

EDGBASTONIA

CHANGING ATTITUDES TO WOMEN

Henrietta Lockhart

In May 1881 *Edgbastonia* was delivered for the first time to the homes of the wealthy inhabitants of Edgbaston. It claimed: 'The contents will be of local interest, or local production, and [...] they shall be of a healthy moral tone, and be altogether non-political and unsectarian.' What did this suburban magazine reveal about attitudes to women?

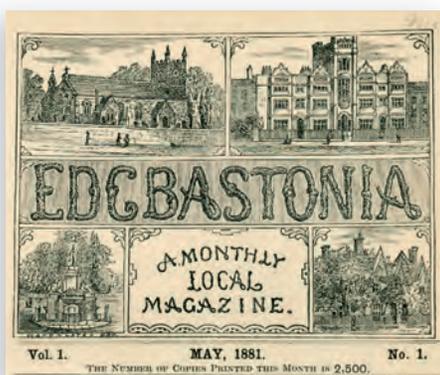
In June 1900 we find women presented in three contrasting ways. First we read a story about a secretary who wants equal pay for doing the same work as a man, and is urged by her employer's wife to be content with what she has. The secretary reflects: 'Three in the family, and she has a housekeeper, a governess, and five servants, and never gets up to breakfast, and does nothing in the world but think about her health and read the new books – and she talks about contentment to me!'

Next, we are offered a sentimental poem which laments the sufferings of mothers who lose their sons in time of war. Lastly, a feature called 'The Woman who is too well dressed' caricatures fashion-conscious women: 'Inconspicuousness is an all-important factor in proper dressing, but the woman who is too well dressed is always conspicuous.' Within this single edition, progressive and regressive attitudes sit side by side.

In a regular feature on 'Edgbastonians Past and Present', most of the few women who appear, such as Louisa Ryland, excel in philanthropy. However, Edgbaston was also home to those who broke boundaries, such as scientist and poet Constance Naden. Myra and Kate Bunce both studied at the progressive Birmingham School of Art. The intrepid traveller and diarist Helen Caddick 'explored most quarters of the globe'.

Status and Occupation

These women were exceptions: most middle-class women in this period married and centred their lives upon their families. However, the growing need for paid employment among middle-class women is reflected in *Edgbastonia* in the early years of the twentieth century, with opportunities offered for work in dressmaking.



The first issue of *Edgbastonia*.

Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham/Edgbastonia May 1881 F-AP.4.E3



Edgbastonia provided a forum to explore ideas about appropriate dress for women. A woman wearing 'rational dress', around 1900.

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There was a growing interest in working-class women. An article which raised the question: 'Why do girls choose factories rather than service?' suggested that girls from working-class homes should be invited to stay as guests with domestic servants to find out 'what a comfortable, happy life it may be'. Domestic servants lurk on the sidelines in *Edgbastonia*. In June 1881 some families were not receiving their magazine because it had been 'retained by servants'.

'Rational Dress' and the Vote

Discussions around appropriate dress for women begin to appear in 1900. A short story explores conflicting views about the merits of 'rational dress': 'Why should it be more immodest for a girl to show a stockinged leg up to the knee than to show a bare arm up to the shoulder?'

A reader picking up *Edgbastonia* in 1907 would be confronted with an advertisement for the Women's Social and Political Union. Prominent Edgbaston women including Elizabeth Cadbury and Bertha Ryland were prime movers in the fight for women's suffrage.

Around the turn of the century, we encounter a wide range of women in *Edgbastonia*; not just single ladies rightly praised for their charitable works, but working women, and radicals who challenged inequality at a political as well as a philanthropic level. This parochial publication is therefore a microcosm of the

changes in attitudes to women throughout society. ●

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Further Reading

The Suburban Birmingham website www.suburbanbirmingham.org.uk carries material by Henrietta Lockhart based on *Edgbastonia*.