

# Remembering legal pioneer Ethel Houston

**On the 75th anniversary of the first woman becoming a partner in a Scottish law firm, partners and staff at city firm, Balfour+Manson, have been remembering Ethel Houston.**

Ms Houston would have celebrated her 100th birthday this year. She was a pioneer becoming a partner of the firm in 1949 when all legal firms were made up of male partners. Her career was celebrated in the board room of the firm's office on Frederick Street.

Ethel's brother Jim is now 102 and he sent a video message from his home in Canada. Eight other members of her family joined former colleagues to celebrate her life. She was at one point a codebreaker at Bletchley Park during the Second World War.

Ethel was also one of the first two women to become members of the Law Society of Scotland Council (with Margaret Hall, in 1975) and the Society's current President Susan Murray was the first to pay tribute.

She said the Society, founded in 1949, was delighted to share its 75th birthday with one of the "great legal pioneers".

"In 1949, there were only about 3,000 Scottish solicitors and only about 3% – about 100 – were women," Susan Murray said. "Now about 60% of the profession are female."

“Ethel was a visible example for women in the profession to follow; you cannot be what you cannot see. We owe a huge debt to Ethel Houston and others like her who challenged the norms in a very different time to our own, and helped us create the dynamic profession we have today.”

Ethel Houston was made an honorary lifetime member of the Law Society of Scotland in 2009. She retired from Balfour+Manson in 1994 and died in 2017, aged 93.

Elaine Motion, a Partner and former Executive Chairman at Balfour+Manson, paid tribute to Ethel, who was awarded her OBE and sat on the Royal Commission on Legal Services for Scotland as well as on the Commission for Racial Equality..

“She was quite extraordinary,” she said. “I have spoken with many individuals from Balfour+ Manson and other organisations, and a theme has emerged of a redoubtable lady with a fierce determination who was NOT a feminist. She would also not have seen herself as a pioneer.

“She had a generously humble spirit with a humanity that ensured she related to people from all walks of life. Her clients were from every background and extremely loyal to her. In today’s world, she would be seen as a natural marketer. I suspect she is with us with a wry smile as to why there is all of this fuss – but also taking some real pleasure from it.”

Elaine Morion said Ethel had created an ethos of equal opportunity: “It speaks volumes of the ethos sown and shown then which has blossomed and grown and is still held very dear to Balfour+Manson. For many years, the firm has had almost an equal number of male and female partners – on occasions there have been more females than males. Today, it is an equal number.

“The message that was sent on that day in 1949 to women in the firm and indeed to the profession as a whole cannot be understated and has resonated through the years.”

Elaine Motion also described Ethel's generous spirit, and her eccentricity – which included her dress sense and driving – and her passion for social justice, and support for colleagues.

"She allowed the use of a large room in our office for a crèche during the school strikes in the 1970's and sanctioned the wearing of trousers by the women lawyers during the miners' strike," she said. "Whilst she was demanding, it was to encourage people to achieve their potential. She was also very supportive of staff in situations of illness or difficulty.

"From a personal point of view, I thank you for making my career path wider and smoother and I am certain many others would echo that sentiment. May your influence ever shine through the further development of women in the law and elsewhere.

"Thanks to you for touching so many lives and for leaving such a legacy for those who follow."

Jim Houston, Ethel's brother, who turned 102 last week, said in a pre-recorded tribute from his home in Canada: "Ethel was a special person who accomplished remarkable things. She was very jovial, not proud, and did not take herself too seriously. Her heart was for the under-privileged and those needing legal aid. Her compassion and empathy were deeply appreciated."

Marjorie Barrow, Ethel's cousin and goddaughter, said: "Aunt Ethel was a formidable and irrepressible woman and she would be saying 'what's all the fuss about?' but secretly unbelievably chuffed about it all!

"She was always impressive and challenging, and warm and kind with hidden depths.

She had a great interest in all our family's lives and

achievements and we have fond memories of our times with her, especially holidays in the Borders. She would often do things that other members of the family didn't know about – arranging to take us on holidays abroad, taking us on walks in her woods or setting up blind dates.

“Wherever we went on holiday abroad, there was always someone she knew who we were told to look up. She was adventurous and curious.

“She only really got angry with me when she was in her 90s when she thought I was too slow to get her a new passport – even though she was bed-ridden and couldn't travel. She was very happy when she finally got it!

“She was a wonderful person who taught us an awful lot, especially determination and curiosity. She was impossible, and fabulous!”



Ethel Houston



Picture by Phil Wilkinson