Royal Holloway, University of London began life as two women’s colleges and the history of the College is full of inspirational women. These panels show a handful of these women who were students, staff or founders of the two colleges – Royal Holloway and Bedford.
'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

Emily Wilding Davison

Emily Wilding Davison is best known for her involvement with the Suffragette movement but she is also an alumna of Royal Holloway. She joined the College in January 1892 to study for the Oxford Second Examination for Women in French, German and English Literature which she passed in June 1892. She continued her studies, working towards the Oxford Final Studies Course in English but after her father’s death in 1893 her family were no longer able to afford the College fees and she left after just five terms.

In 1906 Emily joined the Women’s Social and Political Union suffrage campaign and was frequently arrested and spent time in jail. On 4th June 1913 she attended the Epsom Derby where she ran out onto the course and was knocked down by the King’s horse. She died four days later from her injuries and she remains an iconic figure of the suffragette movement.

#RHWomenInspire
Elizabeth Jesser Reid was the founder of Bedford College. She was a slavery abolitionist and had a lifelong dream of opening a college for women in order to widen women’s culture and therefore their lives. She was independently wealthy after the death of her husband and parents and in 1849 she financed the setting up of Bedford College in Bedford Square, London. At the time of opening, it was the only higher education college for women of its kind in the country, other colleges offered training to become a teacher or governess but Elizabeth Jesser Reid wanted her college to offer academic subjects rather than purely vocational training. The College allowed women to study at the same level as men and to study subjects which had previously been thought of as masculine, and therefore not suitable for women, including the sciences, maths and Greek.
Jane Holloway

Jane Holloway, the wife of Thomas Holloway founder of Royal Holloway College, was born in 1814 and lived in London with her family. Not much is known about Jane’s early life but after her marriage to Thomas in January 1840 she worked for the Holloway’s Pills and Ointment business. She was devoted to the business, working the same long hours as Thomas and helping to make the pills and ointment. When the business expanded she also accompanied Thomas on some of his trips to Europe to arrange advertising.

In the College’s Foundation deed, Thomas states that ‘The College is founded by the advice and counsel of the Founder’s dear Wife’ so we have Jane to thank for the decision to found a women’s College. Jane died in 1875 after falling ill with bronchitis and sadly didn’t live to see the building of the College she inspired.

#RHWomenInspire
‘More and more I seem to see that the College is Miss Higgins and Miss Higgins the College’

Ellen Higgins
Ellen Higgins was Principal of Royal Holloway College between 1907 and 1935. She came to the College as student in 1890 and gained a first class English degree from London University in 1894. In the same year she was also placed in the first class in Final Honours Mathematics at Oxford. After graduating she took up the position of Head of Mathematics at Cheltenham Ladies College but in 1907 returned to Royal Holloway to become Principal. She was greatly loved by the staff and students who affectionately called her ‘Chief’. She took a particular interest in the sports and societies at the College and is the longest serving Principal from either Royal Holloway or Bedford College, having held the position for 28 years until her retirement in 1935.
Martha Whiteley was one of the first 28 students to study at Royal Holloway College when it opened in 1887. She gained a London BSc in 1890 and passed the Oxford honours mathematical moderations in 1891 after which she left the College to work as a teacher. She received her doctorate in 1902 and went on to work at the Royal College of Science, working her way up to become an assistant professor of Chemistry in 1920. During the First World War she was involved in the war effort, working on improved methods for drug production and she was one of the first chemists to test the new mustard gas being used at the front.

She was a lifelong advocate of women’s education and successfully campaigned to gain the admittance of women to the Chemical Society, becoming the first woman to be elected to their council in 1928.