

P/BEN	<p><b>Fonds</b></p> <p><b>Title:</b> <i>Diaries and scrapbook of Lydia Dorothea Benoly (1887-1969) kept while Mayor of Bethnal Green</i></p> <p><b>Extent:</b> 3 volumes</p> <p><b>Description:</b> Manuscript diary in two volumes of Lydia Dorothea Benoly kept during her term of office as Mayor of Bethnal Green. Entitled "'Often I remember" (Jottings from a mayoral note book fifty years ago)" and "Dedicated to the Worshipful The Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of the year 1983-84 in revered memory of Sir Charles and Lady Collett. 1933-34". Some pages cut out.</p> <p>The diaries include many notes about public engagements and dinners, with her observations what people were wearing and what they were like.</p> <p>Also scrapbook mainly covering the her term of office, filled with newspaper cuttings, photographs and brochures, with earlier and later items inserted.</p> <p><b>Administrative History:</b> Lydia Dorothea Benoly was born in 1887 in Clapton, Hackney. She was of Polish/German Jewish parentage. Her father Nathaniel Benoly (b.c. 1850) was born in Poland (at the time Russia). He was naturalised as a British Subject in 1883 (source: 1911 Census). A medical practitioner, he was a well-known Progressive leader in the East End. Her mother Hanna Susan (b.c. 1855) was German. In her diary she refers to them as Conservatives.</p> <p>They had five children, one boy Henrik died young. In 1891 the family lived at 63 Leytonstone Road, West Ham. By 1911 they were living at 150 Bethnal Green Road. Lydia was unmarried. In the diaries she mentions a boyfriend who was killed in the war. She also wrote a story about how women should choose independence and career over marriage.</p> <p>Women from middle class families had better opportunities to train for a career. She worked as a kindergarten teacher locally in 1911. Lydia attended college where she studied Modern Languages and then went on for further study at the University of</p>	1890s - 1950s
-------	--	---------------

	<p>Paris. She worked in three schools, over ten years, Kensington High School for girls, where she was a student teacher, Croydon High School, as the Modern Languages Mistress and Lecturer of History of Education and Methods of Education. Then at the Woking County Secondary School, Surrey she was in charge of organising their whole Modern Languages Department.</p> <p>She later became a councillor in Bethnal Green between 1925-1934, having stood for election on a Liberal ticket (source: 1). After she joined the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green she was chairman of the Public Health Committee and the Housing Committee. She was also Vice President of the S.W. Bethnal Green Liberal Association, Vice president of the Bethnal Green Women's Branch of the British Legion, and secretary and part founder of the Bethnal Green Branch of the League of Nations Union, a chairman of school managers, and a member of the St Matthews Parish Council.</p> <p>When she became the first woman to hold the office of Mayor of Bethnal Green, she chose to identify as a 'progressive'. Her term of office coincided with one of the most difficult years of The Depression. During 1933-1934, the London County Council issued several slum clearance orders in Bethnal Green (source: 2).</p> <p>On her election as Mayor, official photographs were published in November 1933 in the local and also national press (Daily Mirror, Sphere, Daily Express, and the Daily Sketch) as well as some internationally in Brussels, Belgium and Stockholm, Sweden. A banquet at the Guildhall, City of London was one of the first public engagements. Other dinners included the Ladies Festival where Lydia was the only woman to speak (all the other toasts were given by men). On 20 January 1934 she attended and gave a toast at the University club annual dinner at the Imperial Hotel. She also attended the opening of the swimming season at the Bethnal Green Public Baths, which featured a gala with prizes for the school teams and displays of swimming in April 1934. On her visits to schools she instilled a sense of history and a pageant was held. She gave away a copy of Bethnal Green Librarian's book on Bethnal Green to instill a sense of pride.</p>	
--	---	--

When her mother became too ill to do the housework, Lydia returned to live with her father and keep house for him. Her diaries are probably the only Mayoral diaries that include a list of housekeeping chores amongst the dinners and public engagements.

