



## **CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF PLYMOUTH POWERFUL WOMEN, STARTING WITH NANCY ASTOR**

*Judith Rowbotham*<sup>1</sup>

A century ago, in November 1919, Nancy Astor was elected the MP for Plymouth Sutton, becoming the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons.<sup>2</sup> This made her the first non-royal woman in many centuries to have a direct impact in a public arena on legislation and government actions. Since then, the UK has become accustomed (especially over the last half century) to women in national positions of political power, with two women Prime Ministers and in other positions where they have wielded legislative and constitutional authority as elected representatives. The team behind the Plymouth Powerful Women exhibition wanted to be able to contextualise Nancy Astor MP, whose contribution was clear, with other local women who played a significant role as citizens. We agreed that this meant identifying women over the last century who had been ‘powerful’ citizens in the sense of having a significant influence on their local environment and communities; not necessarily politically (or certainly not just so nationally) but also in a range of other ways, including environmental, economic, social and cultural. The object was to engage with the local community, in Plymouth in particular, to solicit information about women who had become ‘hidden from history’. The opportunity became real as a result of being awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund small grant to enable us to celebrate Plymouth Powerful Women of the last 100 years, and we are thankful for their support.

Our starting point was Nancy Astor, because she was a significant political figure both locally and nationally. This is partly for the longevity of her tenure in the House – while other women

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<sup>2</sup> She was not the first woman elected – that was Constance, Countess Markewicz, who was elected in Dublin for the Sinn Fein interest at the General Election in December 1918. This meant that she would never take her seat at Westminster, because she would not be willing to take the necessary oath of allegiance. However, she would also not have been eligible to take her seat as she was, at the time of the Election, in prison in Royal Holloway for her activities in relation to Irish nationalism.

(including the second woman to be elected and take her seat, Mrs Wintringham) often either failed to be re-elected or stood down after a term, Lady Astor remained MP for Plymouth Sutton until she stood down at the General Election in July 1945, just short of her twenty-sixth anniversary on the Commons benches. Subsequently women MPs have represented one of the Plymouth parliamentary constituencies for almost 96 years of the last century, providing a unique record for the City of national representation by women as citizens. Starting with Lucy Middleton, elected in July 1945, figures like Dame Joan Vickers and Baroness Janet Fookes and more recently Linda Gilroy and Alison Seabeck have made the voices of Plymouth women directly heard at Westminster. At the General Election of December 2019, two women candidates (one Lib Dem; one Labour) were standing for election in Plymouth Moor View; two women candidates (one Conservative; one Brexit) were standing for election in Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (representing part of Nancy's old constituency) and one (Lib Dem) in South West Devon (including the remnants of Plymouth Sutton as well as outlying Plymouth areas). In the end, the sitting male MPs retained their seats but it is to be hoped, given the rise in numbers of women in Westminster, that Plymouth will return to upholding a gender balanced profile and that a woman candidate will succeed at a subsequent election (bye- or general) in one of the three constituencies.

The exhibition and its aftermath represents a collaboration between the #ChitChat team, based in the Law School at the University of Plymouth, and local heritage and environment groups, notably the Hoe Neighbourhood Forum, Environment Plymouth and the Real Ideas Organisation based in Devonport. It rose out of a paper on Nancy Astor as a local phenomenon given during Plymouth History month in May 2019 in Devonport Guildhall. We were also aware of the activities of today's Plymouth citizens to raise the funds, via crowd-funding initiatives, to erect the first statue of Nancy Astor, with the unveiling planned to take place on the anniversary of her election as MP on 28 November 1919. The willingness of the #ChitChat team to support the initiative of the Statue Committee provided a time structure for a new initiative which could recognise the contributions made by other Plymouth-based women as citizens over the last century. The starting point for the discussion was the knowledge that it was the women voters in the Plymouth Sutton constituency who ensured that Nancy Astor was elected in November 1919 – and who were significant elements in her success in six further election campaigns. A key question related to citizenship and how women have, over the last century, been able to act as citizens in their own right, in a variety of areas of community life.

