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6. 'A CITIZEN OF NO MEAN CITY'  
EMILY GILBERT 1872-1959: MOTORING PIONEER  
AND FIRST WOMAN SHERIFF OF LINCOLN

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*by Alice Rodgers*

IN OLD AGE, EMILY GILBERT was elegant and upright, a dominant presence in any company, yet modest, sweet and smiling with arms outstretched to greet the youngest members of the family. I thought my grandmother's elder sister, Aunt Em, special because of her encyclopaedic knowledge of gardening. She instantly identified plants, flowers and trees and, when I was only seven, taught me the rudiments of pruning. Within the family she was much loved and greatly respected.

Visits to Aunt Em's home, at Sudbrooke, were marked by tours of the neat borders by her house after which my sister and I would be let loose to wander where we would. It was then that, according to season, we would find the platform where the big house had once stood, explore the grass-filled urns of the neglected Italian Garden, make dens among the low-sweeping boughs of the great cedar or venture into the park to forage for nuts and Boy Scout camps. We would return, much later with grubby clothes, to delight Aunt Em with treasures gathered along the way. At the time we didn't regard it as strange that our great aunt had such an enormous garden, that she still drove a car and, at an age when most people were long retired, went to work at Gilbert and Son, Motor Engineers in Lincoln. We also accepted without comment the framed photograph on the wall at home of a, somewhat younger, Emily Gilbert wearing Sheriff's robes. It was not until long after she died that I began to ask questions, to appreciate Emily Gilbert's unique achievements and to admire the determination with which she had pursued her progress from unremarkable origins.

**Early life**

Emily Gilbert was born on 8 October 1872 at 41 Waterside South, Lincoln, the fourth child and third daughter of William and Fanny Jane Gilbert. William, a blacksmith, had come to Lincoln as a young man in the early 1860s, to seek work first at Clayton and Shuttleworths and later at Robeys. Fanny Jane was ten years his

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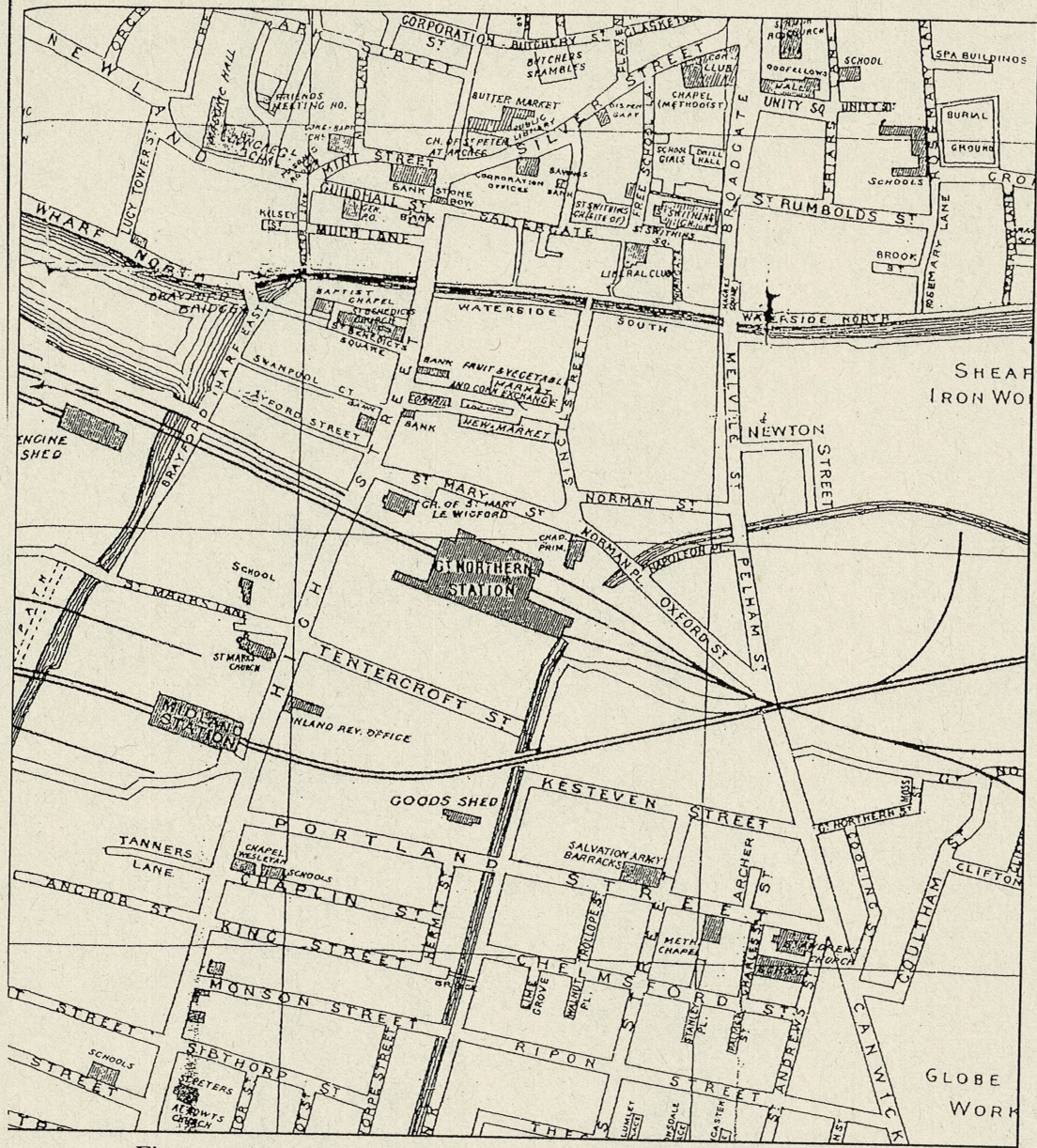


