**Gray (*née* Vickers), Almyra (1862-1939**), social reformer and philanthropist, was born in Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield, Yorkshire, on 15 March 1862, the eldest of the three children of Albert \*Vickers (1838-1919), steel manufacturer and merchant, and his American wife Helen Horton, *née* Gage. Her name at birth was registered as ‘Allie’. She had a liberal education, travelling widely and studying music with a niece of Chopin in Paris. When her mother died in 1873, her father remarried within two years; her stepmother, Edith Foster (1854-1909), only eight years Almyra’s senior, went on to have three further children. Before her father completed this second family, Almyra had left home. On 5 January 1882, at Christ Church, Paddington, she married Edwin Gray (1847-1929) of York, a solicitor; he was the son of William Gray, also a solicitor. She gave birth to her only child, Helen Faith, on 27 November 1883.

Since the eighteenth century, the Gray family had been respected community leaders, centred on the beautiful Gray’s Court residence in central York. Almyra Gray’s immersion in her new family was wholehearted, and was consolidated in 1887 by the marriage of her younger sister Maude Vickers (1865-1953) to Edwin’s younger brother Alan Gray, a composer. Almyra Gray’s edition of the *Papers and Diaries of a York Family: 1764-1839* (1927) celebrated the home she loved and a philanthropic tradition she respected, and is widely cited, as is her account of the neighbouring *Mansion House of the Treasurers of York Minster* (1933). Accounts survive of her in later life hosting tea-parties in the long gallery: ‘ a graceful figure in silver grey’ enthralling her guests with the history of the house. (Daphne Glick, *The National Council of Women of Great Britain: the First One Hundred Years* (London: NCWGB, 1995) 29-30)

The early years of Almyra Gray’s marriage were devoted to the respectable avocations of her class: appearing on fashionable guest lists, showing prize chrysanthemums, singing at the York Penny Concerts, and playing the piano (with the Minster organist) at York People’s Entertainments. Gradually, however, the pressure of her in-laws’ standing in the community – the Grays had been at the forefront of York philanthropy and social work since the 1790s – drew her, first into local social work, and later into regional, national and international campaigning. By 1892 she was on the ladies’ committee of York Grey Coat Girls’ School, a hospital visitor for York County Hospital, and ‘Senior Stewardess’ of the York Female Friendly Society, overseeing its accounts and enjoying the cross-class relationships it fostered. Despite her loyalty to the established church, she allied herself with the Rowntrees and other powerful Quaker families in the town. She joined the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW), a non-political umbrella organization for middle- and upper-class women’s philanthropic, social and educational initiatives which later became the National Council of Women. In 1896 she formed a NUWW branch in York and was local branch president several times.

A stint as ‘Lady Mayoress’ to her husband, Edwin Gray, who was Lord Mayor of York in 1897-8, launched Almyra Gray decisively into public life. She was elected Poor Law Guardian in 1898, four years after women were formally accepted in the role. Brought up, as a Guardian, against the question of what caused pauperism, she found the answer in ‘mental and physical disability and ill-health’ (‘Interview’, n.p.). In 1898 she contributed to the founding of a Health and Housing Reform Association. Rowntree, whose book on *Poverty* was just then being published, joined the campaign. In 1899 she was honorary secretary to the York Charity Organization. Henceforth she would frequently appear on public platforms, making speeches and corresponding with the press. She also took a leading role in the local ‘Lying-in Society’, and, when the Midwives Act was passed in 1902, lobbied hard for the York Dispensary to launch a proper maternity service, with in-patient beds and trained midwives. In the early twentieth century she was active in the recently revived Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, sitting on the York Committee, and, during her husband’s second stint as Lord Mayor (1902-3), she convened public meetings on the subject at the Mansion House in York. Questions of women’s welfare and reproductive health led her to involvement in the Royal Sanitary Society. As president of its Domestic Hygiene section in 1913, when the society held its congress in York, she refused to blame ‘feckless mothers’ for child mortality, pointing out that ‘the ignorance of fathers, inherited disease, poverty, insanitation of every kind’ were contributory factors.

(*Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute* 33 12 (Jan 1913)607–610, p. 610)

Through the NUWW, Almyra Gray (or Mrs Edwin Gray as she was generally known) made contact with many of the leading women activists of the day. In 1904 the NUWW national conference was held at York, and she was national president during 1909-10. In that capacity she placed women’s work firmly on the conference agenda, and led a delegation to the quinquennial International Congress of Women, which was held in Toronto in 1909. Her philanthropic work among York’s poor women and children led her to the moderate wing of the local suffrage movement: she was a longstanding member of the York Suffrage Society, and by 1913 was president of the North and East Riding Federation of the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies. She was a member of the council on Women’s Employment in the Civil Service which gave evidence to the Royal Commission on the Civil Service on the eve of the First World War. When partial enfranchisement was achieved, she founded the York Women Citizens Association, devoted to preparing women to be full participants in public life.

At the end of 1919, when the disqualification of women to serve as Justices of the Peace was removed, and Lady Crewe’s committee drew up a list of 212 eligible women of England, Scotland and Wales, Almyra Gray was recommended for her devotion to issues of health and housing, of maternity, infant and child welfare, and her prominent role in local and national organizations (Skyrme 1314). In 1920 she became a Magistrate for the city of York, joining her husband who had been a JP since 1901. In 1921 she gave evidence to the committee on child adoption, arguing in favour of legislation to prevent casual and irresponsible adoption practices (Keating, p. 75). As a member of the legal subcommittee of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, she campaigned to enable women to be active citizens through the legal processes of affiliation and guardianship of illegitimate children, as opposed to international models of state provision on which she had undertaken comparative research. Between 1920 and 1927 she chaired the laws committee of the International Council of Women. She opposed restrictions on women’s work on grounds of their ‘special’ susceptibilities, and campaigned for women’s participation in policy-making and welfare bodies at all levels. To spend time with Mrs Edwin Gray, reported an interviewer, ‘is to find oneself in touch with a brain seething with interests, on all of which she has a great deal to say which is both fascinating and important.’ Unlike the ‘lady’ social workers of her class who wanted to impose their views on others, Almyra insisted that ‘in all matters affecting themselves, their homes, or their children, working women must be allowed a voice.’ (Interview).

Gray’s most visible legacy is the restored Five Sisters window of York Minster, unveiled in 1925 as a memorial to the ‘womenof the Empire’ who gave their lives in the war. Togetherwith Helen Little, who had undertaken wartime nursing work, she raised £3,500 within three months, drawing on her international contacts. Widowed in 1929, she died on 6 November 1939 of myocardial failure and arterio sclerosis, at Gray’s Court, York.