

Women's History Walk: Cardiff's Civic Centre

These days, we like to talk about the 'hidden history' of women – but look closely, and you'll see that **women's history is everywhere**, woven into the fabric of our public spaces.

Follow this tour, starting at Cardiff University's Main Building, and you'll uncover some of those histories – stories of friendship, protest, innovation and resilience.

Use the map below to follow the step-free tour, which should take around 45-60 minutes at a leisurely pace.



This tour has been brought together by researchers and staff at **Cardiff University Special Collections and Archives**, in partnership with **Women's Archive Wales**, who are supported by the **National Lottery Heritage Fund**.

1. The “Women’s Entrance”

If you stand facing the Main Building of Cardiff University, you’ll see a dazzling white façade, with its “Women’s Entrance” on the right.

Established in 1883, The University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire – the founding organisation that would later become Cardiff University – not only admitted women, but **actively encouraged women to undertake study**. By today, however, separate entrances are no longer in fashion!

This building has seen its fair share of action:



(Image: Helen Craggs, Daily Sketch, 1912)

In this very courtyard, in June 1912, **militant Suffragette Helen Craggs** apprehended the King, Queen and Home Secretary, who were on their way to unveil the foundation stone at the National Museum.

According to the Daily Telegraph, Craggs “jumped a wall and rushed towards the Home Secretary, who was in attendance, **threatening vengeance for ‘the suffrage of the women in Holloway’**”

According to the Daily Sketch, Craggs shouted at the Home Secretary “that it was a shame he was going about the country where suffragists were starving in prison” and had to be removed by force.

Later that summer, Craggs would be apprehended **attempting to set fire to Nuneham House**, home of an anti-suffrage MP, and imprisoned. Norah Smyth, her co-conspirator - a photographer, chauffeur and bodyguard to Emmeline Pankhurst - made off across fields.

2. The Old SU

Leave the courtyard and head left, and you'll pass the site of the old Students' Union, now a row of coffee and sandwich shops.



Student Union Officers, 1933

The University's Institutional Archive holds documents about students' achievements and academic records, as well as photographs and mementos charting **the history of student life in Cardiff** - and shows that women played key roles in student governance, as well as in the social life of the University. Often their first taste of independence away from home, the Old SU was a place where societies met and friendships were forged.

The building, which is no longer standing, suffered **considerable damage in the Nazi raids on Cardiff** in 1941. Records from the student and staff volunteers relate the events of that fateful night:

"Intense bombardment succeeded and continued until approximately 9.50.; incendiary bombs were seen to drop to the East, – none in the vicinity of the College. Large fires came to view; and high explosive bombs succeeded, some of which fell on the Students' Union Building, the College Gymnasium, and in the East grounds of the College, causing casualties and damage."

Students evacuated from UCL also joined the University during this period, some fondly remembering their time in Cardiff. The BBC's People's War Project recorded some of their recollections:

"...we had a good social nucleus of people. I had digs in a terrace house where we had sitting rooms upstairs and bedrooms downstairs because that was safer during air-raids. We had four meals a day and paid 25 shillings a week. There was no electricity, only gas, including gas lighting. Because **we were so far from home that made for a good social life**. On Sundays we had a rambling club, which was very enjoyable, and on Saturday nights we went to the dance in the city hall." - Betty Williams (formerly Johnson)

3. The Labs

Women have been teaching and studying at Cardiff University since the 1880s - longer than any other institution in Wales. As one of the first in the UK to admit women, the University was clear from the outset that: "Female students shall be admitted to attend any of the courses of instruction established in the College."

The University Council even wrote in Western Mail in 1883, that "women ought to be **permitted - nay, encouraged - to seek all the advantages of education** equally with men" at the newly-opened University.

The University's earliest records show an intake of women studying a variety of subjects, including Greek, Latin, maths, chemistry, German, music and history of philosophy.



University Chemistry Lab, c. 1890

On the right side of the photo, you will see a small group of unnamed women working in the lab

Women have fought for - and won - considerable progress in academia, however many women still face very real, systemic discrimination. Our institutional archives reflect these injustices.

The stories of predominantly white, middle-class women are reasonably well-represented in our institutional memory. The voices and achievements of women who face discrimination due to race, religion, age, disability, economic background, gender identity and sexual orientation are notably absent.

Cardiff University Special Collections and Archives would like to better represent these stories. If you think a woman, or a group of women from our institution's history could be better acknowledged and celebrated, please tell us about them by contacting specialcollections@cardiff.ac.uk

4. The Music Building

Morfydd Llwyn Owen was a highly gifted composer, pianist and mezzo soprano - a childhood prodigy who went on to study music here at Cardiff.