Figure 1. Map showing places mentioned in the text. Ruddock's Directory of Lincoln, 1903.

junior, the illegitimate daughter of Jane Wilkinson, whose family hailed from Gainsborough.

Waterside South, at the time of Emily's birth, was a crowded mix of industrial premises, dominated by the Stamp End Works of Clayton and Shuttleworth, and interspersed with rows and courts of workers' housing. Number 41 was in a row situated close to Doughty's Mill on the site later occupied by Rustons. The small, two

up two down property was occupied by Emily's parents, her 88 year old great-grandmother, brother Charles and sisters Eleanor and Kate. A younger sister, Jessie, was born in 1874 and a second brother, John, arrived in 1876.

In order to support his rapidly growing family, Emily's father augmented his income by repairing and, later, retailing mangles and sewing machines. In 1876 the family moved to 4, Ripon Street where there was more space for such work which enabled William to leave paid employment and to run his business full time (Figure 1). It was at Ripon Street that Emily acquired another sister, Mary, born in 1879. Two further brothers, James and George and a sister Janetta arrived after the family's move to 28, Melville Street in 1880. Here her father began to make ordinary bicycles (penny farthings).

In the early days of the business, times were hard as the impact of American food imports depressed the agricultural base on which Lincoln's markets, services and engineering industry depended.

