

# THE FIRST WOMEN OF LAW

## 1878

Janet Wood obtains a first-class honour in the "Special Exam for Women" at Girton College, Cambridge becoming the first woman in the UK to complete the equivalent to the traditional men's law degree exam.

UCL begins to admit women to legal courses in an equal capacity to men. The first university to do so in the UK.



## 1892

Cornelia Sorabji becomes the first woman (and Indian national) to sit the BCL exam (Bachelor of Civil Law) at Oxford University. She did not receive her degree until 1919, thirty years later. Cornelia Sorabji was also the first female graduate from Bombay University.

## 1903

Bertha Cave makes an application to study at Gray's Inn, for the purpose of being called to the Bar – the first time a woman had applied with this purpose in mind. Whilst the Benchers were receptive to the application the committee that had been called to discuss the matter eventually concluded that Judges alone were responsible for the decision to admit women as students and that "males and males alone" were admissible as students.



Bertha Cave appealed the decision before the House of Lords but the Lord Chancellor was unwilling to change precedent.

In the same year, Christabel Pankhurst and Ivy Williams also applied to be admitted to Inn of law but were also rejected.



## 1919

Nancy Astor becomes the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons after being elected MP for Plymouth Sutton on 28th November 1919.

### Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 passes:

This allowed women to enter the legal profession, for women to receive their degrees from universities on completion of study, and that women could be magistrates and act on juries.

Ada Summers becomes the first female magistrate and one week after the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act is sworn in as the first female Justice of the Peace (31st December 1919).



## 1922

Ivy Williams becomes the first woman to be called to the English Bar.

Helena Normanton becomes the first woman to practise as a barrister in England. She also was the first female counsel to hear cases in the High Court of Justice.

Carrie Morrison becomes the first woman to be admitted as a solicitor in England on the 18th December. Alongside Morrison, Maud Crofts, Mary Pickup and Mary Sykes all became the first women to pass the Law Society examinations.



## 1879

The Law Society rejects Eliza Orme's application for permission to sit Solicitor qualification exams.



## 1888

Eliza Orme becomes the first woman in England to earn a law degree, at UCL. She had been practicing unofficially within Chancery Lane, London alongside Mary Richardson, a fellow UCL student, preparing paperwork for wills & settlements, mortgage transactions, conveyancing, and patent registrations

## 1893

Reina Lawrence obtains her LL.B (Bachelor of Laws) from the University of London. Again, she could not qualify as a solicitor until after 1919. She also later became the first woman councillor in London.



## 1906

Christabel Pankhurst becomes the first woman to graduate with an LLB from the Victoria University, now the University of Manchester, with first-class honours.



## 1913

Gwyneth Bebb, Maud Crofts, Karin Costelloe and Lucy Nettlefold attempt to bring legal action against the Law Society arguing women should be allowed to take their preliminary examinations and were entitled to be admitted.



Despite providing publicity for the cause and paving the way for the act in 1919, *Bebb v The Law Society* was unsuccessful as the judge ruled that women could not carry out public functions unless Parliament changed the law.

## 1920

Madge Easton Anderson is admitted as a solicitor, becoming the first woman in the UK able to practise as a professional lawyer after qualifying in Scotland.



## 1921

Frances Kyle and Averill Deverell are the first women to be called to the Irish Bar.