In order to be able to achieve our objectives we agreed to apply for Heritage Lottery Fund money, to enable us to make this more than a short-term research project by escalating the

scale of community involvement, and creating a heritage based perspective on Plymouth's significant women citizens of the past century. We were aware that much work had already been done (including by members of the #ChitChat team, notably Professors Kim Stevenson and Judith Rowbotham) on women from the 1850s up to the passage of the Representation of the People Act 1918. As Rowbotham underlined in her paper at the Plymouth Athenaeum in February 2018, on the anniversary of the passage of the legislation giving (some) women the vote, Plymouth, along with its fellow towns of Devonport and Stonehouse, had been one of the earliest and most significant locations for activism on behalf of women's political rights. Early petitions to Parliament had gone up from the Three Towns, demanding votes for women in the 1860s and 1870s. Men as well as women locally had supported the idea of Plymouth women becoming active citizens in their own right and not just by right of their menfolk. As work done by the Devon History Society done in 1918 also underlines, the majority of Plymouth supporters for the women's franchise were suffragists and not suffragettes.

A group of four leading suffragettes, Elsie Howey, Annie Kenney, Maria Phillips and Vera Wentworth, came to the Three Towns in 1908, in the expectation of setting up a branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the organisation led by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst. Lodging in Alfred Street<sup>3</sup> on the Hoe, they gave up on the Three Towns in 1909, concentrating on more fruitful nearby locations like Totnes and Torquay, because it was the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) that provided the strongest voice. Leading women from prominent families, including the Lattimers, the Baylys and the Ramsays stayed loyal to the NUWSS and the peaceful campaign for votes for women. We are, however, beginning to understand that there may have been more support (if not formal) for the suffragettes, particularly in the Barbican area, than had previously been thought. For a start, the woman who was to become Nancy's local parliamentary agent, Bessie LeCras, was a leading figure in the Barbican community and she was certainly a suffragette.

Some of the names known to be suffrage activists before 1918, notably Dr Rosa Bale and Dr Mabel Ramsay, have also had Plymouth blue plaques unveiled commemorating their activities and contributions to the cause for women's rights, and continued post 1918 to make well-known contributions to Plymouth as citizens. We realised in our discussions that the names of those women citizens who had made a mark post 1918 were far less familiar but no less

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the current Chair of the Hoe Neighbourhood Forum, Penny Tarrant, lives at 15 Alfred Street, where Howey lodged, with the other three at 11 Alfred Street 1909-1909.

deserving of recognition than those from the previous 100 years. Without the work of such women, the Plymouth that is about to celebrate Mayflower 400 would be a very different city.

It was agreed that the launch of the project should be on 28 November, to take advantage of the attention that would (rightly) be devoted to Nancy Astor on that day. It was also agreed that a fitting venue would be Plymouth Guildhall, as it was from the front steps that Nancy Astor's election was announced; moreover, that it should take the form of an exhibition so that it would not set up a rival event to the unveiling of the Nancy Astor statue, but instead provide a complementary one, so that people could attend the unveiling and then come to see the exhibition. The challenge, however, was to design an exhibition that made use of a limited amount of research done to date on the last century of Plymouth Powerful Women – because this was an exhibition that would be initiating research rather than providing a retrospective of work done. The decision was that an interesting exhibition could be achieved by developing posters based around the details of Nancy Astor's work for Plymouth. This was so extensive that it covered a very wide range of activism, from the overtly political to the social and cultural. It was also appropriate given that 28 November 2019 also marked the start of the Mayflower 400 celebrations, and as Nancy Astor had taken a prominent role in promoting the Mayflower 300 celebrations in 1920.

Rowbotham's work for her talk in May 2019 at Devonport Guildhall, during Plymouth History Month, and also for a University documentary ('A Returned Pilgrim', premiered on 6 November 2019) provided the research basis for such an exhibition, with student Sara Bruen also providing two posters. The thematic sections focused on Nancy Astor and her activities would be mirrored by indicative outline sections on ways in which Plymouth Powerful Women had contributed to the life of the city. We first explored the political contribution made by women and the extent to which that showcased Plymouth and represented women's understanding of issues which were core to its citizens, in both local and national politics. Nancy Astor's legacy included the first Private Member's Bill introduced by a woman. The Sale of Liquor (Young Persons Under Eighteen) Act 1923 remains in force, unamended, to this day. Like so many of the suffrage activists before her – and a considerable number of other women activists both during her lifetime and after – Nancy regarded temperance as a core women's issue, affecting the welfare of the daily lives of their families, as well as themselves. Nancy had to fight hard to get the legislation through, facing ridicule and hostility in the House and also locally in Plymouth (local distilleries and brewery owners did not see the legislation in a positive light!). But from her maiden speech in the Commons, in February 1920 on, she fought perseveringly and determinedly to achieve legislation which she believed would be far more

significant than, for example, prohibition (which she thought bad for the US and totally inappropriate for the UK).

