



Harriet in 1907

HARRIET SHAW WEAVER
1876 - 1961
Suffragist and 'Extraordinary Woman'

Harriet Shaw Weaver, born in Frodsham in 1876, was the granddaughter of Edward Abbott Wright of Castle Park. In her time, she was both an important literary figure and a staunch supporter of women's rights. Although Harriet was brought up in a wealthy family, she nevertheless became an active supporter of the women's suffrage movement and eventually a member of the Communist Party. Amongst her literary circle were James Joyce, T. S. Eliot (who dedicated *Selected Letters* to her), Wyndham Lewis, Richard Aldington and Jean Cocteau.

In 2011, Jamie Bruce Lockhart, a great nephew of Harriet Shaw Weaver, contacted Frodsham and District History Society for information on the family's connections with Frodsham. His subsequent correspondence with the History Society's archivist, Kath Hewitt, has provided fascinating insight into the family in which Harriet grew up and much of the information given here has resulted from this correspondence. In his book relating the story of his Cheshire relatives, Jamie fondly refers to Harriet as 'Aunt Hat'.

Early days

Harriet Shaw Weaver was born at East Bank (now Fraser House), Bridge Lane, Frodsham on 1 September 1876. Her parents were Dr Frederick Poynton Weaver, and Edward Abbott Wright's daughter, Mary Berry Wright. The Wrights had lived at Castle Park since 1861. Dr Weaver purchased East Bank in 1869 with its garden and a piece of land between the road and the railway on the opposite side of the road,

plus a further piece of land beyond the railway. Harriet was the sixth of eight children and was baptised at St Laurence Church on 20 October 1876. The family were strict and regular churchgoers. On Sundays the children were only allowed to play suitable 'Sunday' games and to read 'Sunday' books. Harriet and her siblings were clearly very astute. Even as children, they ran their own small enterprise at home at East Bank, forming the 'East Bank Chicken Company', keeping chickens and selling eggs and hens to their mother. Harriet looked after the money and distributed the profits to her brothers and sisters.



**Harriet, Harold and Maude Weaver
'The East Bank Chicken Company'**

(image FD01192 courtesy of cheshireimagebank.co.uk)

While their grandfather was generous in contributing to the education of Harriet's four brothers, he did not support the education of the four girls. The girls were taught by a governess, Marion Spooner, who held liberal views, and who no doubt influenced Harriet as she grew up.

When Edward Abbott Wright died in 1891, Harriet's mother received a very handsome legacy. This allowed the family to buy a house in London (Cedar Lawn in Hampstead), to which they moved in 1892. Dr Weaver and his wife were apparently concerned that the religious practice at St Laurence had moved too far towards the 'High Church' for their liking. In Hampstead they found Christ Church much more to their taste. Harriet's governess, Marion Spooner, and some of the housemaids from East Bank moved with them to London.

Harriet's formal education came to an end when she was 18, in 1894. The family did not believe in university education for girls. Harriet, they thought, did not need to earn a living, so a university education would be a waste. It's a sad reflection on Victorian values where women and education were concerned. However, Harriet was an avid reader, and continued to read widely. Her choices were largely books about politics or economics - as her later activism was to show.



4 A house party at Ballater, about 1897. Harriet is standing between her father and Harold and behind Annie and her mother, who has Maude beside her, on the rug. Alfred is standing on the right behind Mary

House party in Ballater, 1897

Harriet is standing second from the left at the back
(image FDN1896, courtesy of cheshireimagebank.co.uk)

Politics and Literature

Denied the opportunity to continue her education, Harriet became involved in social work. After three years with the Children's Country Holiday Fund based in Bermondsey, she moved on to the Invalid Children's Aid Association in Wapping where she stayed until 1905. Eventually she was able to take a course at the London School of Economics in social relations. Harriet's views became increasingly left wing and by 1911 she was a subscriber to 'The Free Woman', edited by suffragettes Dora Marsden and Mary Gawthorpe. The magazine was notorious for its views on feminism and free love. When the journal ran into financial difficulties in 1912, Harriet rescued it and under her sponsorship it became 'The New Free Woman' in 1913. Its editor was the American poet Ezra Pound. Later in 1913, the paper was renamed and became 'The Egoist'. One of its early contributors was James Joyce, at that time struggling to find a publisher for his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Harriet, in her generosity, founded the Egoist Press to publish it. This was not without difficulty, since many printers refused to print such a radical book, so it was Harriet again who arranged for it to be printed in Holland. For almost 30 years, Harriet continued to support Joyce and his family, possibly to the tune of £40,000 of her own money, inherited from her grandfather and her parents, both of whom died before the outbreak of the First World War.