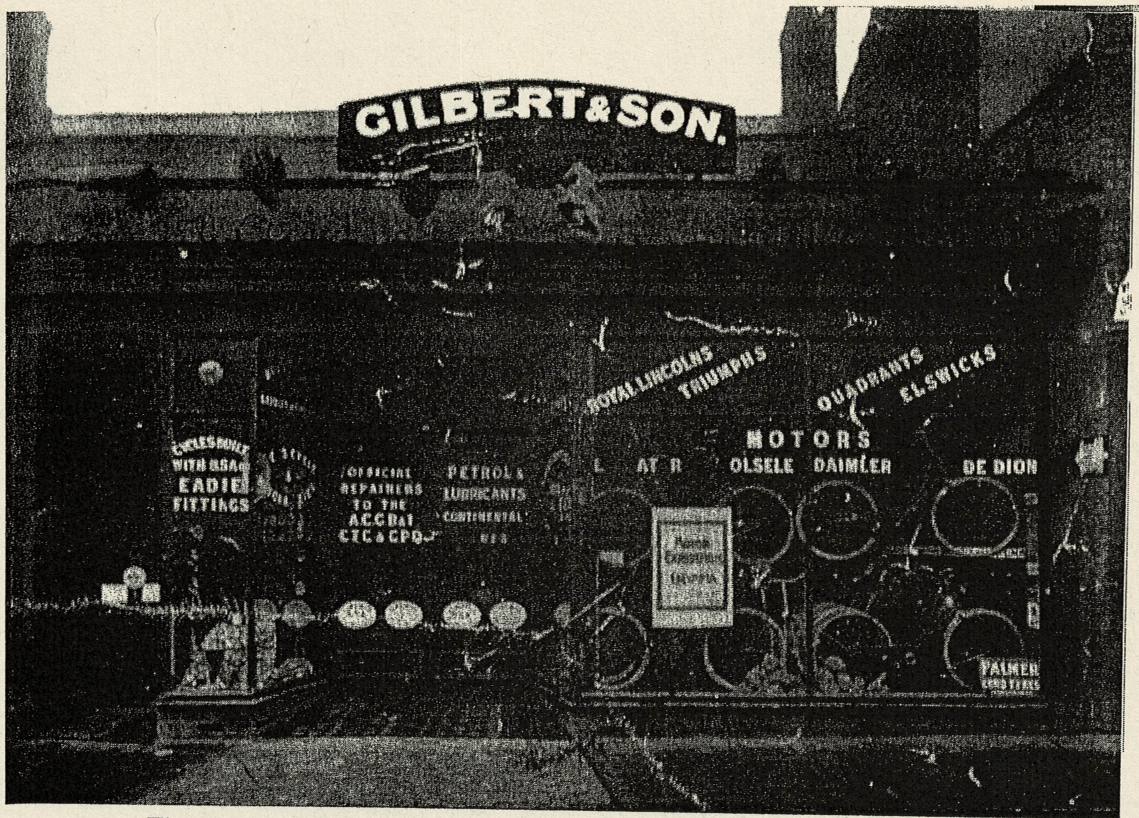
Emily's mother was a good manager. She kept the children fed and clad, skilfully nursed them through illnesses and prided herself that none died in infancy. They all went to the Wesleyan School on Rosemary Lane (Figure 2). The children did well and, by 1886, Emily had progressed to Kingsley Street Girls' School, an Anglican foundation in the parish of St Nicholas. It is not clear who first encouraged the talent with figures on which Emily's later livelihood depended but she left school well read, capable at written work and with a thirst for knowledge which never left her.

#### Lincoln's first woman cyclist?

In the late 1880s, penny farthings gave way to safety bicycles. The former were the province of daring male enthusiasts including Emily's brother Charles. The latter, with chain drive, even-sized wheels and



Figure 2. The façade of the Wesleyan Schools, Rosemary Lane in 2001. *Alice Rodgers.*



**Figure 3.** The Melville Street premises, c1918, showing bicycles manufactured by Gilbert and Son Ltd. *Gilbert and Son collection.*

pneumatic tyres, were much easier and safer to ride. The bicycling craze burst upon the world and William Gilbert was well placed to prosper from it. Very soon he was producing the Lindum and Royal Lincoln models, fabricating the frames and handlebars but buying in chains, wheels and gears (Figure 3).

There seems no reason to doubt the family tradition that the daredevil teenage Emily, riding one of her father's machines, was the first female cyclist in Lincoln. The story goes that, having been forbidden by William, Emily escaped the house over the back fence, donned her brother's trousers in place of her long skirt and cycled off. When she rode down Carholme Road she was stoned by a group of women who, seeing a woman in trousers dressed like a gold rush camp follower, yelled the insult 'Miss Klondyke'.

As cycling became more respectable, Emily's expertise was put to better use when she was entrusted with the task of teaching various daughters of the Minster Yard how to ride Gilbert machines. It is not known to what extent Emily worked for her father, at this stage, but she certainly acquired sufficient business skills to find employment elsewhere.

### Flying the nest

However well William's business succeeded, most of the Gilbert children had to make their own way in the world. On leaving school Charles took up an apprenticeship at Ruston Proctor and Co and began to develop his engineering talent prior to going into partnership with his father. The academically outstanding Eleanor became a teacher and Kate chose nursing as a career. In the early 1890s, Kate moved to a Sheffield hospital to undertake training and with her went Emily, apparently in the hope of training there as well (Figure 4). An independent existence was unthinkable at this time so Emily lodged with her father's Sheffield relatives. She found work in the offices of Vicars and Co, a small manufacturing company.

From this period, a single letter survives, postmarked 16 January 1893 and headed only 'Sheffield'. Written by the twenty year old Emily to her sister Eleanor, then the very lonely and miserable newly appointed headmistress of Long Sutton Board School, it casts light on Emily's activities and attitude to life. Characteristically, Emily's first act was to console her 'darling sister'.