None of her successors as MP (male or female) for a Plymouth constituency can claim to have had quite the overt national impact that Nancy had – partly because she was, for nearly two years, the sole woman in the House and then one of only a handful, and partly because of the key areas which needed to be dealt with to promote equality. Nancy fought long and hard for an equal franchise giving women electoral equality with men. It is substantially due to her efforts that this was eventually achieved through the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 which gave the vote to all women over 21 years old. Without her voice, it could well have been delayed longer. She also promoted new legislation which came into force in 1926 to make adoption a legal, and not merely a social, label. In addition, she was one of the leading agitators for women police, both locally in Plymouth and nationally. Nancy Astor thus focused her attention on what she saw as the social services her constituents needed, and was uninterested in and unimpressed by party politics. She thought nothing of voting against her party, if her conscience and sense of what her constituents needed promoted her to do so. Her commitment to Plymouth showed in her support for the campaign to make Plymouth a city (achieved in 1928) and then to get the honour of a Lord Mayor awarded (achieved, with Leslie Hore Belisha, MP for Devonport, in 1935).

Starting with Lucy Middleton, elected to represent Plymouth Sutton in July 1945, her women successors have also played an important role in shaping Plymouth. Lucy Middleton, though not a Plymothian by birth (in fact, over the last century, echoing the pattern starting with Nancy, few women candidates or MPs for a Plymouth constituency were born and bred Plymothians). However, Lucy had been selected as Labour candidate for Plymouth Sutton in 1936, and had nine years of acquaintance with the City before her election. Like Nancy, one of the fights she faced in a post-war era had to do with unemployment, especially in relation to the Dockyard. It could be said of other women (and men) MPs that this has continued to be a concern. Dame Janet Vickers and Baroness Janet Fookes also took the issue very seriously when they were MPs.

The issue of local politics, with women standing as Councillors, first for the Town and then the City Council, has also been important, and was explored in the section on politically active Plymouth Powerful Women. Thanks to the active Plymouth Co-operative Women's Guild (sometimes called Society), as well as to the interest of Nancy Astor herself, women stood,

and were elected to represent wards like St Budeaux, from the first post-war municipal elections (which is when they became eligible). At the October 1919 elections, two women – Mrs Clara Daymond and Mrs Louise Simpson were elected. Thanks to information volunteered to us by Sarahjane Funnell-Kemp and her aunt, Mrs Elaine Rawlings, we know that the role of the Guild and the encouragement of Nancy Astor remained significant into the post-war period. Sarahjane’s great-grandmother, Mrs Laura McClure was then the youngest woman to be elected to represent a ward (Friary) in 1949. We are hoping to find out more about women like these, including those who went on to become Lord Mayors in their own right, starting with Mrs Jacquetta Marshall in 1952. To date, in the last 67 years since then, ten women have held that role.

