

Liberal pioneer

Kathryn Rix examines the life and political career of the first woman of any party to be formally accepted into the agents' profession.

'One of the most effective a Bertha Bowness Fischer, pic

IN 2020, THE Liberal Democrats added a new category to the awards presented annually at Liberal Democrat conference. This was the Bertha Bowness Fischer Award, conferred on a new member who had joined the party within the last year or two and who had shown outstanding energy and commitment to their new political home. But who was the woman in whose name the award has been established?

On 18 February 1902, three days before her twenty-seventh birthday, she was admitted as a Fellow of the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents (SCALA), having passed its examination papers in both Registration and Elections – although passing either would have been sufficient to qualify her.

Bertha Bowness Fischer (1875–1920) was the first woman of any political party to be formally accepted into the agents' profession. On 18 February 1902, three days before her twenty-seventh birthday, she was admitted as a Fellow of the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents (SCALA), having passed its examination papers in both Registration and Elections – although passing either would have been sufficient to qualify her. Not until 1908 would another woman, Ellen Pocock, enter the ranks of professional Liberal agents by becoming a Fellow of the SCALA, and Fischer and Pocock were the only women to do so before 1918.¹ This achievement was made even more remarkable by the fact that women were excluded from the parliamentary franchise until 1918, and were not admitted to the comparable profession of solicitor until after 1919. There were no female members of the equivalent Conservative or Labour agents' organisations during this period.

Fischer's pioneering status generated attention in the press, both close to her home in Southsea – the *Portsmouth Evening News* and the *Hampshire Telegraph* reported on her success as 'the first lady' qualified as a member of the SCALA – and further afield.² The *Dundee Evening Telegraph* featured Fischer under the headline, 'Novel professions for women. The lady

Liberal agent'.³ Using the press, census entries, India Office records and other sources, it has been possible to build up a picture of Fischer's life. As well as being a pioneering political organiser, she was an active and well-respected poor law guardian in Portsmouth, but ended her days in tragic circumstances on India's North-West frontier.

Fischer was born in India, where her family, who were of German origin, could trace their roots back to the 1750s. She was the fourth generation to be born there. Her great-great-grandfather, George Friedrich Fischer, came to India in 1753 to command troops at Pondicherry (now known as Puducherry). In 1759 he settled at Tranquebar (Tharangambadi), then under Danish control, but ceded to the British in 1845. Born at Tranquebar, Fischer's great-great-grandfather, George Fischer (1773–1812), had a brief military career before setting up in business at Cochin (Kochi) in 1797.⁴ Cochin passed from Dutch to British control in 1814 and the Fischers developed ties to Britain. In 1823 George's younger son, Thomas James Fischer (1808–64) – Fischer's grandfather – joined the 4th regiment of the Madras Native Infantry, which was under the control of Britain's East India Company.⁵ When he married his wife Louisa at the British ambassador's residence in Paris in 1837, he was listed as a resident of Topsham, Devon, but he continued his military career in India and had attained the rank of lieutenant colonel by the time of his death at Trichinopoly (Tiruchirappalli) in 1864.⁶

Fischer's father, Thomas James Henry Bowness Fischer (1838–1910), was baptised at Cannanore (Kannur) in 1839.⁷ He followed in his father's footsteps, joining the 45th Madras Native Infantry as a second lieutenant in August 1857, shortly before this force passed from the East India Company's control to the British crown.⁸ He transferred to the Madras Staff Corps in 1867.⁹ In 1870, by which time

and most welcome workers' pioneering political organiser

he was a captain, he became the British consular agent at Karikal (Karaikal), then in French India.¹⁰ The following year he married Fischer's mother, Henrietta Amelia Stevenson (1851–97), the daughter of a fellow officer in the Madras Native Infantry, at Tranquebar.¹¹ Fischer, born on 21 February 1875, was the younger of two daughters.¹² Although a press report gave her place of birth as Madras (Chennai), census records confirm that, like her older sister Henrietta Maria (1872–1957), she was born at Karikal.¹³ Her father remained there as British consular agent until he retired from the army in August 1887 with the rank of colonel.¹⁴ Fischer presumably spent at least part, if not all, of her childhood in India, although the details of her education are unknown.

In April 1888, when Fischer was 13, her parents left India for England.¹⁵ At the time of the 1891 census, they, Fischer, her sister and two servants were living at the White House, Frant, East Sussex.¹⁶ At some point before 1895 they moved to Southsea, near Portsmouth.¹⁷ In November 1897, when Fischer's mother died, they were living at 'Elsinore', Waverley Grove, Southsea, but by the time of the 1901 census, they had moved to 25 Havelock Road, where Fischer was listed alongside her father, his young niece and two servants.¹⁸ Fischer's sister had obtained her own professional qualification as a Queen's District Nurse and was living in Rochdale, Lancashire.¹⁹

