

# Dame Mary Donaldson



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Dame Mary Donaldson, who died on Saturday [4 October 2003] aged 82, had a remarkable career in public service and was the first - and so far only - woman to become Lord Mayor of London. Her election, in 1983, as the first female Lord Mayor in the 800-year history of the office generated considerable interest in the

media. But Mary Donaldson always disclaimed the mantle of the feminist.

"Of course there are things which men can do better than women," she remarked. "But equally, women have attributes which men can never possess. Personally, I find it difficult not to become over-involved in issues concerning people, whereas a man is more likely to be detached. But perhaps a little emotion at times is no bad thing."

She called herself "Lord Mayor", disdaining to use a feminine title. Those who incorrectly referred to her as the "Lady Mayoress" were "fined" £1, paid into a collection box for the NSPCC.

As for dress, "If I were 20 years younger and considerably slimmer I might have considered wearing knee breeches like the men . . . I hope to do better than the men who wear a suit under the robes. I'll only need a bra and slip and, when it is very hot, pop socks."

Dame Mary (she was appointed GBE in 1983) took as her theme for her year's term of office "It's people that matter". Like all Lord Mayors, it was her duty to hold banquets for visiting heads of state; among those she entertained were the Emir of Bahrain and President Mitterrand. She also travelled widely, promoting British exports.

She was born Dorothy Mary Warwick at Wickham, Hampshire, on August 29 1921; her father was an ironmonger, her mother a schoolteacher who was also the first female member of her local council. Mary later recalled: "I was taught that everything had to be earned, a lesson which has always stood me in good stead."

At the age of 16 she left Portsmouth High School for Girls to spend a year in Paris teaching English; on her return to England she began training in Oxford to become a nurse. After she moved to Middlesex Hospital, London, her patients included soldiers

returning from Dunkirk and victims of the Blitz. She also cared for burned airmen at Stoke Mandeville.

Towards the end of the war she met John Donaldson, then a lieutenant-colonel serving with the Army, and later to become Master of the Rolls. They were introduced by his mother, who was being treated in Middlesex Hospital. Donaldson took Mary to the theatre, and when they married in Hampshire on his next home leave in 1945, the bride wore a borrowed wedding dress and carried a bouquet of bronze chrysanthemums.

Mary Donaldson once said that she was "never one for playing bridge and drinking coffee"; and throughout her early married life she combined bringing up her three children with voluntary work, supporting charities such as the Red Cross. In 1960 she was appointed a JP for Inner London, serving until 1965 on the Inner London Juvenile Court Panel.

It was after her children had grown up that Mary Donaldson decided that she wished to stand for election to her local authority, which in her case was the Corporation of London. When she raised the matter in the City, however, the response was not encouraging: no woman had been elected in 800 years, although there was nothing to prevent her trying. Undaunted, she stood successfully in 1966 for the ward of Farringdon Without, which embraced her home in the Temple, thus becoming the first woman to win election to the City's Court of Common Council.

In 1975 she became the first woman alderman (17 months earlier, another woman, Mrs Edwina Coven, had been elected but had then been vetoed by her fellow aldermen). Mary Donaldson went on to be the first woman Sheriff of the City of London, in 1981 and 1982, before being elected Lord Mayor in the following year. But local government was not the only arena in which Mary Donaldson chose to serve: she also had a particular interest in health and education. From 1967 to 1969 she was chairman of the Women's National Cancer Control Campaign; and she was

chairman of the Interim Licensing Authority for Human In Vitro Fertilisation and Embryology from 1985 to 1991. She was president of the British Association of Cancer United Patients (Bacup) from 1985 to 1993.

She was vice-president of the British Cancer Council in 1970; a member of the North East Metropolitan Regional Hospital Board (1970-74); of the North East Thames Regional Health Authority (1976-81); and a governor of the London Hospital from 1971 to 1974, and of Great Ormond St Hospital for Sick Children from 1978 to 1980.

She was a member of the Inner London Education Authority (1968-71) and a governor of the City of London School for Girls (1971-83), of Berkhamsted Schools (1976-80) and of Charterhouse (1980-85).

Mary Donaldson served on the committee of the Royal Humane Society (1968-83). From 1991 to 1995 she was a member of the Press Complaints Commission, and she was chairman of the Council of the Banking Ombudsman from 1985 to 1994. She was vice-president of Counsel and Care for the Elderly from 1980. She was a liveryman of the Gardeners' Company and a member of the Guild of Freemen. She was an honorary Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge.

In 1984 she was appointed Grand Officier, Ordre National du Merite.

Mary Donaldson, who enjoyed gardening, sailing and skiing, was a staunch support to her family and friends. She and Lord Donaldson were a devoted couple, and he survives her with their

son and two daughters ■