

EAW AND THE EAW SOUTH WEST

by *Peter Lamb*

In November, Women's groups are celebrating the Centenary of the Electrical Association of Women (EAW), even though it was dissolved in 1986 after 62 years of considerable success in educating women and particularly housewives in the efficient use of electrical appliances and safety issues. A Bristol gallery known as the Stradling Collection on Park Row celebrated the EAW in November with an exhibition entitled "Electricity – Emancipating Women". They borrowed appliances from our collection to show what appliances went into the EAW's All-Electric showhouse in 1935. I thought it would be appropriate to show how the South West played an important part of this story.

Many women's organisations are celebrating the Centenary of the setting up on the Electrical Association of Women (EAW) in 1924, even though it was dissolved in 1986. That may be surprising to some people, but the main reason it seems is that the EAW heralded a means of liberating women from household chores. The main thrust of the new group was to show women how to use electrical household appliances to their considerable advantage.



Fig.1 The EAW Logo

The EAW developed in 1924 from a proposal by electrical engineer, Mabel Lucy Matthews, and taken up by Lady Katherine Parsons, wife of the inventor Sir Charles Parson. The first meeting to develop the organisation, which at this time was initially called the Women's

Electrical Association, was held on 12 November 1924 at 1 Upper Brook Street, the home of Lady Katherine Parsons. Attendees were leading figures in the world of engineering and women's organisations, including Sir Charles Parsons, Lord Headley, Sir Alfred Yarrow, Mr. FS Button, Mr. J Beauchamp (Director of the EDA), Mr. B Llewelyn Atkinson (Cable Makers Association) Margaret Partridge (WES member, electrical engineer and company director), Miss TJ Dillon and Miss Hilda Shaw from the world of domestic science, Miss BJ Lanfear of the incorporated municipal association. What a massive gathering with representatives from the Girl Guides, the Women's Co-operative Guild, the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, the Headmistresses' Association; the National Union of Women Teachers, the National Council of Women and the National Women Citizen's Association.

Beatrice Irwin "gave a delightful picture of the American Labour-saving home" as part of the discussion. The meeting ended with a resolution, proposed by Margaret Partridge and agreed unanimously to form a Women's Electrical Association and the name was soon changed to the Electrical Association for Women to avoid confusion with the acronym of the Workers' Educational Association.



Fig.2 Dame Caroline Haslett

The first Director was Caroline Haslett, and its patron was Lady Astor, MP for Plymouth Sutton. Members of the central committee were Laura Annie Wilson, Margaret Moir, Lady Katherine Parsons, Eleanor Shelley-Rolls, Anette Ashberry and Margaret Partridge. Their Headquarters were established at 25 Foubert's Place, London W1 and a logo was designed of the EAW with a flaming torch between.

Branches were established in Glasgow and Birmingham in 1925. In 1926 the Manchester and Cheltenham branches were founded followed by South Wales and Monmouthshire and the North East Coast branches in 1927. 1928 saw branches formed in Ashford; Leeds and West Riding; North Wales; Rugby and Hampshire. Branches were formed in Swansea; Gloucester; North Staffordshire; Bristol; East Devon; Hartlepool; Edinburgh and Plymouth in 1929, followed in 1930 by branches in Bradford and Torquay. It is surprising how the central committee managed to get some many branches up and running so quickly. They must have written to the main electricity supply undertakings in the large towns and cities, since so many of the women who heeded the call were wives of electrical engineers. There were 100 EAW branches by 1949, with a national membership of 10,000. By 1960 there were 202, and 262 in 1971 of which 21 were in the South West!

My mother, Mrs. Tessa Lamb as wife of the City of Plymouth's Electricity Department's Consumers Engineer, took over as Secretary of the Plymouth branch, with the President being the current MP for Plymouth Sutton, Lady Aster, who also was involved nationally as mentioned before. I met the grand lady at the mere age of five, being asked to present her with a bunch of flowers!!



Fig.3 Lady Aster at Plymouth's EAW Meeting with the author, age 5, having presented her ladyship with flowers.