A 'keen politician on the Liberal side', Fischer's father encouraged his daughters to take an interest in social and political affairs. After leaving school, Fischer 'began to study the social questions of the day, especially those concerning women'. She shared her father's Liberal views, although the first political meeting she attended, where she was introduced by a friend as a 'rabid Radical', was organised by the Conservative-supporting Primrose League. Fischer was inspired to take up public work after

hearing a talk by Melie Stanbury, secretary of the Women's Local Government Society, at her first women's Liberal meeting.²⁰ Although excluded from the parliamentary franchise, by the late 1890s women made up 17 per cent of the local government electorate in England and Wales, and in 1900 there were 270 women sitting on school boards, 172 female district councillors and 1,147 female poor law guardians. Following the removal of the property qualification in 1894, 'women and working men flowed on to poor law boards'.²¹ Fischer became one of them in April 1900, when, aged only 25, she was elected to the Portsmouth board of guardians, the ninth of ten successful candidates in the Southern ward.²²

Re-elected as one of the 'progressive' candidates in 1903,²³ this time she took third place in the poll, indicating the recognition her diligent and energetic work had received.²⁴ Indeed, one former chairman of the board considered her 'one of the best of the Guardians of Portsmouth'.²⁵ Between April 1900 and March 1901 she had attended 151 out of the 224 board and committee meetings to which she was summoned.²⁶ Her election address in 1903, issued jointly with Mr W. J. Groves, noted that they had given 'much time and attention to the work', helping to achieve 'The Better Care and Training of the Children', 'Brighter and Better Conditions for the Aged and Infirm' and 'Labour for the *Genuine* Employed during the Winter Months'. This had been done without any need to increase the poor rate, despite increased demands for welfare provision during the Boer War.²⁷

Fischer was particularly interested in the welfare of women and children, serving on the board's Children's Home Committee.²⁸ Like many fellow Liberals, she was anxious to promote temperance. She presided over Gospel Temperance meetings at Portsmouth's workhouse and pursued the same agenda at the

Fischer was inspired to take up public work after hearing a talk by Melie Stanbury, secretary of the Women's Local Government Society, at her first women's Liberal meeting.

Membership Roll of Districts

As reported to Secretary for Annual Meeting at Newcastle
May, 1905.

Those marked * are Fellows, and hold Certificates.
Those marked † are Subscribers to Magazine.

EASTERN.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| *†Belcher, W., Yarmouth | *Leeds, H., Lincoln |
| Brittain, W. H., Norwich | †Mouel, J. |
| Burnip, J., Liberal League | *†Murton, W., Hunts., S. |
| †Clark, J., Spalding | †Oldman, A., Norfolk, S. |
| Collings, O. C., Northants. N. | †Oldman, H. F., Norfolk, S.W. |
| Cosford, A., Northants, S. | *Parsons, J. A. Norfolk, N.W. |
| *†Cotchin, C., Beds. S. | †Prentice, J. |
| Cozens-Hardy, S., Norfolk, N. | †Price, T. H., Grimsby |
| Davis, W. R., Horncastle, Lincs. | *Raine, J. Hunts., N. |
| †Gilham, W. J., Gainsborough | †Renshaw, T., Newmarket Div. |
| *†Guyatt, J., Cambridge, W. | Riggall, F. S., Louth |
| †Hames, H., Gainsborough | Smithurst, R. A., Grantham |
| *†House, W., Cambridge, N. | Sones, F. H., Stamford, Lincs. |
| *†Howe, A., Boston | *Standley, F. W., Norfolk, Mid. |
| Huckle, A., Sandy, Beds. | *Thorburn, W., Peterborough |
| *Kirsop, J., Brigg | *Winfrey, R., Peterborough |

HOME COUNTIES.

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| *†Allard, W., Liberal League | †Clarke, J., Home Counties L.F. |
| *†Allcott, J., Guildford | *†Clark, O., N. Islington |
| *†Allgood, A., Fulham | *†Clark, T. M., unattached |
| Barley, A. G., Southampton | †Coward, W. S., Ipswich |
| *†Bailey, H., Hampstead | Crook, W. M., Home Counties |
| *†Barter, F., N.L.F. | *Crozier, W. E., Chichester |
| *†Buss, A., City of London | *†Daniels, Joseph, Horsham |
| *†Baum, F. C., E. Finsbury | *†Davison, Thomas, Kilburn |
| Bear, B. W., Chatham | *†Downes, F. J., East Grinstead |
| *†Bernthal, W., St. Albans | Elkington, A., Lowestoft |
| Brittain, F. C., Banbury | *†Essery, A. G. Epsom |
| Brown, G., N. Herts. | *Fellowes, Wm., Finsbury Park |
| *†Burley, W. C., E. Hants. | Fidler, J. C., Newbury, Berks. |
| *†Burn, A. H., Battersea | *Fischer, Bertha, Southsea |
| Bynner, J. J., Sudbury | †Fitzpatrick, G. A., Holborn |
| * Cathie, A., Camberwell | †Ford, Will, Maidenhead |
| *†Cattermole, A., Eye | Galton, F. W., City of London |
| †Chester, E., Brighton | †Gathercole, G. Thetford, Suffolk |
| Childs, R. J., Watford | *Geake, C. |

