

Dr Ruth Bensusan-Butt, MD: Social Pioneer

The Minories was bought by the Victor Batte Lay Trust (Now the Victor Batte Lay Foundation) in 1956 from Dr Ruth Bensusan-Butt, who continued to live in a ground floor flat there until her death a year later. A plaque on the front of the building commemorates her life and work, but if you're not a history buff, you may never have heard of her: That's a shame, because she was a woman worth knowing.

This article borrows heavily and gratefully from Dr Elizabeth Hall's research, and the work of Jo Edwards of the Colchester Civic Society and Suki Cohen of the Friends of the Minories. Any direct quotes are from Dr Ruth's hand typed memoirs:

Dr Ruth, or Ben, as she was affectionately known, was born in 1877 to an ostrich-feather merchant father, who was "an important member" of the local synagogue, and a mother who "did not have a look in", rather side-lined by her father's large family. She was a mischievous child who recalled being made to stand in the corner at school, having books thrown at her head by her teachers and being told off for escaping Saturday services on Fast Days to go and eat!

She first developed an interest in medicine, she recounts with some admiration, was when the family's local doctor operated on her brother's ear abscess successfully - the respected ear specialist of the day "had said there was nothing to be done". That same doctor later dealt with a fainting house maid at Dr Ruth's home, and so, she wrote, thinking very little indeed of the expectation that at 16 she be a 'daughter of the house', she enrolled herself in high school and thought, "Well, I will be a doctor!"

In recollecting her first biology lesson during her training, she notes that she had to dissect a smelly dog-fish and began to "wonder why I had taken up medicine at all", but she overcame that initial trepidation and trained at the Royal Free, qualifying in 1904 and gaining an MD in 1908. There were numerous moments where she candidly admitted she felt out of her depth, however, not least signing herself as dead on the first death certificate she completed!

She worked in Italy as a doctor to the English colony there for a while and met her husband, Geoffrey Bensusan Butt, who she referred to as "my boy", at a Fabian Society meeting in Wales in 1909 when she was working as assistant to a GP. They marched in suffragette protests in London (husbands and sympathisers walking at the back - "All men behind!"), married in Naples and honeymooned in Capri, ("glorious holiday") before returning to England.

By 1910 Geoffrey had an accountancy firm in Colchester and Dr Ruth set up her medical practice first on North Hill, and then in 1915 at The Minories. The front part of the house was her consulting rooms, and she also established a nursery there. As a woman doctor, there was opposition, but Dr Ruth took it in her stride. She was sacked as a school doctor when she fell pregnant and only two of the local doctors she had visited to introduce herself returned her call. One doctor's wife told her that her husband was shocked that she treated male patients. Her reply was typically direct: 'Tell your husband that if he gives up his women patients, I will give up my men.'

Dr Ruth's life in Colchester was full of firsts - as well as the town's first female doctor, she was also the first woman to own and drive a car and the first to be invited to the Oyster Feast. She was truly formidable - never afraid to tackle injustices where she saw them, or make things happen when she identified a need - whether it was haranguing slum landlords until they undertook repairs, opening social clubs for veterans, establishing antenatal classes, fighting with matrons to give sick children fruit instead of purgatives or sending them off for surgery when she felt they weren't being properly attended to. She was also elected to Council,

becoming an Alderman in 1935, instrumental in establishing the Maternity Hospital in Colchester, was governor of three schools, set up the Inner Wheel of the Rotary Club of Colchester, begun by Geoffrey in 1922, the Colchester Professional Women's Club and was President of the Colchester Medical Society.

Dr Ruth had three children, returning to work within two weeks each time. Because she was always so busy the children found the only way to get her attention was to help her in the evenings to make up medicines in the dispensary. Her son, John (a respected artist – we have some of his work in our collection) described her as a bit rough and ready with patients. Once she was overheard saying, 'Oh go away, you silly old woman' rather loudly. Her partner came in, seeing her bundling someone out of the door. 'You can't speak to patients like that!', she cried. 'Oh yes I can', Dr Ruth said, 'She is as deaf as a post.'

Jo Edwards, who was Dr Ruth's neighbour as a child, remembers her as marvellously kind to local children, although her own grandchildren were mildly terrified of her! Jo has cherished memories of helping her plant a miniature garden in a stone sink in the gardens of the Minorities, of which she was very fond.

Dr Ruth retired three years before her 80th birthday, saying 'I would rather wear out than rust out'. Her obituary in the Essex County Standard was fitting: 'A pioneer who wrote a page of Colchester history. Fought prejudice with spirit and enthusiasm, solved problems with hard work and charm. She lived in the town for 47 years and worked for it every one of them.'

Dr Ruth Bensusan Butt's ashes are scattered in the garden of the Minorities. We at the Minorities are enormously proud to count her as part of our story.