There were two main thrusts of their mission:

1. Educate women in electrical knowledge and
2. Emancipation from drudgery of women's chores in the home by using electrical appliances.

Immediately educational pamphlets and leaflets were devised and distributed around the country. Not content with that, a manual was produced in 1934 "The Electrical Handbook for Women". It is an amazingly detailed book describing electricity and the formulae associated with watts, amps and volts. It describes electrical installations and all the appliances then available, and how to use them. Again, much later in the 1950's after nationalisation of the electricity supply industry, they issued a soft-backed booklet "Electricity for Everyday Living". It covers the same territory but definitely more precise and to a certain extent matching the electricity boards shops change from Showrooms to Service Centres. The booklet states "Published by EAW (Publications) Ltd."; a big step in the publishing business!

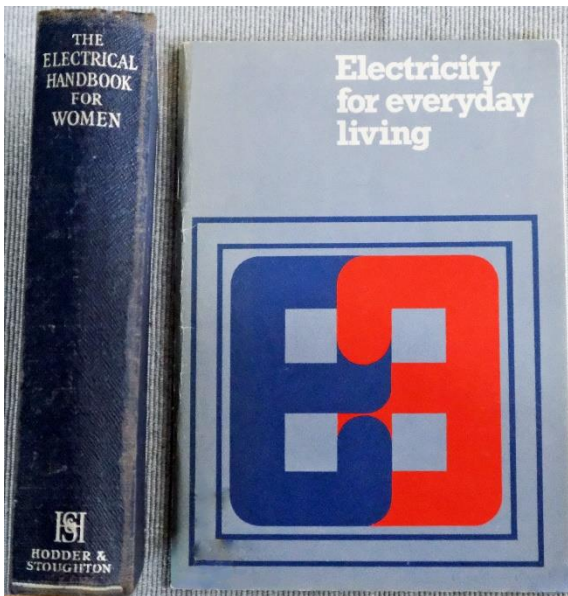


Fig.4 The Two EAW Book & Booklet

The EAW published recipe books, ran courses on Electricity for Everyday Living and developed an Electrical Housecraft Certificate and diploma course. They created informational films to help educate women in how electricity could relieve their domestic drudgery. They held annual conferences and Summer Schools of Electrical Housecraft. The EAW showcased the great possibilities of domestic electricity at large public events, including the international Empire Exhibition in Glasgow held between May and December 1938.

Most of the electrical undertakings had demonstrators and the EAW branches were encouraged to visit these demonstrations, which mainly were cooking demonstrations, but also included other ideas.



Fig.5 Plymouth EAW watching a Cooking Demonstration in the 1930's.

Another important part of their motivation to educate the housewives in electrical knowledge was their involvement in the All-Electric Houses throughout the UK. To do this they needed the help of both the electricity undertakings but also then The British Electrical Development Association Inc., abbreviated generally as (EDA). This was a national body, set up and financed by the Electricity Supply Industry (ESI) in order to enable standard national advertising throughout the land. They advertised in local newspapers, national newspapers and magazines, but of course they had money and the EAW were very short of finances. In 1931 this problem caused a considerable rift between the two bodies, the EDA had already promoted All-Electric Houses at Milehouse, Plymouth and at Taunton and was irritated by the EAW wanting to do the same. With the advent of the electricity supply undertakings giving annual sums to their local EAW groups, eventually an agreement was reached for the two bodies to work together,



Fig.6 Advertising the All-Electric House in Plymouth with both Electrical Engineers and EAW members present.

All-Electric Houses were then established as joint efforts. Bristol was pre-eminent in getting so many, firstly in 1931 at 70 Kings Drive, Bishopston and four terrace houses in Oakwood Road, Henleaze, but with the Bishopston house a massive list of every conceivable electrical household appliance was listed in the local paper.