Membership list
of Liberal agents
– Fischer included
lower right (*Liberal
Agent* 41 (July 1905))

children's home through the Band of Hope.²⁹ She consistently voted against offering beer as a Christmas treat in the workhouse,³⁰ and also opposed a Christmas allowance for those receiving poor relief outside the workhouse, partly because 'in many cases ... the money would go on beer'.³¹ She 'strongly advocated women doctors',³² and was involved with the Portsmouth branch of the National Union of Women Workers.³³ Hoping to make the board of guardians work more efficiently, she successfully raised the issue of a time limit on speeches at its meetings, complaining that 'lately the Board had suffered from an epidemic of long speeches ... the longest speakers were those who did not speak closest to the subject'.³⁴

Alongside this, Fischer was 'a most enthusiastic worker in the Liberal cause'.³⁵ The potential to harness women's voluntary labour for

electioneering tasks such as canvassing in the wake of the restrictions on paid assistance imposed by the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act and the demands of an expanded electorate after the Third Reform Act of 1885 had encouraged the formation of women's Liberal organisations, which from 'a modest beginning' in the early 1880s had grown considerably by the end of the century. In 1904 the Women's Liberal Federation – founded in 1887 – had 496 affiliated Women's Liberal Associations, with a combined membership of 66,000 women.³⁶ Fischer was honorary secretary of the Southsea Women's Liberal Association. She did not, however, confine her activities to single-sex organisations, serving on the executive committee of the Portsmouth Liberal Association, as well as its ward and finance committees.³⁷ She attended selection meetings for the Liberal candidate for a by-election at Portsmouth in April 1900.³⁸ The Liberals won on this occasion, but lost both Portsmouth seats at the 'khaki' election later that year.

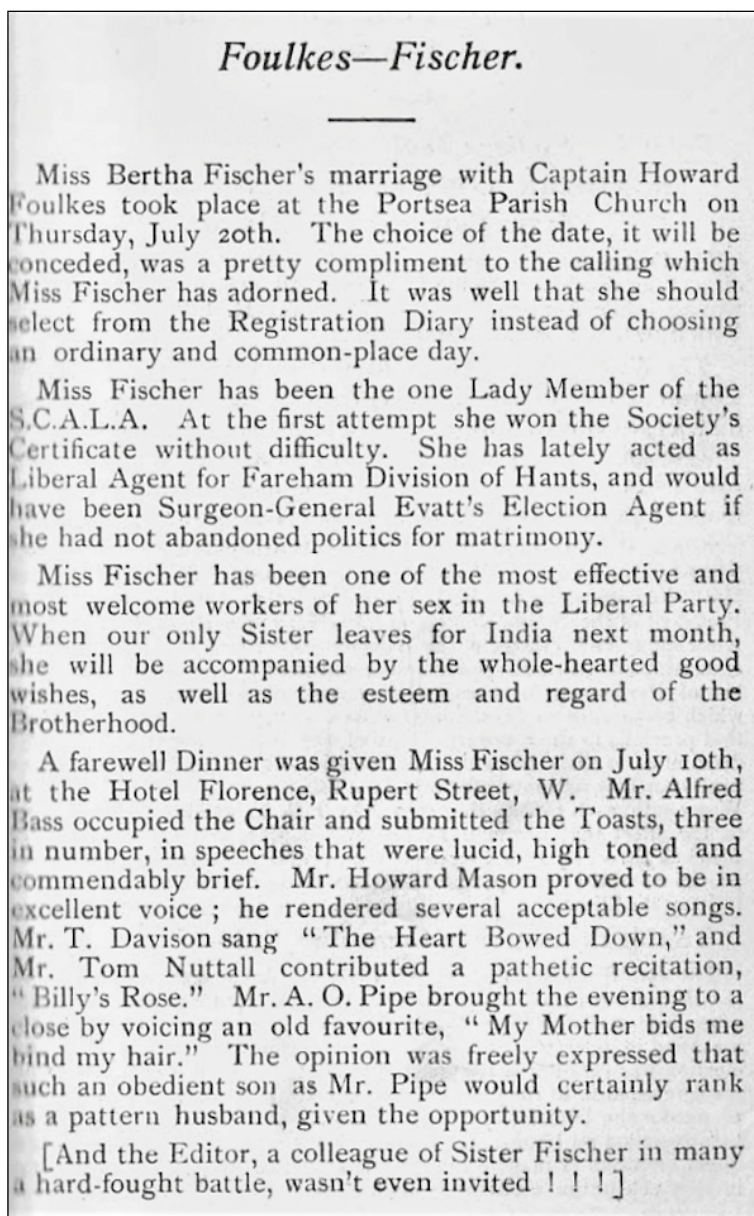
Reflecting on this defeat in a speech at Southsea on 'Women and politics', Fischer argued that 'there was much work to be done by women, and by Women's Liberal Associations, to awaken the right spirit'. She also commented 'in interesting and instructive fashion' on 'the temperance problem, the housing question and the conditions of labour'.³⁹ She regularly addressed the Southsea Women's Liberal Association, on topics ranging from 'Imperialism and Empire' to 'The work of the guardians'.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, press reports did not elaborate on Fischer's views on these issues, many of which were divisive and electorally challenging ones for the Liberal party. Given her firm anti-drink stance as a poor law guardian, it seems likely that she would have sided with the temperance lobby, rather than those party activists who raised concerns about the potential of this issue to alienate voters, while her own family's experiences would undoubtedly have informed her speeches on the theme of imperialism.⁴¹

