

Margaret Bondfield – First Female Cabinet Minister **by Michael Howes** **Location of plaque – The Ridgeway, Southborough.**



Margaret Grace Bondfield was born on 17 March 1873 at Chard, Somerset, the tenth of the eleven children of William Bondfield, a laceworker, and his wife Anne. She is remembered chiefly for becoming the first female Cabinet Minister but, as this biography shows, had a most distinguished career holding many high-flying leadership posts as a trade unionist, feminist and campaigner.

After leaving school she became a shop assistant aged fourteen, at first in Brighton and then in London. Unhappy with the poor pay and conditions of shop work, she joined the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks and contributed to its journal. She was appointed Assistant Secretary of this union in 1898. She is reported to have said that she had “no vocation for wifehood or motherhood” and “just lived for the Trade Union Movement with a concentration undisturbed by love affairs”. On several occasions she was involved in covert investigation and presented evidence to the 1901 House of Lords Select Committee. Later, she returned to this field for action on married women’s employment and maternity welfare. The introduction of state maternity benefit owed much to this work.

She was an executive member of the Women’s Trade Union League and whilst in this position she formed, with others, the National Federation of Women Workers. She became a leader of the Adult Suffrage Society and in 1906 helped found the Women’s Labour League.

Bondfield was considered to be one of the leading female trade unionists of the 1920s and was the first female elected to the TUC executive. In 1923 she became its first female chairman.

She stood for parliament as a candidate for Northampton in 1920 and 1922 and was defeated both times but was successful in 1923. She was defeated in the 1924 general election but returned to parliament at the Wallsend by-election in July 1926. When Labour gained power in 1929, she was appointed as Minister for Labour – making her the first woman Cabinet member and Privy Councillor. She was defeated in the 1931 general election and despite later standing again, did not return to parliament. It was in this year that she moved to “Cuttiversdoor”, a house at The Ridgeway, Southborough, where she lived for the next 21 years.



A young Margaret Bondfield

After leaving politics she returned to trade union work and also carried out speaking tours of North America as well as writing her autobiography. She lived in Southborough until 1952 and died a year later at a nursing home in Surrey, aged 80.

Cllr Jacqui Jedrzejewski unveiled the commemorative plaque in summer 2012 – fitting, we thought, being our lady Mayor and also a Labour councillor.