

# Dr. Elizabeth Burtt Dowell, the First Female President of the Lancaster Medical Book Club

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Elizabeth Burtt Robson (1903-1979) was born in Huddersfield in 1903. A Quaker by faith, she was a direct descendant of William Tuke, founder of the famous York Retreat Asylum in 1795. She was also a distant relative of the poet Laurence Binyon. After initial education at the Mount School in York, Elizabeth subsequently graduated from Liverpool University Medical School in 1928. Her future husband, Leslie, was also a medical student in Liverpool. She then spent an influential period working as house surgeon at the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital.

After their marriage in 1930, Elizabeth and Leslie became general practitioners at the same surgery in Bentham, Elizabeth becoming the first female GP to ever work in the area. Working as a GP in a large rural area in the 1930s came with many challenges. She carried out thousands of home deliveries; sometimes the only lighting available was from a Tilly lamp booked in advance from the Bentham pharmacy.<sup>1</sup> Leslie and Elizabeth also started a family themselves and had two sons and a daughter.

Always dedicated to the care of children, she was elected Chair of the Bentham District Nursing Association in 1939 and served on the Bentham Refugee Council during World War Two. She served as medical officer of the Bentham Child Welfare Clinic for 43 years and, with Leslie, was co-founder of the Bentham branch of the NSPCC. She served as Chair of the Settle 'Save the Children's Fund' for several years.

Alongside her husband, she took an active role in the local community and the local medical community, becoming the Lancaster Medical Book Club's first female president in 1952. She was Chair of the Lancaster division of the BMA in 1963 and also served as a parish councillor and school governor. She was a member of the Bentham Women's Institute and, in her leisure time, developed a talent in handicrafts especially making soft toys. A long-term supporter of the Bentham Agricultural Society, she became President in 1962 and later, in 1978, Chair of the Handicrafts and Domestic Section. Elizabeth's name lives on at the Bentham Agricultural Show where the Dr Elizabeth Dowell Silver Tray is awarded each year to the best performing Women's Institute in the Handicraft section.



The Dr Elizabeth Dowell Silver Tray. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Janet Greenwood

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCE

1. Obituary of Dr EB Dowell. *British Medical Journal*. 1979;2(6190):p621



Elizabeth and Leslie Dowell in their home. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Kay Piper