One subject on which Fischer's opinions were reported in more detail was women's suffrage, of which she was, unsurprisingly, an advocate. She told a local debating society in December 1900 that 'women should bear a share in the government of the country, as they were becoming large wage earners and had a stake in the country'.⁴² She was concerned, however, that 'if women do get votes there are very few who would know anything about registration', and thought they should go beyond the canvassing work usually assigned to them and 'learn more about the legal aspect of elections'. This prompted her to study registration

law and spend six months assisting with Liberal registration efforts at Hastings.⁴³ Local party organisations made a significant contribution to the work of electoral registration, checking the lists prepared by parish overseers, lodging claims to vote on behalf of their supporters, objecting to opponents' claims and sending representatives – usually the agent – to the annual registration courts at which revising barristers ruled on these claims and objections.⁴⁴

Impressed by Fischer's abilities, the Hastings agent encouraged her to sit the examination held by the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents (SCALA).⁴⁵ Following the major electoral reforms of 1883–5 – the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act, the Franchise Act and the Redistribution of Seats Act – which made the work of registration, electioneering and party organisation more demanding, local party associations increasingly turned from part-time solicitor agents to full-time professional agents.⁴⁶ On the Liberal side, these aspiring professionals had formed the Liberal Secretaries and Agents' Association in 1882, known from 1887 as the National Association of Liberal Secretaries and Agents (NALSA). It aimed to improve agents' status and provide professional education for this new breed of party organisers. Wanting to take this further and issue certificates of proficiency for agents, a break-away group from the NALSA formed the Society of Certificated Liberal Agents (SCLA) in June 1893. It held its first examination in February 1894. Papers on Registration and Elections tested would-be agents on questions ranging from the detailed technicalities of registration law to broader practical matters such as how to organise a by-election campaign.⁴⁷

Fischer passed both papers not long after the NALSA and SCLA overcame their differences and merged as the SCALA in 1901. Agents could also qualify to join as Fellows on the basis of experience, or at the lower grade of Associate, but for Fischer, new to the profession, examination offered her the opportunity to demonstrate her abilities, irrespective of her gender. In 1895, the SCLA's examining board had discussed whether to accept women into the society, and resolved that 'women be not admitted members at present'. It reported to the annual meeting that 'applications had been made by women to become members but have been declined'.⁴⁸ The reasons for this were not elucidated, but when Fischer proved her merits by passing both of the SCALA's examination papers 'without difficulty' in 1902, no qualms seem to have been raised about making her a Fellow.⁴⁹



Although it was not compulsory for agents to be SCALA members, Fischer's possession of a professional qualification undoubtedly proved an advantage in securing the post of Liberal agent for the Fareham (or South) division of Hampshire, an appointment which the *Liberal Agent* reported in January 1905.⁵⁰ She also had the benefit of some local knowledge, since the Fareham constituency adjoined Portsmouth. Fischer therefore became only the second woman known to have held a position as a constituency agent. The first, Ellen Pocock, had served as Liberal agent for the Strand division in London from around 1899, but did not become a SCALA Fellow until 1908. In the absence of any surviving records from the Fareham Liberals, the circumstances of Fischer's appointment are unknown, but it came just a few months after Surgeon-General George

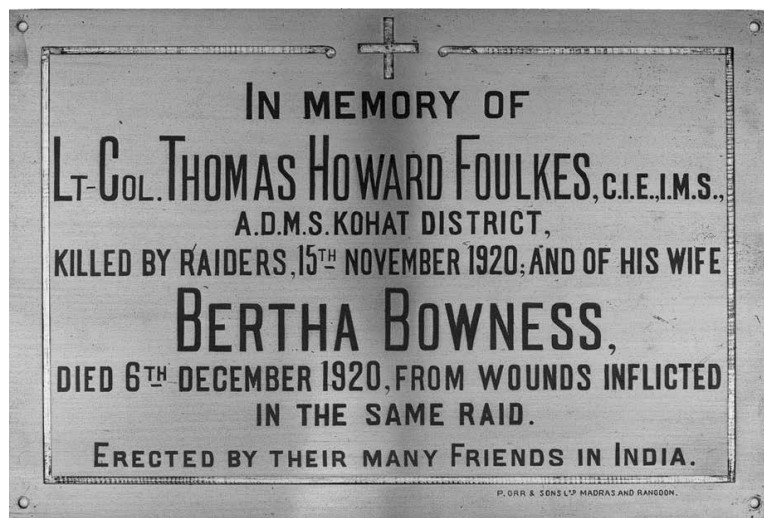
Tribute to Fischer on leaving the agents' profession (*Liberal Agent* 41 (July 1905))

'One of the most effective and most welcome workers' Bertha Bowness Fischer, pioneering political organiser

Evatt (1843–1921) became the prospective candidate, suggesting that, as in other constituencies, the arrival of a candidate served as a stimulus to organisation ahead of an anticipated general election.⁵¹ The Liberals, under the guidance of Herbert Gladstone as chief whip, were making particular efforts on this score in the run-up to the 1906 election.⁵²

