

Who was Ipswich's trailblazing first female priest?

Danielle Lett finds out about the life and times of a true pioneer

When I met the Rev Sophie Cowan last month, to find out more about her life as a woman in the clergy, I was fascinated.

I'm not religious at all, but it's always great to see women breaking down barriers and smashing glass ceilings, in all walks of life.

I wanted to find out who came before her. Were there any other trailblazers in local churches?

And that's when I remembered. During a visit to Unitarian Meeting House in Ipswich at the end of 2022 with the Rev Cliff Reed, I couldn't help but notice, on a gallery wall, a woman nestled in amongst the sea of men.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"That was Reverend Winifred Elsie May Brown," replied Cliff.

Not only was Winifred the first female church minister of the Unitarian Meeting House, she was also the first female church minister in all of Ipswich.

I knew I had to find out more about her and her life, so I set out to see what I could uncover. And thankfully both Rev. Cliff Reed (who served as minister for 36 years before retiring in 2012), and Agnes Hallander, a member of the Ipswich Women's History Group were a great help.

But before getting onto Winifred, it's important to give a bit of context about who the Unitarians are, and their history here in Suffolk's county town.

The Unitarians are a liberal religious movement, and originated in the Protestant Reform of the 16th century. "Unitarians departed from the orthodox line after a group of people studied the bible for themselves and came to the conclusion that some of the doctrines of the church were not supported by scripture," explains Cliff.

"And one of those doctrines in which they found to be unscriptural was the doctrine of the trinity and the idea that God is three-in-one - and that's where 'unitarian' comes from. As Unitarianism developed throughout the years, the idea was that each person came to faith in their own way, and their particular beliefs might differ as everyone has a different experience of life and the divine."

So essentially, more liberal and



progressive than some of their more orthodox counterparts.

In 1699, Unitarian Meeting House was established. "John Bantoft, a local mercer, purchased the land for £150. When all formalities were signed off, his sister Elizabeth Bantoft completed this task, as his executor. Many influential local residents belonged to the congregation, and some of young women of the congregation were Judith Hayle's pupils," explains Agnes.

Shortly after its construction, Reverend John Fairfax gave the church's first sermon on April 26, 1700 (that very sermon can be found framed in the back room of the meeting house).

Fast forward to the early 20th century though, and one woman felt ready to deliver her own sermon to the congregation.

Winifred Elsie May Brown was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, in 1919, and was an only child.

She was a graduate of Somerville College, Oxford, where she successfully obtained a BA in 1940, followed by an MA in 1944. She also completed ministerial training at Manchester College, Oxford, between 1940 and 1943. And that same year, she applied for the vacant post and was appointed minister of the

Unitarian Meeting House, Ipswich.

"With that appointment she became the first woman church minister in Ipswich," explains Agnes.

"At that time most churches and congregations only allowed male ministers, and Rev. Brown was the 19th female Unitarian minister in the country. She told me that it was its 'lack of dogma' which attracted her to its religious principles.

Things however didn't come without their troubles, though.

"She joined a congregation which had experienced dissension between its members. Of her two predecessors, one was an active and outspoken socialist and the other a vocal pacifist. After the Second World War broke out, he was effectively dismissed by the trustees. A number of members resigned in protest, as 'one of the Unitarian principles is tolerance towards others'."

Just 24 at the time of her appointment, Winifred was faced with the difficult task of unifying a heated and divided congregation.

"The congregation was split and depleted," explains Cliff.

"Winifred, young and in her first ministry, inherited a dysfunctional congregation that didn't look like it had much future."

While not much is known about her time as church minister, she was there for three years, so one may surmise she perhaps brought the church together in some capacity?

Unfortunately not, as Cliff explains: "The experience meant that Winifred never took another pulpit and left the ministry. I base this on what one old member, now long dead, told me about forty years ago, and in a letter which Winifred sent to me on the occasion of our Meeting House's tercentenary in 2000. You will gather that in spite of the situation that Winifred found at Ipswich, the Meeting House survived."

"Her own words were 'it was an impossible task'," adds Agnes.

In-fighting, division, and perhaps even sexism all could've resulted in Winifred's decision to leave the Meeting House in 1946.

However, she didn't turn her back on Unitarianism.

According to Agnes, Winifred moved to the East Midlands,



ABOVE:
Inside the Unitarian Meeting House

LEFT:
The Rev Winifred Elsie May Brown

RIGHT:
The Rev Winifred Elsie May Brown's portrait in the back room of the Unitarian Meeting House

Pictures: CHARLOTTE BOND, NEWSQUEST/ IPSWICH WOMEN'S FESTIVAL GROUP





where she became an English teacher at Rawlins Grammar School in Quorn, Leicestershire (where she remained for 35 years), and was actively involved in with the Unitarians for many years.

“She joined the Unitarian Congregation in Loughborough, and took services there and at other meeting houses in the East Midlands. She was a committee member of North Midland Unitarian Association in 1956. In the same year, she applied and was accepted on the General Assembly’s Supplementary List of Ministers. She never took another Unitarian pulpit, but she remained on the General Assembly’s Directory of Ministers as late as 1971-72.”

And in 1950, she published her own book, *The Polished Shaft, Studies in the Purpose and Influence of the Christian Writer in 18th century.*

“Rev. Winifred Brown was one remarkable woman highlighted in the Ipswich Women’s History Trail, compiled by Ipswich Women’s Festival Group and first published with support by

Ipswich Borough Council. A member of the current congregation of the Unitarian Meeting House Ipswich had highlighted her to the festival group, and I undertook the task of finding information about her,” explains Agnes.

“I also had contact with the minister at the Unitarian Meeting House at the time, as well as the archivist of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. I eventually found that Miss Brown was still alive and living independently in the small Derbyshire town of Swadlincote. I spoke to her on the phone several times and she appeared pleased to learn about the interest in her and her early career. She was happy to provide details and have her photograph to be included in the trail booklet.

“However, after several falls at home, Miss Brown sustained injuries, which left her severely disabled. From hospital she moved to Nether Hall Care Home in Swadlincote. Miss Brown and I had agreed for me to visit her, if I had the opportunity to do so. I

was aware that Miss Brown had only a few friends still alive and her only regular visitors were her neighbours. I saw her in the care home, and her disability was such that she remained in her bed virtually all the time. She still had an active mind and enjoyed our chat, though. She was also a great lover of music, mainly listening to classical music.

“At the suggestion of staff at the home, I came well stocked with chocolates. Unfortunately, she even needed some assistance with unwrapping the chocolate.

“I had hoped to visit Miss Brown again, but when making telephone contact with the care home, I was told she had passed away.”

Winifred Elsie May Brown died in 2015 at the age of 96. She without a doubt lived a rich and spiritual life, and certainly paved the way for other female priests to follow in her footsteps.

Do you know any more information about Rev. Winifred Brown? If so, please get in touch with danielle.lett@newsquest.co.uk