*...I know how lonely you feel, dearie, it is an old feeling to me now... I only wish I were with you. We could defy all the Long Suttoners and be independent of anyone's friendship but if you get in Lincoln and I get in the Hospital, why we shan't know what ails us, but we shall be as happy as birds on a bough... but we mustn't look for perfect bliss in this world, but be content to get enough to eat and drink with a little happiness thrown in occasionally.*

**Figure 4.** The Gilbert sisters, c1900. Left to right: Janetta, Eleanor, Jessie, Mary, Emily, Kate. *Gilbert and Son collection.*



Elsewhere in the letter Emily writes of her work and demonstrates a mature understanding of business realities.

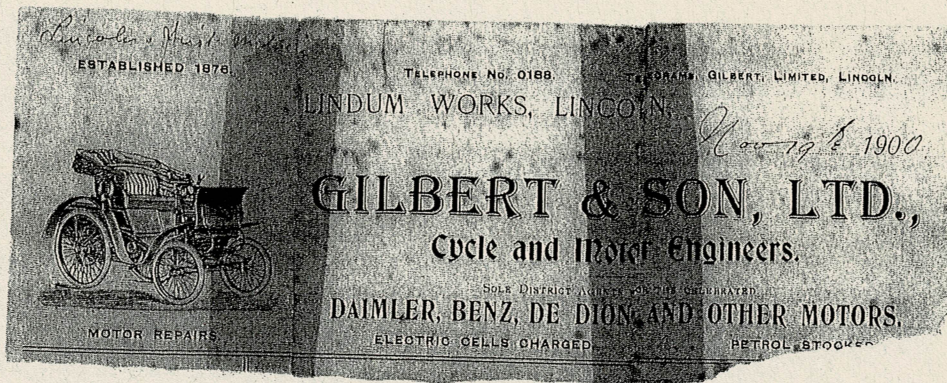
*Mr H has not given me a raise as I anticipated, but perhaps he will do later when he has more work, he has nothing in to do. If you see any likelihood of work in this line you might drop me line, with the address of Vicars & Co, he would give me 5% on any work he got...*

Emily also writes of 'the meeting' (perhaps a Sunday school meeting) and reveals, in her account of a conversation with a poor ragged boy, the seeds of what was to become her lifelong Socialism.

*He finished his pitiful narrative in a whisper 'my big brother has run away and mother says it will break her heart'. Poor little chap. He was no bigger than Janet [Emily's sister, then aged 6] and yet he had tasted trouble. The world is indeed sadly out of joint.*

How long Emily remained in Sheffield is not known but by 1898 she had returned to Lincoln to work for her father and brother Charles's business partnership, now incorporated as Gilbert and Son Ltd. Sheffield had made its mark on Emily and she maintained, for the next half century, business contacts established there. Family wedding presents organised by Emily and given jointly with her brother Charles were invariably beautiful canteens of Sheffield cutlery always manufactured by Joseph Elliot and Sons. It seems likely that Emily's Sheffield experience was also influential in Gilbert's decision to diversify into silver plating, an activity for very many years overseen by Jack Panton who hailed from Sheffield.

**The first car in Lincoln and the first motorised mail delivery**  
Gilbert and Son Ltd's *Memorandum and Articles of Association* dated 23 December 1897 show a company poising itself to respond to technological developments. It was to continue as a manufacturer of 'Cycles, Bicycles, Tricycles, Velocipedes and carriages of all kinds', the option to operate in the wider field of mechanical engineering was retained but there was specific provision to deal in 'Carts, Cars, Vehicles, Autocars, Motors and Carriages of all kinds.' The age of motor transport had dawned and, in 1896, it had been Charles Gilbert who drove the first car, a three horsepower Benz (Figure 5) into Lincoln. The year 1899 saw Charles involved in the first use in the provinces by the Royal Mail, of motor transport when he drove the Lincoln assistant postmaster and half a ton of mail in a Daimler Rougemont waggonette to provide a Christmas Day delivery to villages in the fens (Figure 6).