Evatt, who had stood unsuccessfully at Woolwich in 1886, made his first appearance in the Fareham constituency in April 1904. He was a long-serving and distinguished officer in the army medical service, and had been stationed for several years in British India, which gave Fischer the advantage of working with a candidate whose experiences and background were familiar to her.⁵³ The Liberals had never won the Fareham seat since its creation in 1885 and had left it uncontested in 1886, 1895 and at a by-election in 1903. Alongside their poor electoral prospects, the financial position of the local party does not seem to have been strong, since in May 1905 Rev. R. J. Wells wrote on behalf of the Fareham Liberal Association to W. M. Crook, secretary of the Home Counties Liberal Federation, to solicit funds from party headquarters in order to be able to employ a successor to Fischer, who was due to leave her post at the end of June.⁵⁴ At the 1906 election, Evatt was among the 169 Liberal candidates in England and Wales – many of them in unpromising southern English seats such as Fareham – who received a grant of money from Herbert Gladstone towards their election costs: in his case, £300.⁵⁵

Fischer's career as a Liberal agent proved short-lived, as she left the profession to get married in July 1905.⁵⁶ This meant that she did not, as anticipated, act as Evatt's election agent, which would have been the first time a woman performed this role.⁵⁷ She had, however, undertaken many of the other key duties of an agent during her time at Fareham. Although she was no longer in post by the time of the autumn registration courts, she would have overseen much of the preparatory work of registration earlier in the year, drawing on the experience she had gained at Hastings. This would have included gathering information on potential Liberal voters who could be added to the register, as well as marking up the new electoral registers which were published in January, listing details of what was known about each voter, so that they could be invited to meetings, sent election literature and canvassed as appropriate. In the case of known Conservative voters, possibilities for objecting to their vote and striking them off the register would also have been



considered. Given that the constituency had 17,398 electors in 1906 – 6,331 of whom voted for Evatt – the organisational and clerical tasks associated with registration and party organisation were significant.⁵⁸

Fischer's work as agent also included promoting Evatt's candidature and general efforts at 'political education' on behalf of the Liberal cause. One means of doing this was by the distribution of Liberal leaflets and pamphlets and the display of posters. Some of these were used to promote the speaking tour of the constituency made by Evatt in January and February 1905, which was also advertised in the press.⁵⁹ Under the heading 'WAKE UP SOUTH HANTS', the *Portsmouth Evening News* in January 1905 listed eight dates and locations of meetings to be addressed by Evatt, and there was further promotion of the individual events.⁶⁰ Given the timing of this campaign, not long after Fischer's appointment, it is likely that the organisational initiative came from her, and as agent, she would have been responsible

'One of the most effective and most welcome workers' Bertha Bowness Fischer, pioneering political organiser

for arrangements ranging from the placing of advertisements in the press to the booking of rooms for meetings. Fischer attended at least two of these meetings alongside Evatt.⁶¹ At one of them, she was singled out for praise by Rev. Wells, who chaired the meeting, as 'a lady skilled in electioneering work ... whose heart and soul were in the cause'.⁶² If there was any opposition to a woman performing the duties of agent, it was not recorded in the press.

The reaction of Fischer's fellow agents also appears to have been largely positive. The *Liberal Agent's* 'All About Agents' column reported the appointment of 'our only lady Fellow' as agent for Fareham alongside similar news from other agents.⁶³ In noting that this post came with an agreement that Fischer would serve as the election agent, the journal implicitly conveyed approval on her, since securing the right of the constituency agent to serve as the election agent – rather than this position being taken by a solicitor – was an important part of the agents' efforts to promote their professional status.⁶⁴ When Fischer left the profession, her colleagues gave her a farewell dinner at the Hotel Florence, Rupert Street, London, and the *Liberal Agent* paid tribute to her as 'one of the most effective and most welcome workers of her sex in the Liberal Party', declaring that 'our only Sister' had 'the whole-hearted good wishes, as well as the esteem and regard of the Brotherhood'.⁶⁵ Her services to the board of guardians and the Southsea Women's Liberal Association were recognised with wedding gifts of a bracelet and a silver salver.⁶⁶

In turn, Fischer showed her 'kindness of heart' by inviting children from the children's home to her wedding to her cousin, Captain Thomas Howard Foulkes (1870–1920), at Portsea parish church, as well as sending a wedding cake to the home.⁶⁷ Her husband, known as Howard, was born in India, where his father, the Welsh-born Rev. Thomas Foulkes (1826–1901), had gone as a missionary in the late 1840s, subsequently becoming a chaplain in the Madras government service.⁶⁸ Having completed medical training at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London, Howard Foulkes qualified in 1892, when he became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. He joined the Indian Medical Service the following year and served in both civil and military posts. By the time he married Fischer, he had served not only in India, but also Burma and China, and become a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.⁶⁹