At the gathering at the end of her term in office Miss James gave the congratulatory speech, saying that:

"The selection of Miss Benoly as the first woman Mayor was not only a compliment to her, but also to the good sense of Bethnal Green. She always did say that the people of Bethnal Green were sensible, and they were never more sensible than when they chose a woman Mayor and decided that Miss Benoly should fill that office because she was extraordinarily suitable for the post. She had wide experience and a wide knowledge of things in general, was highly educated herself and took a profound interest in the education of other people."

By 1940, she had joined Labour, then became a supporter of Moral Re-armament (source: 3).

She died in 1969.

**Sources of information:**

1. p.14-15 in 'Madam Mayor: The First Wave of Liberal Women in Local Government Leadership 1918-1939': J. Reynolds in *The Journal of Liberal History* - Winter 2015-2016 (Liberal Democrat History Group - article found online)
2. 'Bethnal Green: Building and Social Conditions from 1915-1945' in [british-history.ac.uk](http://british-history.ac.uk)
3. p.14-15 Ibid  
[eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk](http://eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk)  
p. 8 in *The Daily Mirror*, 21st October, 1933 (Photograph) via [The British Newspaper Archive](http://The British Newspaper Archive)  
p. 21 in *The Daily Mirror*, 2nd November 1933 (Photograph) via [The British Newspaper Archive](http://The British Newspaper Archive)

**Background to Women Mayors in Tower Hamlets:**

The first woman Mayor in the United Kingdom was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. She was elected in 1908 as first female mayor of Aldeburgh, Suffolk.

By the 1930s, women as Mayors were becoming more popular as they took a more active role in local politics. Mayors were seen as fitting into the

	<p>gender roles of women in politics, aligned often to charity work and event functions. Before the Second World War there were between 200-300 women that took on roles in local government as Mayors and Aldermen. Most of whom, like Lydia Benoly, were members of the Liberal Party.</p> <p>The first woman Mayor in Tower Hamlets was Miriam Moses in 1931-1932 (a couple years before Lydia Benoly). Miriam Moses was the Mayor for Stepney and first Jewish woman to be Mayor. There first woman Mayor of Poplar was not elected until the Second World War, when there were three in a row.</p> <p><b>Related Material:</b> See Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green (L/BGM)</p> <p><b>Request:</b> NO - This does not represent a physical document. Please click on the reference number and view list of records to find material available to order at file or item level.</p>	
<b>P/BEN/1</b>	<p><b>File</b></p> <p><b>Title:</b> <i>Diary</i></p> <p><b>Extent:</b> 1 volume</p> <p><b>Request:</b> YES - You can order this material to consult in our Reading Room.</p>	19 October 1933 - 3 June 1934
<b>P/BEN/2</b>	<p><b>File</b></p> <p><b>Title:</b> <i>Diary</i></p> <p><b>Extent:</b> 1 volume</p> <p><b>Request:</b> YES - You can order this material to consult in our Reading Room.</p>	4 June 1934 - 8 November 1934
<b>P/BEN/3</b>	<p><b>File</b></p> <p><b>Title:</b> <i>Mayor of Bethnal Green scrapbook</i></p> <p><b>Extent:</b></p>	1890s - 1950s

	<p>1 volume</p> <p><b>Description:</b> Large 42 cm volume, mainly newspaper cuttings, pamphlets, and photographs of Lydia Dorothea Benoly, Mayor of Bethnal Green 1933-1934 and events during that year.</p> <p>Includes drawings and images. Also photographs of sister Freda Sylvia Benoly their parents Nathaniel and Hanna Susan Benoly and brothers including Henrik who died young, 1890s-1920s, and pet cats, 1930s. Some items up to 1950s are loose</p> <p><b>Request:</b> YES - You can order this material to consult in our Reading Room.</p>	
--	---	--