

MAGNIFICENT WOMEN:

Women's Engineering Society



The Women's Engineering Society, WES, is the oldest women's engineering organisation in the world, having been set up after the First World War in 1919 to support and inspire women in engineering and technical professions. It is still going strong today.

23 June 1919 – Present Day

Early Days

WES was founded by **Lady Parsons** in 1919 in response to the employment difficulties experienced by women who had become engineers during World War 1. Lady Parsons and her daughter, **Rachel Parsons**, had both worked in engineering during the war and quickly attracted other female pioneers to join WES. **Caroline Haslett** was employed as the society's first secretary and her task was to find members and establish the society,

The society had local branches from the outset and members helped each other to find work and identify the few places willing to train women in engineering. From the early days of the society WES had a technical library and the WES Journal was until relatively recently, principally a technical journal with WES news and information attached. The library was needed because, initially, women could not be members of the professional institutions or universities and hence had no access to high level technical information. Conferences for members and supporters were a regular feature until WW2, resuming after the war in 1947.

The 1920s and 1930s was a period when more women were able to attend university and the first women to gain engineering degrees did so in this time. At this time, although women were taking science degrees at a few universities, there were few places that would accept a woman for professional practical training. Many upper class women were motoring and aviation enthusiasts and several were founding members of WES, such as **Lady Bailey** and **Claudia Parsons**. But there were also members who made full professional careers and were public heroines in their time, such as **Amy Johnston** (aviation), **Victoria**

Drummond (marine engineering)

and **Dorothee Pullinger** (car design). The 'marriage bar' was a general cultural expectation then and up into the 1960s, which dictated that women would not work after marriage. This inhibited the careers of many female engineering pioneers at this time, with Pullinger being a rare exception.



The British Women Pilots Association (launched 1955), Verena Holmes Trust (1969), WISE (1984), Daphne Jackson Trust (1992) and Mentorset are examples of organisations established by or with WES to support women's engineering work and careers. Various scholarships schemes have also been offered through WES over the years, such as the British Legion Aeronautics, Amy Johnston, EITB girls scheme, Lady Finnieston and Doris Gray award schemes.

WES in War Times

Many of WES's founder members had been trained in engineering and gained essential working experience during WW1. During the interwar years many of them developed their

careers and when WW2 started, they were respected senior figures who were sought out by the government to advise on the recruitment and training of women for technical work in the armed forces and in industry. Dorothee Pullinger, **Verena Holmes**, and Caroline Haslett were examples of such advisers. Haslett was called in before the war had even started, in 1938, to advise on whether women could be capable of operating anti-aircraft gun emplacements, which they did to great effect during the war.

Many leading lights in the society have been engineers in the defence industries (**Elizabeth Laverick**, **Peggy Hodges**) and armed forces (**Suzanne Flynn**) doing important innovative technical work whilst paving the way for more women to follow in their footsteps and promoting engineering to girls and women.

Today the Women's Engineering Society inspires and supports women in engineering, it promotes the education of engineering to young people, and it helps companies achieve a diverse and inclusive workforce. WES is the voice of women engineers.

WES in Peace Times

The government quickly learned to turn to WES for advice on work for women in technical fields. As early as 1920 the Home Office asked WES to provide information on training opportunities, resulting in a booklet listing training facilities for women. Similar requests have been made on a regular basis, including in 2013. WES member and journal contributor, **Mabel Mathews** set up the hugely successful Electrical Association for Women (EAW) in 1924 with Caroline Haslett as director, and it continued to educate and promote the safe use of electricity in the home until 1986.

The post-WW2 years saw a repeat of the post-WW1 situation, with many women obliged to leave skilled and responsible engineering roles when the men returned from war service. In 1956, a government white paper recommended

encouraging more girls into science and engineering to meet growing shortages. In 1969 WES launched a "Women in Engineering Year" and in 1984 WES helped to set up the Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) campaign, which is still running.

In 2014 WES launched an annual *National Women in Engineering Day* to mark its 95th anniversary, taking place on 23 June.

Further information

- WES Website
www.wes.org.uk/content/history
- A Brief History of WES by Isobel Hardwich.
The Woman Engineer, V8, 18, pp9-11 1960
- Electrical Association for Women
www.engineering-timelines.com/who/haslett_c/haslettCaroline4.asp
- WISE
www.wisecampaign.org.uk/about-us/
- IET Archive
www.theiet.org/resources/library/archives/research/guides-women.cfm

Where are we now?

Many of the activities of the early decades – the lists of training facilities willing to take women, the WES technical library and journal, the assistance in finding work – are fortunately no longer needed. WES has been instrumental in the many stages of progress towards the situation today where women can attend any college or university and can get good engineering jobs in any field. However there remains much to do and many women still feel isolated at college or in their workplaces. It is still the case that girls are not taking up the fantastic opportunities that an engineering career offers in the numbers that we know they are intellectually capable of. So WES continues to be an essential resource to promote engineering to girls and women and to support and encourage women in their careers at all stages.

