

Gladys Irene Howard (1916-2017)

A Portsmouth Police Pioneer

By CLIFFORD WILLIAMS

Gladys Howard was a remarkable lady, who lived a full life devoted to public service. Gladys was the first woman Sergeant and Inspector in the Portsmouth City Police. She later became Lord Mayor of Portsmouth. She lived all her life, including the war years, in Portsmouth.

After leaving school in 1933 at 16 with her school certificate and credits for art, arithmetic and geography, Gladys went to work for Timothy White's, first as a clerk and then as a comptometer operator. Around 1936 the firm was taken over by Taylors of Leeds, and expansion followed. A comptometer was a small calculating machine used for all accounts and stock books.

During World War Two the offices were bombed and Gladys lost her job, so she went to the Labour Exchange. She was told, "Either you work in the dockyard or join the Services." She wanted to join the Services, but because she was looking after her parents she could not leave them. Phyllis, Gladys's younger sister, was away working in munitions. So Gladys went to work in the Dockyard; in accounts, as a temporary non-industrial civil service.

The work in the Dockyard went on despite bombing raids. Gladys

was based in an office next to HMS *Victory*. When raids were on, the staff went to the basement and knitted and chatted, with the noise of the raid and ack-ack guns all around them.

When not at work, Gladys also helped provide refreshments at a club for Service personnel in St Vincent Street, which ran alongside the Southdown bus station just south of the Guildhall. On the night of one big German raid (January 10th 1941), Gladys and others were nearly cooked alive inside the burning Services Club and had to run for their lives through flying shrapnel and fire.

Gladys passed the Civil Service Exam (coming 28th in the whole country), but she did not enjoy the work. Gladys was a little bored after six years working in the Civil Service so decided to apply for the police service when she saw an advertisement for policewomen. Portsmouth had a Women Auxiliary Police Corps during WW2, but no regular women constables until 1947.

After a written examination and an interview with the Chief Constable, Arthur West, Gladys became the first post-war woman to be accepted.

However, as she had to give one month's notice on her civil service employment, Mabel Fitcher (later

Warren) and Betty Chatfield (later Milton) went before her to the police training centre at Ryton, near Coventry. Gladys followed and describes her days at Ryton as some of the happiest of her life. One of her course colleagues was the only policewoman in Rutland, Nora Mowbray. In April 1948, having finished at Ryton, Gladys reported for duty as WPC 4 Howard at Portsmouth Police Headquarters, Byculla House.

Gladys's first posting was to 'A' Division, Central Police Station in St. Michael's Road, in the old vicarage next to the derelict St. Michael's Church. In 1948 she attended a detective training course in Wakefield.

Gladys kept all her notes from the courses she attended, as well as her pocket books and reports on Women Police.

After about a year in the police service she brought a girl into the station for care and protection. This was previously unheard of to the City Police, so Gladys introduced the practice to them. She often worked with the NSPCC. If they wanted to remove a child for care and protection they got Gladys to do it. Once she went to a house to remove a girl and the mother would not let her go. Gladys said she would stay there until



Gladys at Ryton 1947

she did; she sat there all Saturday afternoon and evening before the mother relented.

Gladys often took children who did not have much money to the Police Christmas parties. They were held at Kimbells. Child welfare was always at the forefront of Gladys's public service.

Gladys kept her own little notebook of known women criminals frequenting the city. One of the entries is marked 'Deceased victim

of Christie'; Kathleen Maloney, a prostitute operating in Hampshire and a victim of the killer John Christie in 1953.

Gladys was promoted to Sergeant in December 1952 and to Inspector in September 1963, becoming the first woman in those two ranks in the City force.

In a newspaper feature in *The Portsmouth Evening News* of 12th September 1963 Gladys said, 'When I decided to join I hoped that I had

chosen an interesting and unusual career and I certainly have not been disappointed.' She added that the qualities she felt essential for a young woman hoping to make a career as a policewoman were a good memory, initiative, tact, and the ability to cope with all sorts of situations.

Gladys was an active member of the Portsmouth Women's Business and Professional Club, and also the Soroptimists.

In 1970 she was sent over to the Isle of Wight to police the massive music Festival there. On one occasion she went to get some refreshments in the restaurant where the police had been given a room upstairs to themselves. She noticed a large group of scruffy hippies in the police area and went to complain to the management. However, just before she did so she recognised one of the hippies as a police officer! These were the undercover hippies.

Retirement (compulsory because of age) from the police came in 1976. Gladys, then in Hampshire Constabulary, was very sad to leave and cried when she went to hand in her uniform. But immediately she got into serving the public as a City



Gladys took children in need to the Police Christmas parties



Gladys as Sergeant in a publicity shot circa 1962

councillor, winning a by-election in Kingston (later called Milton) Ward.

Gladys remarked, 'Had I known how demanding this job would be, I would never have agreed to it'. But she did, and went on to serve as a Councillor for 13 years. She was Lady Mayoress in 1986-87, and in 1989 Lord Mayor of Portsmouth. In 1990 Gladys was appointed an Honorary Alderman of the City.

Gladys attended NARPO (National Association of Retired Police Officers) meetings right to the end. In December 2016 she was guest of honour at their Christmas Lunch. The day before she had celebrated her 100th birthday and received a card from the Queen.

An American friend, Ellen Smith, helped Gladys record her memoirs when she was in her early 80s. Whilst researching my book on women's police history (*A History of Women Policing Hampshire and the Isle of Wight 1915-2016*, ISBN 9780956850812) I got to meet Gladys on a number of occasions and discovered the rich archive of material she had kept.

After her death I was given the job of sorting through several boxes of old files, notebooks, newspaper cutting and photographs.

I was pleased when Adam Wood of Mango Books agreed to publish the memoirs Gladys had written. Her book, *Never a Dull Moment*, will be published this autumn. I can guarantee you will enjoy it.



CLIFFORD WILLIAMS is a retired police officer and now a volunteer historian for Hampshire Constabulary. Clifford studied History and Anthropology at the University of London, Criminology at the University of Cambridge and has a PhD from the University of Bradford. He is author of numerous articles and books. He is still researching pre-WW2 women police, as well as a number of other topics, including policing of homosexuality post war. He has been a member of the PHS for nearly 30 years.