The newly-weds departed for Madras, where Howard Foulkes had been serving as district medical and sanitary officer since 1899. In 1908

they moved to Vizagapatam (Visakhapatnam, also known as Waltair), where he took up a similar post and was also superintendent of the medical school and asylum.⁷⁰ Their only child, Constance Hilda Fischer, was born there in 1909.⁷¹ Their peripatetic existence continued with Howard's appointment in 1912 as Durbar surgeon of Mysore state.⁷² At some point they lived in Egypt, where Bertha Foulkes once 'had to stand and protect herself against seditious conduct'.⁷³ By then a lieutenant colonel, her husband returned to military service during the First World War, when it seems most likely that Bertha remained in India.⁷⁴ By 1920, still in the Indian Medical Service, Howard was assistant director of medical services at Kohat, then on India's North-West Frontier, but now in Pakistan. He was shot dead in a raid on the family's bungalow by Pathan tribesmen in the early hours of 15 November 1920. Shot in the arm and chest, Bertha was dragged away by their attackers, but released almost immediately when she became too weak to walk. Press reports praised her 'wonderful calm and pluck'. The dangers of life on the North-West Frontier were shown by the fact that the Foulkeses usually slept with revolvers under their pillows, but had not done so on this occasion.⁷⁵

Sadly, Bertha Foulkes died of her injuries three weeks later on 6 December 1920.⁷⁶ Their daughter, who was uninjured, went to live with relatives in England.⁷⁷ Bertha and Howard Foulkes were buried at Kohat Church, where 'their many friends in India' erected a memorial plaque. This became part of the Punjab Frontier Force Memorial, which was relocated to England following partition in 1947. From 1951 the plaque to Bertha and Howard Foulkes was housed in the crypt of the newly dedicated Punjab Frontier Force Memorial Chapel at St Luke's Church, Chelsea, but it was given to the National Army Museum in 1998.⁷⁸

Learning of their former colleague's plight, the members of the Portsmouth board of guardians paid tribute to her as 'an efficient lady on the board' and 'a most able woman'.⁷⁹ Bertha Fischer had been a trailblazer in 1902 as the first female professional agent. Her departure for India in 1905 left Ellen Pocock as 'the only woman political registration agent in the United Kingdom'.⁸⁰ Looking beyond the constituency associations, there were a small number of other female organisers on the Liberal side, such as Ivy Pretious of the Free Trade Union.⁸¹ There were also cases of daughters who aided their fathers with political work: the *Liberal Agent* suggested that James Corrie's daughter, who assisted her father at the

Left:

Liberal Democrat party president Mark Pack confers the Bertha Bowness Fischer award for the first time, on Simran Meji at the autumn 2020 Liberal Democrat conference.

Commemorative plaque for Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Howard Foulkes and Bertha Bowness (Fischer), made by P Orr and Sons, from the Punjab Frontier Force Memorial Wall S10, 'Erected by their many friends in India', 1920. (© National Army Museum online collection)

'One of the most effective and most welcome workers' Bertha Bowness Fischer, pioneering political organiser

By the time of the 1921 census – the first occasion on which 'political association officials' were listed as a separate category among the 'professional occupations' – there were 1,159 male and 243 female political association officials in England and Wales. Bertha Bowness Fischer's hopes that women would become more involved in registration and elections had been realised.

Northern Liberal Federation's offices, could easily qualify as a Fellow of the SCALA.⁸² Taking a broader perspective, while Fischer's position within the formal structures of the Liberal Party organisation as a professional agent was highly unusual, her wider experiences – as a poor law guardian, a temperance supporter, an advocate of women's employment and an active Liberal association member – were symptomatic of the growing opportunities which women had for participation in public and political life, even before the extension of the parliamentary franchise to them in 1918 and 1928.⁸³

However, despite the acceptance Fischer had received, allowing women into the profession remained a thorny question for the Liberal agents. In 1905 Maisie Rivers – demonstrating her own capabilities by deputising for her ill father as editor of the *Liberal Agent* – deemed it 'a well-known fact that *some* Liberal agents are not at all partial to admitting the "fair sex" into their ranks'.⁸⁴ This may have reflected the divisions within the profession over women's suffrage. When the SCALA overhauled its rules in 1910, it confined its membership specifically to 'persons of the male sex'. An attempt at the annual meeting to omit this alteration received only sixteen votes in favour from the ninety members present.⁸⁵

This rule change overlooked the existence of the society's only current female member, Ellen Pocock, who had followed in Fischer's footsteps and qualified as a Fellow by examination in December 1908. Pocock does not seem to have known of Fischer's pioneering achievements, commenting in an interview about her registration activities in 1904 that 'I am the only lady who does this sort of work. It is extraordinary that others have not taken it up'.⁸⁶ By 1910, Pocock was able to report that 'there are a good many women engaged in this branch of political work in various parts of the country', although she believed she was 'the only one' who had defended her party's claims and objections in the registration courts.⁸⁷ The Liberal candidate for the Strand constituency, Leonard Costello, entrusted her with the responsibility of acting as his election agent in January 1910, the first known occasion on which a woman undertook this duty.⁸⁸ Pocock seems to have encouraged other women to take up political work, with a 'lady assistant' accompanying her to the 1913 registration courts.⁸⁹

