

REINA EMILY LAWRENCE



Reina Lawrence was the first woman to be elected as a borough councillor in London. She was honoured in 2008 in an exhibition held by Camden Council, which wrote as follows:

Reina came from a comfortable background – her father, John Lawrence, drawing his income from investments. Her mother, Emily, was born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, and Reina herself was born in New York, USA. By the time of the 1881 census, Reina had moved to 37 Belsize Avenue in Camden with her parents, eight siblings and six servants. She lived there for most of her life.

Reina studied law, obtaining a LLB (Bachelor of Law) at University College London in 1893. The first woman to graduate in law, Eliza Orme, had graduated from the same university just five years earlier.

Opportunities for women to be involved in local government were limited. Reina took an interest in local affairs and from 1905 served on the Hampstead Distress Committee, set up to help the unemployed. This stood her in good stead when in 1907 the Qualification of Women Act enabled women ratepayers to be elected to Borough and County Councils. In December, a by-election was called in Belsize Ward and, supported by the Hampstead Women's Local Government Association, she put herself forward as a candidate.

In her election address Reina listed her interests as housing, swimming baths and infant mortality and said she intended to work harmoniously with the men on the Council. She was keen to calm any fears about radicalism or extremism and stressed that she was not a Suffragette. One of the people who spoke up in support of her candidature was Eliza Orme. The election turnout was low due to bad weather but Miss Lawrence achieved a large majority and had the distinction of becoming the first woman to be elected a borough councillor in London.

During her time as a councillor, Reina served on the baths, distress, public health and works committees. Unfortunately, her time in local government was brief. She stood for re-election in October 1909, supported by the Hampstead Non-Political and Progressive Association, but lost her seat by just six votes. Of the three lady candidates in Hampstead that year, only one was elected. However, the principle of women councillors had been established and in Reina Lawrence's own words "no terrible revolution had occurred".