

MAGNIFICENT WOMEN:

Rachel Parsons



Rachel Parsons was the first president of the Women's Engineering Society. In the First World War, she co-directed an engineering firm and taught hundreds of women to make munitions. Later, she fought for women's employment rights.

25 January 1885 – 1 July 1956

A legacy of genius

Rachel Parsons came from an amazing family of inventors and engineers. On her father's side, her ancestors included the Anglo-Irish earls of Rosse.

- Her grandfather was William Parsons, third earl of Rosse, president of the Royal Society from 1848 to 1854. He built the world's largest telescope, 'the Leviathan of Parsonstown'
- Her grandmother was Mary Rosse, an engineer and astronomer, as well as a pioneer of early photography, who created her own dark room
- Her father was Charles Parsons, inventor of the steam turbine, revered by many as the greatest mechanical engineer since James Watt
- Her mother was Katharine Parsons, a leading suffragette, who championed training and employment for women engineers, and helped to set up the Women's Engineering Society

A trailblazing career

Rachel Parsons was educated at Roedean, near Brighton, one of the very few schools that taught science to girls. In 1910, she became the first woman to read mechanical sciences at Cambridge University, but, in common with other female students, she was barred from taking a degree. (The bar was not lifted at Cambridge until 1948.)

When war broke out in August 1914, and her brother Tommy joined the Royal Field Artillery, Rachel replaced Tommy on the board of Heaton Works, her father's engineering firm in Newcastle upon Tyne, taking charge of the growing cohort of female employees. Heaton made steam turbines for electricity generation and marine engines, as well as searchlights and other optical munitions.

Rachel joined the Training Department of the Ministry of Munitions, guiding a multitude of women in factories all over the country in tasks that ranged from making periscopes and viewfinders to installing electrical wiring on battleships.

After the war, when women were told to go back to the home, Rachel started a campaign to promote women's employment rights. In 1919, assisted by her mother, Katharine, and Caroline Haslett, she founded the Women's Engineering Society. A few years later, she was elected to the London County Council, and went on to stand for Parliament.

Women must organise – this is the only royal road to victory in the industrial world. They have achieved political independence; now is the time to win economic freedom too.

Further information

- <http://parsonstown.info>

A tragic finale

Rachel Parsons inherited a fortune from her parents but lived largely alone. In the 1950s, she moved to Newmarket in Suffolk and began a new life as a racehorse owner. On 1 July 1956, she was bludgeoned to death by a stable boy, Dennis Pratt. The killer was convicted of manslaughter on the grounds of provocation.