A virtuoso performer, she produced over 180 compositions during her life, which was tragically cut short at only 26 years old, in 1918.



Now held in Cardiff University Special Collections and Archives, her handwritten scores include ambitious orchestral compositions, choral pieces, inventive chamber works, operas and arrangements of Welsh folk songs.

Her papers paint a picture of a **confident, talented and prolific musician and composer** - and give a glimpse of her personality. In her personal papers we find meticulously transcribed copies of favourable reviews - with exceptionally high praise is underlined in heavy pencil!

Thanks to the painstaking work of scholars Dr Rhian Davies and Dr Peter Leech, Morfydd's contribution to the musical heritage of Wales and beyond has been rediscovered and celebrated. Many of Morfydd's previously unperformed works were performed for the first time by the University's chamber choir, to mark the centenary of her death in 2018.

Following her untimely death, a scholarship was established in Morfydd's name, to support women studying music - the first recipient would be **Grace Williams**, who would go on to become a renowned composer in her own right. While Williams' large orchestral works can be found at the National Library of Wales, her hand-written notes, drafts, scripts and scribbles – mostly made during her time at the BBC - can be found at the University's Special Collections and Archives.

5. Three Obliques (Walk In)

Easily the largest item in the University's collection, Three Obliques (Walk In) was made by the artist Barbara Hepworth in 1968-69.

The bronze sculpture is one of three editions, and one of the first works by the artist to include an invitation from artist to viewer - 'Walk In' - **encouraging us to engage with the sculpture and move around its gigantic, heavy form.**

Three Obliques is a significant work in many ways - not only in terms of scale, as a work from Hepworth's 'monumental' era. It also marks a significant shift in her style - moving from her famously free-flowing, organic sculptures, to explore the 'Square Form'.



Over time, the bronze has changed in colour - the vibrant greens a contrast to the bright red brick of the School of Music. Scholar Alan Bowness writes that Hepworth "loved the colour of the eventual bronze, and the variety of patination that was possible".

Hepworth, who died in 1975, aged 73, said of her work:

"Sculpture is a three-dimensional projection of primitive feeling: **touch, texture, size and scale, hardness and warmth, evocation and compulsion to move, live and love.**"

We hope that you stay a while and accept her invitation, to walk towards, and around this beautiful sculpture.

6. Aberdare Hall

“In many Welsh families, the education of sons and daughters is remarkably unequal. It is not uncommon to encounter a girl in service... with two or three brothers who have received years of academic education” - A Plea for Mixed Schools in Wales, 1891

Opened in 1895, Aberdare Hall was a residence for 40 female students. The grand opening, according to the Western Mail, was attended by a number of “**earnest, unfrivolous souls...** in severe coats, collars and austere felt hats...”



Women who studied here during the early days fondly describe their experiences, especially the personal relationships formed in the small community of Aberdare Hall.

They were expected to follow strict rules - subject to a medical exam on entry and expected to participate in daily prayer.

Mixed outings and activities were viewed with suspicion - especially drama productions with mixed-gender casts. **Chaperoned picnics with male students** were also subject to strict rules, and even banned for a time. By the twentieth century, men of “reliable” character were reluctantly allowed to enter the Hall to act as firewatchers during the Second World War.

As the demands and expectations of students changed, mixed halls were introduced. The Victorian practices of chaperones and medical exams gave way to practices which enabled **women’s physical and intellectual independence**. By the 1970s, the University began to market this independence as a quintessential part of the student experience.



University Prospectus, c. 1970

7. Pharmacy Building

Look up as you walk around the Civic Centre and you will see women carved into the fabric of many of its grand buildings.

Every single one, however, is **symbolic**. Women's bodies have been used to symbolise a wide variety of concepts in this small part of the city: Navigation, Culture and Music, The Prehistoric Period and Grief, to name a few.

This particular sculpture, the "Theophilus Relief" by Edward Bainbridge Copnall, shows a woman in a peculiar, almost comic, position: holding an ape aloft, who itself is holding a flower - as a man draped in traditional Greek-style robes towers over her and a companion.



Image: Cardiff University Institutional Archives, c. 1980

Work started in 2011 on surveying Cardiff's statues, raising awareness of the fact that not one of its carved women represented a woman who has lived, or is alive. By 2019, a campaign had gathered momentum and **Betty Campbell** - Wales' first Black headteacher - was chosen by public vote, as the **first woman to be represented in a statue in the city**.