But we did not wish to focus only upon politics. Nancy Astor was keenly interested in issues of everyday law and order, and in the management of juvenile delinquency and female criminality. She campaigned to prevent the ‘moral blame’ applied by society to women for prostitution to be more equally divided, with sanctions for male clients as well and not just the women. Mrs Louise Simpson was one of the first women magistrates to be appointed nationally in 1920 (when 170 were appointed in the UK). Other women followed her as Plymouth and Devon county magistrates – and we need to know more about these women, as the exhibition underlined. Opening up the magistracy to women came at a time when the legal profession was also opened to allow the entry of women. Plymouth (and the Western Circuit) cannot claim to be in the vanguard with the very earliest women solicitors and barristers, and according to the Western Circuit’s Women’s Forum there is still work to be done.<sup>4</sup> However Nancy Astor would undoubtedly approve that, amongst other women legal professionals, we were able to highlight Her Honour Judge Miranda Robertshaw of the Western Circuit, specialising in family law and so addressing precisely those issues so many Plymouth Powerful Women have sought to highlight over the last century. Nancy Astor relied on her women constituents to keep her informed and involved in a range of Plymouth developments in relation to education, the provision of nursery and maternal welfare care, opportunities for sport and leisure, training and employment opportunities for women. These were also areas in which other women whose names we have so far picked up have made significant contributions. Elspeth Sitters, for example, worked to establish Age Concern UK in Plymouth and Felicity ‘Roma’ French played a key role in Trevi House, with its work on addiction and homelessness.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://westerncircuit.co.uk/womens-forum/>

Of particular interest and relevance to the University was Nancy Astor's involvement in Mayflower 300 and so we decided to showcase this in the exhibition. There had never been a previous celebration of the anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower from Plymouth in 1620. In 1720, the North American colonies were still part of the British Empire. In 1820, relations between the UK and the USA were still extremely tense – not only was the War of Independence still very recent, but also the burning of the original White House in 1812 was very present in American thinking. However, in 1917, with the USA joining the Great War – the idea of celebrating Mayflower 300 emerged. The original suggestion came from Dr James Rendell Harris, a Plymouth born (and educated) scholar of global eminence who was then in the US. He proposed celebrations in 1920 to mark the friendship of the two countries – and proposed at the same time a permanent legacy in the shape of a new Anglo-American university to be based in Plymouth. Over the next two years, that evolved into the idea of the University of the South West, with a campus in Plymouth and Exeter. The Plymouth campus was to include the University's law, science, social science and engineering departments, as well as the medical school. Exeter was to focus on arts and humanities, and modern languages. Sadly, lack of investment during the 1930s from the City Council saw the Plymouth campus dwindle and re-emerge as the polytechnic, which later became the University of Plymouth. But it is fitting to remember this as we come up to Mayflower 400.

The exhibition opened at 1pm on 28 November 2019 and during the afternoon over 400 visitors passed through. It was opened formally at 2pm, with the Town Criers of Plymouth in attendance to announce speeches from Penny Tarrant and Judith Rowbotham, to explain the objectives of the project. Lesley Abdela, founder of the 300 Group<sup>5</sup> and Frances Scott of 50-50 Parliament,<sup>6</sup> reminded us of the importance of Nancy Astor's election and her subsequent work, with its international and national significance – but also of the work that still needs to be done if political parity is to be achieved. Finally, Alice Astor declared the exhibition open, emphasising again the importance of Plymouth to her grandmother.

The Events Team from the University, led by Catherine Evans and assisted by a team of student ambassadors, alongside students from the Law School led by Sara Bruen and Molly

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<sup>5</sup> The 300 Group was a cross-party initiative, founded by Lesley Abdela in 1980, which campaigned for equal representation of women and men in Parliament. It was the first such movement and received substantial support within Parliament from figures such as Shirley Williams and Theresa May; branches were set up across the country, including in Plymouth. The annual dinner was held on 28 November, to memorialise Nancy Astor and her initial achievements. The movement closed its operations around 2000 and many of its records are held by the Women's Library, LSE, London.

<sup>6</sup> The 50-50 Parliament movement, and Ask Her to Stand, are today's successors to the 300 Group.

Bruen, had worked hard to set the poster exhibition up and we are very grateful to them. Sara and Molly remained to act as stewards during the exhibition, alongside volunteers from the Hoe Neighbourhood Forum, answering questions and explaining aspects of the posters to the visitors. Besides those provided by Judith Rowbotham, two posters were provided by Sara Bruen, another by holders of the University's Nancy Astor studentships, and also by the Enactus Group. The exhibition feedback has been substantially positive, preparing the ground for the next stage, which will be showcased during the Vice Chancellor's Research Festival in January 2020 – when an expanded list of women is previewed and the next research stage undertaken, before announcement of the top 30 women during Plymouth History Month – a choice made by public vote. Over the summer months, a heritage trail featuring these women will then be finalised, and launched in September 2020.