In 1914 Pocock successfully appealed to the SCALA's examining board to be reinstated as a Fellow. Citing the 1910 rule change, the Home Counties district, to which she had previously

belonged – as had Fischer – had refused to allow Pocock to resume her membership after she missed subscription payments due to a change of address, despite her offer to pay the arrears. The examining board resolved, however, that the rule change should not be considered retrospective, and the SCALA therefore had a female member once more.⁹⁰ In the wake of partial women's suffrage in 1918, the society put its opposition to female political agents firmly behind it, not only admitting women as members, but honouring two of them – Mrs E. Smith, of East Dulwich, and Florence Morton, assistant secretary to the Yorkshire Liberal Federation – with biographical profiles in the *Liberal Agent* to mark the event.⁹¹ By the time of the 1921 census – the first occasion on which 'political association officials' were listed as a separate category among the 'professional occupations' – there were 1,159 male and 243 female political association officials in England and Wales.⁹² Bertha Bowness Fischer's hopes that women would become more involved in registration and elections had been realised.

Dr Kathryn Rix is assistant editor of the House of Commons, 1832–1945 project at the History of Parliament Trust. She has published widely on the history of elections and party organisation, including her book, Parties, agents and electoral culture in England, 1880–1910 (2016), and wrote the entry on Bertha Bowness Fischer for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

- 1 West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS), Leeds, Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents (SCALA), minute book, 18 Feb. 1902, 10 Dec. 1908.
- 2 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 3 Jul. 1902; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 5 Jul. 1902.
- 3 *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 10 Jul. 1902.
- 4 B. Rajannan, *Salem Cyclopaedia. A cultural and historical dictionary of Salem district, Tamil Nadu* (1992), p. 76.
- 5 *The East-India register and army list* (1854), p. 28.
- 6 Register of marriages solemnized in the house of his excellency the British ambassador at the court of France, 1828–1837, via findmypast.co.uk; J. J. Cotton, *List of inscriptions on tombs or monuments in Madras* (1946), ii, p. 273.
- 7 British India Office, Ecclesiastical Returns (BIO, ER), Births & Baptisms, parish register transcripts from the Presidency of Madras, baptism record, 4 Apr. 1839, via findmypast.co.uk.
- 8 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 19 Mar. 1910.
- 9 *Naval and Military Gazette*, 2 Mar. 1867.
- 10 *Globe*, 21 Nov. 1870; *Hart's Annual Army List* (1908), p. 934.
- 11 BIO, ER, Births & Baptisms, Madras ecclesiastical

'One of the most effective and most welcome workers' Bertha Bowness Fischer, pioneering political organiser

