

Obituary

Mrs Florence Edith Skillington (1906-1992)¹

by David L. Wykes

Florence Edith Skillington, who died on 12 September 1992 at the age of 86, was for 60 years a member of the Society, which she served with distinction and firmness as Chairman of the Committee between 1957 and 1968. She was born in 1906 at Cossington, the elder daughter of Mr Peter Astill, a farmer. In June 1933, she married Stephen Harry Skillington, a cigar merchant of Leicester and one of the leading figures in this Society during the 1930s and '40s. S. H. had joined the Society in 1912, and with George Farnham and others he had been responsible for the major changes which transformed *Transactions* into a much more scholarly journal. He was Honorary Secretary from 1933, and following Farnham's death that year, he was also largely responsible for editing *Transactions*, in which capacity he gave much valuable encouragement to a number of younger historians, including his wife.

Mrs Skillington, as she was always addressed, for she belonged to an age that expected such formality, had been elected a member of the Society in June 1932, a year before her marriage, doubtless at the prompting of her future husband. She was to share S. H.'s great interest in the work of the Society. Moreover, she became a historian in her own right. She was soon a contributor to *Transactions* with an article on 'The Coltmans of the Newarke at Leicester' (1933-34). Two years later she contributed 'Post-Medieval Cossington' (1938-39), a study of her native parish, making use of a large number of deeds and other documents which had been presented to the Muniment Room of the Leicester Museum. Her husband provided the account of medieval Cossington, 'a narrative based on the researches of the late George Francis Farnham'.

During the Second World War, Mrs Skillington was made a member of the Excursions Subcommittee, and in 1950, the year her husband resigned as Secretary of the Society, she became the Excursions Secretary. She was elected a member of the Society's Committee the following year, the year her husband died. In 1955 she gave the Society a most generous gift of £250, to establish the S. H. Skillington Memorial Fund in memory of her husband. The gift was intended to help with the publication by the Society of works other than *Transactions*. Nora Whitcomb's study of medieval floor tiles was the first publication to benefit from it. It is unfortunate that changes in publishing made the publication of scholarly works by the Society largely redundant, and Mrs Skillington's generosity has sadly rarely been used for the purpose for which it was intended. In 1957 Mrs Skillington succeeded Colin Ellis as Chairman of the Committee, in which capacity she served until 1968. She remained a member of the Committee until November 1977. She had the attributes that make a good Chairman, not least a natural authority. Younger members of the Society will remember her as, at

1 I wish to express my thanks to Professor Jack Simmons, Dr Alan McWhirr and Mr Terence Cocks for their help in preparing this tribute.



Mrs Skillington at the presentation made to Canon Dudley Gundry (centre) by the Provost, the Very Rev. Alan Warren, on behalf of the Cathedral congregation. (Leicester Mercury)

times, a formidable figure, whose opinion was not to be ignored lightly; but a stern exterior hid much kindness. In 1966 she was elected a Vice-President in recognition of her service to the Society.

In 1950, Mrs Skillington published *The Plain Man's History of Leicester*, an attempt to make the history of the City more accessible to the ordinary reader. As might be expected from the daughter of a farmer, a particular feature of the work is the identification of the extent to which the countryside has left its mark on Leicester in the development of the City. She was a contributor to the Centenary History of the Society with Professor Jack Simmons and David Clarke, and was to publish further articles in *Transactions*: 'Enclosed in Clay: A Study in Leicester Wills' (1966-67); 'Sir John Beaumont of Gracedieu' (1971-72) and in 1975 an article on Trinity Hospital of which she was a Governor. The other major concern of her life was the Church, and in particular the Cathedral. Mrs Skillington was able to combine her love of the Church with her interest in history through the County Historic Churches Preservation Trust, of which she was a founding member in 1964. Her knowledge of the history and churches of the county must have been invaluable. She undoubtedly set high standards and not all the applications for grants matched those she upheld. At one meeting she expressed strong disapproval of the proposal that a particular church should be considered for a grant, because it had been so heavily restored in the Victorian period that she felt it did not therefore qualify as 'historic'. The Church in question did in fact receive a grant despite Mrs Skillington's opposition. In recognition of her work she was appointed a Lay Canon of the Cathedral in 1969, a position which she held for 20 years. In general Lay Canons are required to vacate their stalls after their 75th birthday. Bishop Rutt was usually quite rigid on this point, but in the case of Mrs

Skillington he made an exception because of his great respect for her. She was, as long as she was able, a regular worshipper at the Cathedral.

For the whole of her married life, and until she was forced to move into a small flat in 1975, Mrs Skillington lived at 20 Victoria Park Road, the house built in 1895-6 for her father-in-law, William Skillington, by his friend S. Perkins Pick (1859-1919). The house is an interesting early work by Pick, who was responsible for such important public buildings as the Leicester College of Art (now the Hawthorn Building of the De Montfort University) in 1896, Pares (now the National Westminster) Bank in St. Martin's in 1900 and Carlton Hayes Hospital in 1904. The house was decorated with fine plaster ceilings, solid mahogany doors with panelling and brass fixtures, a fine mosaic patterned hall floor and many other features reflecting the taste of a prosperous and informed middle-class family. Mrs Skillington's house was unusual in one other respect. Although she did not smoke herself, since she was the widow of a cigar merchant, those of her visitors who did smoke were almost expected to do so when in her house.