

Charles, Bessie Ada 1869 - 1932

Bessie Ada Charles [also known as Elizabeth Charles] was born to British parents in Calcutta [now Kolkata], Bengal, India in 1869. She left India with her family in 1877 and lived initially in Cannes, France. She eventually settled in England and, with her sister, [Ethel Mary Charles](#) (1871-1962), studied modern languages at Somerville College, Oxford in 1891-92. After leaving Somerville they both decided to pursue a career as architects and in 1892 they were articled to Sir Ernest George (1839-1922) and [Harold Ainsworth Peto](#) (1854-1933) in London. Later that year ill health forced Peto to resign from the practice and George formed a new partnership with [Alfred Bowman Yeates](#) (1867-1944) with whom Charles's completed their articles in 1895.

In 1893, Bessie and Ethel Charles applied to be members of the Architectural Association, School of Architecture (AA) in London in order to attend evening classes. The school had been founded in 1847 and was the first institution to offer systematic architectural training and examinations in Britain. George called a special meeting where the Charles sisters' application for membership was considered: it was rejected. The AA did not admit women until 1917. However, whilst training with George and Yeates, the sisters were able to attend classes in architecture as a fine art and architectural history at The Bartlett, University College, London in 1892-93.

From 1896, Ethel Charles worked as an assistant in the office of architect Walter Frederick Cave (1863-1939). She also travelled throughout England to study Gothic and domestic architecture. Bessie Charles would appear to have continued to work in the George and Yeates practice until 1899.

In June 1898 Ethel Charles sat and passed the Royal Institute of British Architects' qualifying exam and was duly elected an Associate (ARIBA) later that year. She was the first woman to be elected to associate membership. Her sister Bessie was elected an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (ARIBA) two years later, making her the second female member of the RIBA,

Bessie and Ethel Charles subsequently practised in London, sometimes collaborating on projects such as on alterations to a house for a female client in 1902, Ethel seems to have been the most active of the sisters. She designed a house for a doctor in 1901, and three labourers' cottages for Letchworth Garden

City in 1905. In 1909 when she won a German competition to design a church, beating 200 male architects.

The Charles's address was given as 49 York Street Chambers, Marylebone, London from 1900 to c.1911. York Street Chambers was an apartment block specifically designed by Thackeray Turner (1853-1937) to accommodate professional women. From 1914 to 1932, they sometimes lived at the family home, 18, Heatherdale Road, Camberley, Surrey. The Charles sisters also practised in the village of Flushing near Falmouth, Cornwall, where their parents had a cottage. Between 1905 and 1907 they designed two semi-detached houses in Flushing, undertook alterations to two others in the village, and, in 1906, the Bible Christian Chapel in Falmouth, Cornwall .

Bessie Ada Charles died at the Hospital for Women in Soho, Middlesex [now London] on 20 September 1932. Ethel Charles died in in Hollow Oak Nursing Home in Haverthwaite, Lancashire on 8 April 1962

Worked in

UK

Bibliography

AA Women in Architecture 1917-2017. Edited by Wlizabeth Darling and Lynne Walker. London: Architectural Association and the authors, 2017

Directory of British Architects 1834-1914. Compiled by Antonia Brodie, et al. Volume 1: A-K. London; New York: British Architectural Library, Royal Institute of British Architects/Continuum, 2001

Links

- Lynne Walker, 'Ethel Mary Charles (1871–1962)' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography [Subscription service] <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/63129>
- Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Charles
- The Bartlett History Project
<https://bartletthistoryproject.tumblr.com/post/78428614670/ethel-bessie-charles>
- Lynne Walker. Golden Age or False Dawn? Women Architects in the Early 20th Century <https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/research/women-architects-early-20th-century-pdf>