**BACKGROUND TO THE CAREER OF FLORENCE BREAKIE AND HER PORTRAIT**

Former Belfast Corporation Councillor John Harcourt\* kindly donated a portrait in pastel by Raymond Piper of his aunt, Mrs Florence Breakie, a former Deputy Lord Mayor, for display in the Ulster Unionist Party Group room in City Hall.

This was unveiled on 19 January 2017 by Mike Nesbitt MLA, UUP leader.

The sitter, Councillor Mrs Florence E. Breakie was High Sheriff of Belfast in 1959 when the portrait was presented to her by her colleagues and friends in the City Council. It is dated 1957 and has an informational inscription which reads: “Presented to Councillor Mrs E. Breakie O.B.E. J.P. by her friends and colleagues in recognition of her public service and in esteem and affection for her generosity and hospitality”.

Mrs Breakie represented St Anne's Ward on Belfast Corporation from 1949 to 1961.

Her brother, Sir John Harcourt, was Lord Mayor of Belfast for two years, in 1955 and 1956, having been MP for Woodvale from 1950 to 1955.

From 1954 to 1956, she was Chairman of the Library, Museums and Art Committee which ran the then Belfast Municipal Museum and Art Gallery at Stranmillis Road. It was during her tenure that Stormont took the building over and it became in 1962 the Ulster Museum.

Mrs Breakie was instrumental in establishing the Ulster Transport Museum at the old Belfast and Co. Down Railway Motor Shed at Queen's Quay in 1955. It later moved to Witham Street on the Newtownards Road and ultimately became part of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum on transfer to its Gallery at Cultra. She was also a founding board member of the Ulster Folk Museum.

A long-time member of the Gas and Welfare Committee, she was chair of St Anne's Women's Unionist Association and a member of the Ulster Unionist Council. She was also chairman and managing director of F.E. Harcourt and Co. of High Street. Belfast.

She lived in Moygannon House on Windsor Avenue after her house on the Antrim Road had been totally destroyed by a parachute mine in the 1941 Belfast Blitz. She died in March 1962.

Although not the first female High Sheriff in Ireland (that was Alderman Julia McMordie in 1928 who was also an MP), Florence Breakie was probably the most high profile woman in Belfast politics until the 1960s, becoming also the first female Deputy Lord Mayor.

Sadly she and her efforts have been largely forgotten, as with so many of the municipal achievements of Belfast Corporation up to 1973 when it ran health, education, gas, and power supply, housing, public transport and museums.

These achievements over a century have been belittled and undervalued. The recent publication of a biography of Sir Crawford McCullagh, the city’s longest serving Lord Mayor, by Susie Cunningham, is an attempt to focus on that historic record.

Florence Breakie’s service and successes are well worthy of recognition and pride should be taken in them. They prove also that the Unionist Party was in the vanguard when it came to female representation and advancement.

\*John Harcourt left Belfast Corporation in 1973, after twenty-two years as a councillor from 1951, in protest at the Stormont government removing most of Belfast Corporation’s powers in the local government changes of the time. He is currently President of the South Belfast Ulster Unionist Association.