

Irene Barclay (1894-1989)

The first woman chartered surveyor



Photograph taken from flyleaf of *People Need Roots*, Irene Barclay, 1976, Bedford Square Press.

Irene Barclay was the first woman to qualify as a chartered surveyor, in the Valuation Division in 1922.

Born Irene Turberville Martin into a socialist family in Hereford in 1894, her father, Basil, was a non-conformist minister whose memoirs, *An Impossible Parson*, set out the philosophy of public service, faith and wry sense of fun which informed her upbringing. Barclay was the eldest of four. Her brother, Kingsley, was an occasional lecturer in politics at the LSE, a committed pacifist, and editor of *The New Statesman* from 1930-60. Barclay attended Hereford High School, which she loved, until 1911. She then boarded at Monmouth High for two years, where she was 'miserable in the extreme'. Having grown up in reasonable comfort, in 1913 the family moved to Finchley in somewhat straightened circumstances. Barclay gained a BA (Hons) in History in 1916 followed by a diploma in Social Science in 1917, both from Bedford College.

Work experience during Barclay's Social Science diploma introduced her to London's slums and to Miss Maud Jeffery, formerly secretary to Octavia Hill and now a housing manager for the Crown Estate Commissioners. Miss Jeffery ensured that Barclay became an early member of the Association of Women House Property Managers and encouraged her to study for surveying exams. So Barclay took evening classes in surveying alongside Evelyn Perry, the second woman to be admitted, and they referred, with ill-concealed mischief, to tutors' embarrassment at having women present in lectures on drainage and sanitation. She was employed throughout her training period by the Crown Office on a salary which reached £140 per year by the time she left - 'stingy' (in Barclay's word) even by contemporary measures. On qualification, Barclay spent six months with Louis de Soissons, architect of the new Welwyn Garden City, but

she soon set up in on her own account in Finsbury Square. She ran the practice, largely in partnership with Evelyn Perry, in Somers Town (the area around St Pancras, King's Cross and Euston stations), for over 50 years. Barclay's working life was spent improving London social housing and she was involved from the earliest days with the St Pancras Housing Association becoming Secretary of the Society in 1925, holding the office for 48 years. The Society's first project was to purchase and refurbish seven houses. Barclay later favoured demolition and re-development over refurbishment once the extent of damp, dry rot, poor structure and, not least, bed bug infestation, became apparent. A key feature of housing association developments managed by Barclay and Perry, distinguishing them from council programmes, was re-housing within communities, to retain community bonds, an ethos reflected in the title of her 1976 record of working and, to some extent, personal life, *People Need Roots*. Barclay and her partners also achieved some of their success through shrewd financial management, for example running an in-house workforce for general maintenance, only sub-contracting large structural programmes, even then ensuring that all materials were purchased direct.

Barclay was active in fundraising and notes giving many talks where she bridled at and countered perceptions of the slum population, which attitudes she described as 'a libellous insult to the mass of poorer working-class people'. Along with St Pancras work, Barclay's firm took on the establishment and management of other housing associations, council estate management, private professional work and some voluntary activities. She also supported tenants in their struggles with landlords and loan sharks, which led to a loan club and furniture shop. In addition, Barclay worked to provide accommodation for the elderly, nurseries, play areas, seaside holidays and a children's home in the country, her deep compassion and politics always manifest in practical measures.

In the decades of mass slum clearance, Barclay and Perry broke new ground with their surveys, commissioned both privately and by local authorities, which were unique in the extent of internal surveying and engagement with residents, as opposed to the more cursory, external surveys more usually produced by councils. This not only gained tenants' support but provided depth to discussions of housing need.

Barclay was a prolific speaker, broadcaster and writer, often for the left leaning press. And writing and speaking invitations increased considerably on the publication of the influential war-time report, *Our Towns: a Close-up*, produced in 1943 by the Women's Group on Public Welfare (of which she was a member) at the request of the National Federation of Women's Institutes when evacuation disclosed the hygiene, nutrition and behavioural standards of small

proportion of evacuees to be of concern. She also edited the annual property journal *House Happenings* for some time after the war.

Barclay expressed a lack of time in her early career and war years to keep up with professional groups: the Soroptomists, the Society of Women Housing Managers (SWHM) and, of course the Surveyors' Institution. At the end of the war, however, she became chairman of the SWHM and drove the dropping of the 'W' and the introduction of men. After the war Barclay continued to campaign for better housing and joined a number of public committees and boards, expressing the hope that she was chosen as a surveyor and not as a token women!

Unlike many career women in the first half of the twentieth century, Barclay married and had two sons, Michael and Anthony.

In 1966 Barclay was widowed and received an OBE for her work with housing associations. She retired in 1972 and died in Toronto in 1989, having moved to Canada a few years earlier to be near her younger son.

In a letter of 7th September 1925 to her old university tutor Barclay expressed sorrow '... if no more women surveyors follow on, as it really is a job in which a woman may be very useful'. In the following decades even in her own business she voiced disappointment that despite training many women housing managers, relatively few went on to qualify as surveyors. Still she would, I venture, be shocked that in 2017, 86 out of every 100 chartered surveyors are men.

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