Harriet's views estranged her from her family, though she remained loyal and affectionate towards them throughout her life. Her sister Maude married Revd (later Bishop) Campbell Hone who objected most strongly to her connections with Dora Marsden and the suffragettes, to her atheist views and to her financial support for avant-garde literature.

In 1931 Harriet joined the Labour Party, but found Ramsay MacDonald 'disappointing' as a leader, so became a member of the Communist Party in 1938. Like many in her day, she retained her membership of the Labour Party, but kept her membership of the Communist Party secret. The Spanish Civil War of 1936 and the 'Arms for Spain' appeal had given Harriet another cause to espouse and she could be found marching through London in its support. On Saturdays she sold copies of the Communist 'Daily Worker'. Eventually, her ties with the Labour Party were stretched to breaking point by its support for the British Government's policies during the Munich Crisis. When war broke out in 1939 Harriet volunteered as an Air Raid Warden. Her home in Marylebone was threatened by a fire in the flat above during the Blitz on London and she chose at that point to move to the relative safety of Oxford. Here she and her fellow communists became supporters of the Russian people who were suffering as a result of the German attack on Soviet Russia in 1941. She contributed funds to help the financially strained 'Daily Worker' and delivered copies to party members in Oxford. At the end of the war, she gave £500 to the paper in memory of those who had died for peace and the socialist cause.

Harriet was known as 'Comrade Josephine' in communist circles and campaigned for the party at the general election of 1945. She was greatly disappointed that, in the end, the party had polled only 494 of the 58,711 votes cast.

In the post-war years, Harriet continued to deal with the manuscripts and letters of James Joyce and was acclaimed by the literary world at a commemorative dinner in 1957 for her contribution to Joyce's work.

Harriet's health wavered following a heart attack in 1956, by which time she had decided to move to Norfolk to live with her brother Alfred's widow, Muriel Weaver. Despite her move, she stayed in touch with the Oxford branch of the Communist Party. Her nieces and nephews were frequent visitors, as were James Joyce scholars. A fall in 1959 further affected her heart condition, but she carried on gardening, visiting friends and relatives until mid-October 1961 when her condition became serious. She died in her sleep on 14 October.

Harriet's legacy

Harriet's views could not have been more different from those of her family, but she loved them nonetheless, and they her. A lady of quiet determination, she remained faithful to her own principles throughout her life.

She had financed avant-garde literature and campaigned for women's rights without becoming involved in the most extreme forms of suffragette activity. In February 1918, the passage of the Representation of the People Act gave the vote to women over 30 with property worth an annual rateable value of £5.00. In November of that year, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act enabled women over 21 to stand for election. Ten years later, in 1928, full representation of all women over 21 became law.

Through literary channels, Harriet Shaw Weaver had supported left wing causes. She had made a major contribution to the development of English literature through her support for and association with Joyce, Pound and Eliot, whose writings were to shape English prose and verse in the first half of the twentieth century.

We are fortunate to be able to recognise her importance in literary and political movements of the first half of the twentieth century and to celebrate her connections with this area.

Postscript

As for the Weaver family's connections with Castle Park, Harriet's unmarried aunts, sisters to her mother, Mary Berry Wright, were Harriet Elizabeth and Emily Priscilla Wright. They remained at Castle Park after Edward Abbott Wright's death in 1891. Harriet visited them on a number of occasions, though she found the house ill-lit and uncomfortable for her work. Emily died in early 1923 and Harriet in 1931. Since none of the surviving family members wanted to live in Frodsham, Castle Park was given to the Rural District Council of Runcorn and has been owned by its successor local authorities ever since. The gardens are a popular place to walk and play for local families and a flourishing Arts Centre is housed in what were originally the stables. Harriet would no doubt have heartily approved of the use of a once private home for public enjoyment.

Acknowledgements and reference

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