However, the most ambitious was the Art Deco house at 26 Withey Close East, Westbury-on-Trym. The house was opened to the public in October 1935. It had been commissioned by the EAW, a local Architect, Adrian Powell was chosen with the interior designed by Crofton Gane of PE Gane Ltd. It was designed as a major change for women without the need of maids and cooks, but for the householder to do the domestic tasks with the considerable assistance of electrical household appliances. Another person involved in the interior design was the Chairman of the Bristol branch, Mrs. Dorothy Newman, wife of the BCED's Chief Engineer, who was involved in the choice of appliances as you will see later. The aim was to apply modern principles of scientific management in the home to free women from domestic drudgery, so they might enjoy both increased leisure and a fuller participation in public life.



Fig.7 The All-Electric House, Bristol

A slogan was adopted "It is not a dream, it is a reality of the present". Their publicity must have been good, because it is reported that more than 20,000 people visited the house during its first month of public opening. This house obviously made a big stir nationally as it appears in so many internet histories of the EAW. I think the Art Deco design with a flat roof helped in its publicity, but the layout of interior was exceptionally modern to the

extreme. The close connection with BCED will be realised when you know that the cooker, water heaters and wash boiler were all hired! The other appliances were 6 – inset fires, 3 – directional fires, 12- tubular heaters, 3- electric clocks and a heated airing cupboard, 1 heated towel rail, 1- two cubic foot refrigerator, , a tubular heater under the desk, a fan-ventilated drying area, and a small electrical incinerator for getting rid of unwanted paperwork.

Mrs. Dorothy Newman became quite well-known for her involvement in the design of the interior of the house and went on to join the National Committee.



Fig. 8 Mr and Mrs Newman pictured at a Luncheon. Mrs Newman is 1st left & Mr Newman is 6th left.

Other branches wanted to emulate Bristol and asked builders to design and build similar properties in their areas such as Kent, London and Northampton. However, these never materialised due the high costs involved, telling the EAW branches that smaller more affordable houses for normal middle-class families would be more appropriate.

When the war came in 1939, the EAW proceeded to take an active part when rationing was brought in. They issued recipes and pamphlets to persuade housewives to be more economical. Their 1943 issue of their Journal "The Electrical Age" contained the same type of information with sketches of a character called "Margaret", who showed how to reuse used clothes for adults and children; A far cry from their normal publicity, but of course they were trying to help the war effort!

Caroline Haslett had been awarded a CBE in 1931, but in 1947, an important year for her, not only was she honoured by being created a Dame but also was invited to join the board of the new nationalised electricity supply industry, the British Electricity Authority (BEA). She was the first woman to be so honoured in that way. The BEA were so delighted that they named a ship after her, a collier from their then fleet of colliers. Caroline retired as Director of the EAW in the 1950's, but her retirement didn't last long, dying in 1957. The new Director was Mary George who took over for the next 20 years.



Fig.9 Mary George, second Director

In the 1930's the EAW established the EAW Certificate and Diploma for young women in home economics and were taken up by demonstrators and teachers. It conducted twice yearly examinations. In the South West these were held at Exeter. Caroline Haslett was not to be forgotten however it is believed that the BEA set-up a Caroline Haslett Memorial Trust which started setting examinations to award bursaries for university places to study engineering, science or mathematics. Many of these awards were in the South West with women being employed by electrical firms in Bristol and working for SWEB.

In the 1950s and 60s, the EAW produced series of tea towels, pinnies and dusters to inform women about electrical safety. In the 1960's and 70's it is reported that at their HQ they had a Test Kitchen where electrical appliances were tested in conjunction with a technical committee of the British Standards Institute (BSI). Right up to the end, they continued publishing pamphlets and tea towels with safety messages on them.



Fig.10 An EAW Tea Towel describing which fuse to use for each appliance in a fused plug.

According to Mary George, the South West has always played an important part in the national affairs of the EAW. providing two national Chairmen, Miss Pugh from Torquay and Mrs Davidson from Bristol. Also SWEB had been very helpful in giving them space within their displays at the county shows. However throughout their 62 years the EAW has been applauded most for the one All-Electric House in Bristol in 1935, but unfortunately this was too costly to replicate elsewhere.