

Catherine Ellis Williamson (née Goodbody) 1896-1977



Catherine Ellis Williamson came from a long established Quaker family in Clara, Ireland. Her father worked as a solicitor and land agent, while her grandfather had been one of the founders of a successful jute-sack business. The firm lasted until the 1970s and at its height employed some 500 people. Catherine was born on 1 May 1896, and was mostly educated at home but completed her final two years of schooling at Cheltenham Ladies College. After leaving school she studied the cello in Paris. Then during WW1, while her fiancé was fighting at the front, she worked at St Dunstan's Hospital in London teaching blinded soldiers Braille and Typing. Her fiancé was killed in 1918. In the years that followed she married his close friend Stephen Williamson in 1921. Stephen had also fought in WW1. He was a recipient of the Military Cross. They settled in Canterbury and had 3 children in the 1920s (Elizabeth 1923, Stephen 1926 and John 1929).

Public Life and Civic Service

Following the death of Stephen's parents, Catherine and Stephen gifted [Tower House and Westgate Gardens](#) to the City of Canterbury in 1936. This act is widely remembered for its generosity and recognised in the memorial tablets adjacent to Tower House and by a "Blue Plaque" in the Westgate Gardens which is currently used as the Lord Mayor's Parlour and prominent public gardens.



[Mayor Charles Le Fevre](#), Mrs Lefevre, Catherine and Stephen Williamson at the Tower House and Westgate Gardens presentation ceremony in 1936

In 1935 Catherine entered politics and became an Independent councillor (Westgate Ward) influenced (see her book 'Come Along With Me') by an early lady councillor and the first to be Sheriff of Canterbury Mrs Lucy Green Wells – wife of a tailor, Arthur Wells, d1925 who had an outfitter's shop at Cogan House, St Peters – who became a councillor as an Independent (Womens Citizen Association) in 1919.

Catherine took a particular interest in mental health. She was Deputy Mayor in 1936 and 1937, then Mayor of Canterbury in 1938 and 1939.

Her mayoral leadership was during the tense period leading up to WW2 and earned her considerable respect. She was criticised for excessive spending. She was frequently quoted in the national and local press, including one under a dramatic headline in which she denied rumours that German forces had landed.

During the blitz she suffered shell shock when 3 50lb bombs landed about 12yds away from her near Holy Cross Church on 4th September 1940 following a Spitfire/Messerschmidt aerial dogfight.



COUNCILLOR CATHERINE E. WILLIAMSON, J.P.
Mayor of Canterbury, 1938-39 and 1939-40

As a result, Catherine stood down as mayor and she took the children to Minehead in Somerset to get away from the blitz, remaining there for nearly two years. She continued her public service in Somerset, working at the Citizens' Advice Bureau in Dunster and later establishing the Taunton branch. She returned to Canterbury Council in May 1942 just before the Baedeker raid on Canterbury in late May 1942. Canterbury had been targeted for its cultural value as part of a demoralisation campaign.

After WW2 she published '*Though the Streets Burn*', her account of Canterbury during the Blitz, with a preface written by Dr Hewlett Johnson, the "Red Dean" of Canterbury, a close friend who was also related by marriage (her aunt married the brother of his first wife).



Political Career

Catherine attended meetings of the 1941 Committee in the West Country. This political party subsequently morphed into the Commonwealth Party, and she stood as a Commonwealth Party candidate for Ashford on 10th February 1943 the first by-election fought by the new party formed in July 1942 by Richard Acland, a sitting Liberal MP for Barnstaple, finishing second with 4192 votes. She later stood unsuccessfully for Canterbury in 1945 for the Commonwealth Party (election campaign picture) and for Labour in East Grinstead (1950) and Hastings (1951). In 1945 she and her husband both stood as Labour Candidates for Northgate Ward but were beaten by Citizens' Defence Association candidates.

Travels, Writing and Later Life

Catherine's friendship with the Dean, Dr Hewlett Johnson, opened doors internationally, particularly in China before and during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1947 she travelled regularly all over the world, including East Germany determined to witness rebuilding efforts first hand. Over the following decades she travelled widely, especially to China, and in the 1960s she lectured extensively, particularly at universities, about her experiences. She wrote several more books (*Crimson Dawn*, *Come Along With Me*, and *Death and its Aftermath*).

During one visit to China she met Zhou Enlai (who was the first Premier of the People's Republic of China).

All this while she remained actively involved in the family's business at St Mildred's [Tannery](#) on Stour Street. From 1948 to 1958 she served as sales manager, and took a hands on role in managing the splitting shop and sorting hides.

Catherine was an early advocate for workplace equality; soon after the war she introduced equal pay for women at the Tannery and pay for workers' clean-up time after a shift. She would be in the Tannery by 7.30am, and continued working into the 1970's, well past normal retirement age.

Catherine Williamson lived to 80 and died in Nunnery Fields Hospital in Canterbury on 25 April 1977.