the Windrush Generation, her parents moved to England in 1959, in search of new opportunities to support their family. Joan was left in the care of her grandparents and older siblings. She moved to England in 1979 with her three children, settling in Tooting Bec with her parents.

Joan worked at St. George's hospital, Tooting and Bolingbroke Hospital, Battersea. A Labour councillor for Pollards Hill since 2014, Joan has always been proactive in her role. Taking pains to assist local people, she is active in supporting a number of Merton organisations, from the Mitcham Commons Conservators, to the Accoutre Centre for Learning and Hadley Road Community Allotment. As Mayor of Merton 2022-23, she is determined to promote, community togetherness, empowerment and the needs of young people.

In her capacity as Mayor, Councillor Henry has been called on to officiate at several moments in history, from delivering the local accession proclamation of our new king, Charles III, to leading the borough's mourning for our late Queen, Elizabeth II and honouring the people of Ukraine, one year on from the invasion of their country.