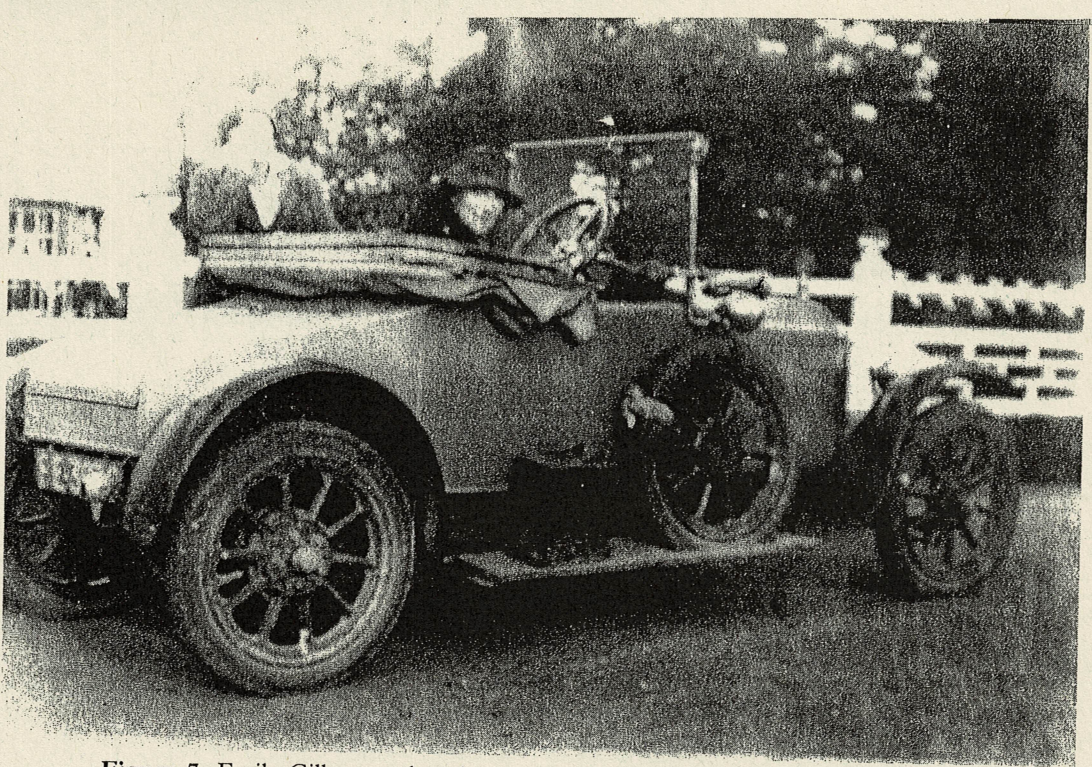


**Figure 5.** A Gilbert billhead of 1900 showing Lincoln's first car, a three horsepower Benz. *A Rodgers/Gilbert collection.*

In the new company, Emily's book-keeping skills dovetailed well with the inventive engineering expertise of William and Charles. She had a very practical approach to maintaining cash flow in the early days, drawing up invoices quickly and going round on her bicycle delivering them by hand. Only after she had knocked on doors for settlement could the wages be paid. Not everyone responded to her charm but, thanks to her meticulous records, all debts could be pursued. The earliest minute books of the company, which date from 1897, confirm the importance of her work. Emily was trusted and respected by a board of directors composed solely of men. A woman on the board was, at this time, unthinkable.

**Figure 6.** A Gilbert and Son promotional postcard illustrating the pioneering motorised transport of Christmas Day mails in 1899. Charles Gilbert (driver) and Mr A D Taylor (Assistant Postmaster), are in the Daimler Rougemont waggonette being sent off by Royal Mail staff outside the Sorting Office, Firth Road, Lincoln. *A Rodgers/Gilbert collection.*





**Figure 7.** Emily Gilbert at the wheel of her car, a Wolseley 14, in c1925.  
*A Rodgers/Gilbert collection.*

#### **Feminist, suffragist and Lincoln's first woman driver**

By 1902 Emily's sisters Eleanor and Mary had moved to Kingston upon Thames to take up teaching jobs. Both were concerned at the academic and political inequalities experienced by women and they supported the call for the extension of the franchise. Living close to London they were in a position to watch political developments and to attend suffragist rallies. The Gilbert sisters remained close and the new ideas about votes for women were shared with Emily. For them all, the path towards equality was paved with reasoned argument and by notions of natural justice. Their independence of thought and action in everyday life vouchsafed their beliefs. Before the First World War both Eleanor and Emily had set up their own homes but Emily's most public demonstration of her feminism was to get behind the wheel of a car, probably as early as 1899. She was Lincoln's first woman motorist (Figure 7) and one of the first in the country.

#### **Tents at Skegness and socialist talk**

In 1901, Charles Gilbert married a widow, Mary Jane (Polly) Beyan, who brought with her a tent-hire business. The sisters and their mother saw the opportunity to gather together the, now widely dispersed, family and their friends for seaside holidays. Each