

WOMEN IN LAW

LEGAL INSIGHTS

Donjeta Feka

October 2026

Breaking Barriers at the Bar,

The Women Who Paved the Way

A Legacy of Firsts.

Ivy Williams

*The First Woman Called
to the English Bar, 1922*

Ivy Williams was born in Devon in 1877. Growing up, she was surrounded by legal professionals. Her father, George St Swithin Williams, was a solicitor, while her brother, Winter Williams, was a barrister who studied law at Corpus Christi College.

Helena Normanton

*The First Practising Female
Barrister in England, 1922*

Helena Normanton was born in East London in 1882. In contrast to Williams, Normanton did not grow up surrounded by legal professionals. Her father worked as a piano tuner, whilst her mother supported her family by renting out rooms, following his death.

1922, the landmark year for women aspiring to become barristers

A LASTING LEGACY

Ivy Williams and Helena Normanton courageously challenged the traditional expectations of that time by breaking down the long-standing gender barriers and opening the doors for women to enter and establish themselves in the legal profession.

Their Struggle, Our Opportunities. Against All Odds. Their Firsts, Our Futures.

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A Legacy of Progress.

Ivy Williams

One of the first women to graduate from Oxford University with a law degree. The first woman to be called to the Bar of England and Wales, and only the third woman to study law at Oxford.

Dr Ivy Williams was a woman who defied all odds. In the early 1900s, Oxford did not formally award degrees to women. Williams, despite finishing her BA in jurisprudence in 1900 and her BCL examinations in 1902, did not receive her Oxford diploma until 1920.

Times were progressing. After so long, women were finally being admitted to the Inns of Court with the first admission in 1919, following the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. This stated that “*A person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function, or from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial post, or from entering or assuming or carrying on any civil profession or vocation.*” This was significant as it removed a barrier that women in the legal profession were facing, strengthening the continuous closing of the gap between men and women during that time. However, despite this progression, women continued to face discrimination in the profession.

On the 26th of January 1920, Ivy Williams joined the Inner Temple. The 10th of May 1922 marked a crucial date for women in the legal profession. On this date, Williams became the first ever woman to be called to the English Bar, reflecting a significant turning point for women.

Although Williams was not a practising barrister, she paved the way for women entering the legal profession to follow in her footsteps and refuse to let gender inequality discourage them from pursuing their dreams of becoming barristers.

From 1920 to 1945 Williams did not practise law but instead was a tutor and lecturer in law to the Society of Oxford Home Students. In 1956, she was appointed as an honorary fellow at St Anne’s College. This is significant as it highlights that success in law was not limited to the courtroom, and Ivy Williams demonstrated that women could have a valuable role in legal education.

Additionally, her achievements provided a framework for future generations, challenging traditional expectations of women in the legal profession, demonstrating that women can play a significant role in law.

Williams opened doors during the 1900s that were previously closed to women. She became the figure whose achievements would inspire generations. Ivy Williams, a pioneering woman.

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A Legacy of Resilience.

Helena Normanton

A woman with no family ties to law, yet the first ever woman who went on to practise as a barrister in England and Wales.

Helena Normanton did not discover her calling to be a lawyer in a traditional way. Instead, her interest was sparked when she was asked to explain advice given by a solicitor to her mother, who referred to her as “quite the little lawyer”. Here, Normanton saw first-hand just how male-dominated the legal profession was, as she would not have encountered a female solicitor, considering women were barred from practising at the time. Despite this, law became her calling.

Normanton applied to join Middle Temple in February 1918 but was rejected. With the help of the Secretary to the Lord Chancellor, she appealed the decision, but was refused yet again. To her, it became clear that gender inequality was predominant in the legal profession and that women had no place in law.

The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 officially became a law on the 23rd of December 1919, demonstrating a clear advancement in narrowing the divide between men and women. Women were no longer rejected from joining an Inn simply because they were women, marking a pivotal moment.

History was made. 24th of December 1919, the day Helena Normanton, the first ever woman, joined an English Inn of Court. Specifically, Middle Temple, the Inn she was originally rejected from.

Normanton practised law until she retired in 1951. She relied on dock briefs (a prisoner directly providing papers to barristers). Normanton’s income was insufficient and she was forced to earn money elsewhere, through public speaking or writing campaigns for women. In spite of the steps towards clear progression, women were still considered inferior to men and that was reflected through their differences in income and the way they were perceived by those around them.

Undeterred by the continuing discrimination, Normanton became the first woman to represent clients in both the High Court and the Old Bailey. Although she never accomplished her aspiration of becoming a judge, she became one of the first two women appointed as King's Counsel in England and Wales in 1949. This affirmed that, despite every hardship women faced, anything and everything was possible.

Helena Normanton proved that women could become something incredible. Normanton, a resilient woman who strived for equality and proved that doors could open for women, even when faced with profound hardship and greater barriers than their male colleagues.

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Their Fight for Equality.

Williams AND Normanton

Two different forms of pioneering. Ivy Williams broke the barrier to qualification. Helena Normanton broke the barrier to professional practice. Both broke barriers to the Bar.

Both women were called to the Bar in 1922, classing it as a landmark year.

Both women proved that women do in fact belong in the legal profession, despite the centuries worth of exclusion.

Williams established her role as a female in advancing legal education while Normanton established her presence as a female in the courtroom.

Ivy Williams and Helena Normanton remain significant figures for women in the 21st century. Not only did they pave the way for future generations of women, but they proved that women have the strength and willpower to build a career that had once seemed virtually impossible, in spite of discrimination and gender inequality. They established the clear fact that women do play a role in law, whether that be in practice or in educating. Their struggles and challenges were not abolished. However, they did what no one thought women could at that time: **they became the *firsts*. Their struggles cleared the path for future generations of women to encounter fewer barriers. They made history.**

Since 1990, the percentage of women at the Bar almost doubled, increasing from 21.6% to 40.28%, according to the 2025 Bar Council Report. The Pupillage Gateway Report 2024/25 found that more pupillage offers are going to women than men with the percentages being 51.2% to women and 46% to men.

These statistics highlight the ultimate aspiration that Williams and Normanton were advocating for throughout their lives: their fight for equality.

Complete equality has yet to be achieved in every sector of law. For example, men are twice as likely to have pupillage awards of £60,000 or more in comparison to women, however, there has been a significant increase in progression for women in the legal profession.

Ivy Williams and Helena Normanton worked endlessly to ensure that women be heard, be seen and be accepted and these statistics show that women's representation in law has increased immensely.

Williams and Normanton fought tirelessly against injustice and inequality, ensuring that future generations of women would not have to face the same barriers. Their commitment continues to be recognised today.

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