



# Towards a Longer History of British Women in Engineering

**Elizabeth Bruton** and **Graeme Gooday** discuss women in engineering before, during, and after the foundation of the Women's Engineering Society in 1919.

In 2019, the UK's Women's Engineering Society (WES) will celebrate the centenary of its foundation with events and activities, including an HLF-funded Centenary Trail that commemorates WES's interwar origins. But women's involvement in engineering in Britain pre-dated the foundation of WES in June 1919 by the aristocratic Lady Katharine Parsons and the upwardly mobile Caroline Haslett. Instead, then, we draw attention to the somewhat longer but less visible history of women working in British engineering.

Patricia Fara's recent book *A Lab of One's Own: Science and Suffrage in the First World War* (2018) very effectively looked at how pre-World War I campaigns for women's votes also generated opportunities for women in science and technology during the First World War. Fara gives three brief examples of women in wartime engineering: Rachel Parsons, Hilda

Hudson, and Victoria Drummond. These women's participation undeniably helped to meet the wartime manpower shortages that temporarily overrode traditional gendered assumptions about who could serve as an engineer. Yet our story begins a whole generation before the advent of the so-called Great War.

## Pre-war Female engineers

Family and kinship were important factors enabling women's contribution to engineering in the late Victorian period, and most obviously in the exciting new terrain of electrical power and lighting. The female spouse in a number of electrical engineering couples worked in supporting the electrification of the home from the 1880s, either directly in collaboration with their male engineer partner or in some cases semi-independently. Among these electrical engineering couples, women's

work was rarely given much public credit. Important exceptions arose, however, when these partnerships wrote published books together.

For example, Alice Gordon was credited as the main author of *Decorative Electricity* (1891) in the guise of 'Mrs J. E. H. Gordon', with her husband James Edward Henry Gordon contributing a chapter on fire risks, and credited as Director of and Consulting Engineer to the Metropolitan Electric Supply Company. In this book, Alice Gordon not only established her reputation for aesthetics and domestic economy in electrical lighting, but the concluding chapter 'Some Personal Experiences' gives a rare glimpse of how an 'engineering wife' could be integrally involved in the expert management of machines, employees, and innovative practices.

Similarly, Maud Lancaster co-authored *Electric cooking, heating, cleaning, etc: being*