- records, omissions and corrections, 1777–1884, baptism record, 7 Aug. 1851; *Ibid*, Marriages, parish register transcripts from the Presidency of Madras, marriage record, 11 Sept. 1871.
- 12 *Ibid*, Births & Baptisms, parish register transcripts from the Presidency of Madras, baptism record, 16 Apr. 1875.
- 13 *Homeward Mail*, 22 Mar. 1875; Information from 1891 census.
- 14 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 19 Mar. 1910.
- 15 *Homeward Mail*, 14 May 1888.
- 16 Information from 1891 census.
- 17 *Kelly's directory of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (1895), p. 326.
- 18 England and Wales, National Probate Calendar (1898), p. 100 (20 Jan. 1898); Information from 1901 census.
- 19 Information from 1901 census.
- 20 *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 10 Jul. 1902.
- 21 P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English local government, 1865–1914* (1987), pp. 31, 208, 486.
- 22 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 3 Apr. 1900.
- 23 *Ibid*, 19 Feb. 1903.
- 24 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 11 Apr. 1903.
- 25 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 Mar. 1903.
- 26 *Ibid*, 14 Mar. 1901.
- 27 *Ibid*, 20 Mar. 1903.
- 28 *Ibid*, 12 July 1900.
- 29 *Ibid*, 29 Nov. 1901, 7 Apr. 1904.
- 30 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 8 Dec. 1900, 7 Dec. 1901; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 6 Apr. 1903.
- 31 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 21 Nov. 1903.
- 32 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 Nov. 1920.
- 33 *Ibid*, 21 Apr. 1903, 28 Mar. 1904.
- 34 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 10 Sept. 1904.
- 35 *Ibid*, 5 July 1902.
- 36 L. Walker, 'Party political women: a comparative study of Liberal women and the Primrose League, 1890–1914', in J. Rendall (ed.), *Equal or different. Women's politics 1800–1914* (1987), pp. 165–9.
- 37 *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 10 Jul. 1902.
- 38 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 11 and 18 Apr. 1900.
- 39 *Ibid*, 26 Oct. 1900.
- 40 *Ibid*, 25 Feb. 1902, 25 Mar. 1903.
- 41 On the problematic nature of the temperance question for the Liberal party, see D. A. Hamer, *The politics of electoral pressure* (1977), ch. XII, and K. Rix, *Parties, agents and electoral culture in England, 1880–1910* (2016), pp. 164–7.
- 42 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 20 Dec. 1900.
- 43 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 5 Jul. 1902.
- 44 On party registration activity, see Rix, *Parties, agents and electoral culture*, pp. 124–38.
- 45 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 5 Jul. 1902.
- 46 On this transition, see Rix, *Parties, agents and electoral culture*, chs. 1–2.
- 47 On the history of the Liberal agents' associations, see K. Rix, 'Hidden workers of the party. The professional Liberal agents, 1885–1910', *Journal of Liberal History*, 52 (2006), pp. 4–13, and for a more detailed discussion, see Rix, *Parties, agents and electoral culture*, ch. 3.
- 48 WYAS, Leeds, Society of Certificated Liberal Agents (SCLA), minute book, 4 Dec. 1905.
- 49 SCALA, minute book, 8 Feb. 1902; *Liberal Agent*, 41 (July 1905), p. 29.
- 50 *Liberal Agent*, 39 (Jan. 1905), p. 163.
- 51 Rix, *Parties, agents and electoral culture*, p. 56.
- 52 A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide. The general election of 1906* (1973), ch. 2.
- 53 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 12 Apr. 1904; 'Obituary. Sir George Evatt, K.C.B., M.D.', *British Medical Journal* (1921; 2), p. 869.
- 54 R. J. Wells to W. M. Crook, 1 May 1905, included in W. M. Crook to H. Gladstone, 2 May 1905, British Library, Herbert Gladstone papers, Add. 46024, f. 203.
- 55 R. A. Hudson to H. Gladstone, 26 Jan. 1906, British Library, Herbert Gladstone papers, Add. 46021, f. 116; T. Lloyd, 'The Whip as paymaster: Herbert Gladstone and party organisation', *English Historical Review*, lxxxix (1974), p. 789. Evatt was defeated by over 1,300 votes in 1906.
- 56 *Daily News*, 26 Jul. 1905.
- 57 *Liberal Agent*, 41 (Jul. 1905), p. 29.
- 58 J. Vincent and M. Stenton (eds.), *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book: British Election results 1832–1918* (1971), Part II, p. 108.
- 59 Evatt's meeting at Cosham was announced with a bill headed 'A General Election is approaching!': *Portsmouth Evening News*, 1 Feb. 1905.
- 60 *Ibid*, 24 Jan. 1905.
- 61 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 28 Jan. 1905, 4 Feb. 1905.
- 62 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 1 Feb. 1905.
- 63 *Liberal Agent*, 39 (Jan. 1905), p. 163.
- 64 Rix, *Parties, agents and electoral culture*, pp. 112–13.
- 65 *Liberal Agent*, 41 (July 1905), p. 29.
- 66 *Hampshire Telegraph*, 13 May 1905; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 20 Jul. 1905.
- 67 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 21 Jul. 1905.
- 68 E. M. Spiers, 'Foulkes, Charles Howard (1875–1969)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [www.oxforddnb.com]. Foulkes's mother was Jessie Fischer (1842–1912), his father's second wife, who was the daughter of Bertha Fischer's great-uncle.
- 69 'Foulkes, Thomas Howard (1870–1920)', *Plarr's Lives* [https://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/biogs/E001895b.htm]; D. G. Crawford, *Roll of the Indian Medical Service 1615–1930. Volume Two: 1800–1930* (1930), p. 377.
- 70 'Foulkes, Thomas Howard'.
- 71 BIO, Births & Baptisms, parish register transcripts from the Presidency of Madras, baptism record, 28 May 1909.
- 72 'Foulkes, Thomas Howard'.
- 73 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 Nov. 1920.
- 74 'Foulkes, Thomas Howard'; Crawford, *Roll of the Indian Medical Service*, p. 377.
- 75 *The Times*, 19 Nov. 1920; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 Nov. 1920; *Pioneer Mail*, 26 Nov. 1920. For the wider context, see E. Kolsky, 'No "Signs of Weakness": Gendered violence and masculine authority on the North-West Frontier of British India', *Modern Asian Studies* (2020), pp. 1–36.
- 76 BIO, Deaths and Burials, parish register transcripts from the Presidency of Bengal, 1713–1948, burial record, 7 Dec. 1920.
- 77 King's College London, Liddell Hart Military Archive, Papers of Major General Charles Howard Foulkes.
- 78 https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/12151; https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/91134
- 79 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 25 Nov. 1920.
- 80 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 12 Sep. 1905.
- 81 F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: commerce, consumption, and civil society in modern Britain* (2008), p. 106.
- 82 *Liberal Agent*, 41 (Jul. 1905), p. 2.
- 83 K. Gleadle, *British women in the nineteenth century* (2001), ch. 11.
- 84 *Liberal Agent*, 42 (Oct. 1905), p. 61.
- 85 SCALA, minute book, 30 Dec. 1910 (annual meeting).
- 86 *Manchester Evening News*, 10 Sep. 1904.
- 87 *Evening News*, 4 Oct. 1910.
- 88 *Daily Mirror*, 8 Jan. 1910.
- 89 *Globe*, 8 Sept. 1913.
- 90 *Liberal Agent*, 76 (Apr. 1914), p. 221; SCALA, minute book, 2 Apr. 1914 (examining board).
- 91 *Liberal Agent*, 94 (Oct. 1918), pp. 1–4.
- 92 *Census of England and Wales 1921: occupation tables* (1924), p. 18.