8. Temple of Peace

The Temple of Peace and Health was opened to much fanfare, in November 1938. A space dedicated to the promotion of “**national health and international peace**”, the building was envisioned as a centre to foster international unity and co-operation.

When Buckingham Palace turned down the invitation to open the Temple, founder Lord David Davies wrote in a memo that “I am minded to ask **the oldest and poorest wife of an Ocean (colliery) workman**”.



Clipping of Minnie James, courtesy of WCIA

One of the most notable items associated with the Temple of Peace is the Women’s Petition of 1923. Signed by 390,296 Welsh women, it was sent to US President Calvin Coolidge, calling on the US to join the Council of the League of Nations.

Its introduction reads:

“We speak simply as the Women of Wales - **the daughters of a nation whose glory it has been to cherish no hatred towards any land or people**, and whose desire is for the coming on earth of the reign of fellowship and goodwill.”

This entry contains original research shared generously by the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, originally carried out by Peter Garwood, Mari Lowe, Ffion Fielding, Frank Holloway, Craig Owen and Dr Emma West. Research on the Women’s Peace Petition was conducted by Women’s Archive Wales, Heddwch Nain Mamgu, The National Library of Wales and Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales.

And so, Minnie James - the ‘Mother of Wales’ - opened the temple, leading a cohort of 24 bereaved mothers from the UK and the British Empire. The women were recruited by the British Legion in a campaign described as the “**search for most tragic mother of the war**”.

Minnie, who was born in Merthyr in 1866, had lost two daughters, Elizabeth and Gwladys, in early infancy. Three of her sons - David, Thomas and James - died during the First World War. She spoke to the press of a “drawer of secrets” which held mementoes for each of her children.

As she opened the building, she said: “I pray this Temple may come to be regarded by the people of my country, both of our generation and those that are to follow as a symbol of our determination to strive for a world of justice and peace in the future.”

10. Alexandra Gardens

The 'Alexandra' in Alexandra Gardens refers to Alexandra, Queen Consort of Great Britain. Born in Copenhagen in 1844, she married King Edward VII in 1863.



Alexandra Caroline Marie Charlotte Louise Julia, 1881

Before 1910, this beautiful civic space, one of the earliest parts of Cathays Park to be developed, was known as '**Geometrical Gardens**', and later '**University Gardens**'.

The park was later renamed for named for Alexandra in 1910, who was by then Queen of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, and Empress of India. Nowadays, the park is home to a number of memorials, commemorating mostly military events, such as the Spanish Civil War, the First World War and the Malvinas/Falklands conflict.

Royal women account for a vast majority of the sculptures of women in the UK, as well as monuments, streets and civic spaces named for women – and as such, they are an exception.

Recent research has showed that, for example, there are more statues of goats than of Black women in the UK. At the moment, there are **three statues of named Black women** – Dame Kelly Holmes, Floella Benjamin and Mary Seacole. Only a single Muslim woman – Noor Inayat Khan – is commemorated by public monument in the UK. In fact, there are more statues of men called John than of non-mythical, non-royal women in the UK.

11. National Museum Cardiff

Our tour ends at National Museum Cardiff – another building adorned with sculptures of symbolic women.



'The Classical Period', Gilbert Bayes, 1914-15

This imposing building, however, would not have come about, were it not for the contributions and canny collecting habits of two sisters: **Margaret and Gwendoline Davies**.

Granddaughters of the industrialist David Davies, they **inherited substantial wealth from his mineral extraction, railway and export enterprises**. Their fortune, built on the back of the Industrial Revolution and expansion of the British Empire, would be spent on artworks that would form the foundation of the Welsh national art collection.

Growing up in Llandinam, mid Wales, Margaret and Gwendoline were raised according to strict Calvinistic Methodist beliefs. These beliefs would have a strong influence on how they used their wealth, focussing on what they perceived as philanthropic endeavours. For example, purchasing Gregynog Hall to create an arts and crafts community, where **they housed refugee artists** at the outbreak of the First World War.

In addition to donating their collection to the nation, they also contributed generously to the museum's building fund, enabling the construction of one of Wales' **first national cultural institutions**. Their keen eye for Impressionist works has enabled the museum to build a world-renowned collection which by today includes paintings by Berthe Morisot, Gwen John, Gillian Ayres, Natalia Goncharova, Siani Rhys James and many more.

We hope you've enjoyed this tour – a chance to look through a different lens at the fabric of our Civic Centre, to see the women's history all around us.

To find out more about our collections, events and talks, follow us on **twitter**: [@CUSpecialColls](https://twitter.com/CUSpecialColls) and **facebook**: [CUSpecialColls](https://www.facebook.com/CUSpecialColls)