



NANCY ASTOR: CELEBRATING 100 YEARS FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS

Lauryn Thurlow¹

As a result of the work of the suffragettes and suffragists, a catalyst for Plymouth's current social equality, Nancy Astor remains one of the most inspirational political pioneers to emerge from Plymouth to this day. The 28th of November 2019 marked 100 years since Nancy Astor decided to stand for Sutton as Member of Parliament for the Conservative Party. Lady Astor was not a typical candidate; despite the obvious aspect of her being a woman she had also been divorced, was an American and not University educated. She did however have a streak of independence that captivated an audience and she cared about her community, a balance of personality that made her the most suitable candidate for social change.

The celebrations of Nancy Astor's legacy began early, with a Great Western Railway train being named "The Astor Express" delivering relatives, reporters and Reading University researchers to Plymouth to enjoy the event. School children then joined together to march, banners in hand, up onto The Hoe where the statue would later be revealed. The children ran towards the statue, temporarily draped with a large purple cloth, waving flags that read 'Nancy Astor leads the way'. The entire audience waited in anticipation of the guest that would shortly be arriving to unveil the statue. The children sang a song called 'together as one', creating a sense of unity for everybody there celebrating the statue and the memory of Nancy Astor. A marching band played whilst a group of children performed a dance entitled 'How We Got Here'. The entire celebration took place



Statue of Nancy Astor on Plymouth Hoe

¹ Lauryn is a final-year law student with Plymouth School of Law, Criminology and Government.

in front of the Nancy Astor 100 years bus, that was placed for everyone to see before it was driven around Plymouth for the duration of the day, offering free journeys to all school children.



Theresa May arriving to unveil the statue, with the Mayor of Plymouth, Cllr Richard Ball

The event began to fill with politicians, reporters, lords and ladies followed by four women who took their seats on the stage next to the statue. Emily Astor was the first to stand; she retold the story of Lady Astor's life, including memories she had shared with her granddaughter, such as waking up in her house on Elliot Terrace and looking across the sea toward her homeland. Emily expressed her excitement that this event was also to coincide with the 400-year commemoration of the Mayflower, which as an American, impacted upon her grandmother's life and subsequently the lives of all the women in Plymouth. She detailed how as one of 16 grandchildren to Lady Astor they had all inherited her strong will and

her passion for voicing your opinions. She then introduced Dr Jackie Turner, a historian who went on to speak about Nancy Astor's legacy in and outside of parliament. She explained to the audience how Nancy's Bill, to bring the legal drinking age to 18 years old, was the first one to be passed by a woman and was even more important to Lady Astor as she had seen loved ones suffer with alcoholism all her life. The next person to speak was Alexis Bowater, who headed the campaign to erect the statue. Whilst talking through the process of the 400 days prior to the unveiling of the statue, it was clear how much effort had gone into this project from the very start and that it was driven by passion for Nancy Astor's legacy. Alexis closed her speech describing Nancy Astor as a symbol that it does not matter who you are or where you're from, you can do anything if you try hard enough.

The final speech made before she unveiled the statue was delivered by Theresa May, the immediate past Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and one of only two females to ever hold that title. Mrs May discussed her own passion for encouraging women to get into politics before revealing the statistic that a third of candidates standing in the upcoming election are women, which despite seeming low is the highest this figure has ever been. As Mrs May cut the ribbon and unveiled the statue there was a roaring round of applause, followed by a moment of quiet as the audience focused upon the statue and everything that it represents.

The bus was running and the statue was unveiled but the celebrations of Nancy Astor and many other inspirational women to have emerged from Plymouth was far from over. The audience then moved to the Plymouth Guildhall, where there was an exhibition hosted by the Hoe Neighbourhood Forum. The exhibition, thanks to the hard work of Professor Judith Rowbotham, was a collaboration of posters and images that detailed the work that Nancy Astor did and the policies she stood for. The posters also dismissed myths of her political and religious beliefs. There was a poster dedicated to the unfair tarnishing of her reputation due to claims of her fascist and antisemitic beliefs. These are claims that have been twisted throughout history as she did initially support Richard Chamberlain's efforts to reach a compromise in the shape of the Munich Agreement but rapidly changed her mind and in 1938 did help in the early stages to unseat him, making way for Winston Churchill. It is sometimes difficult to dispel claims made against powerful women in history, as changing the status quo will always be met with hostility. Nancy Astor's legacy however should be one of her success in politics and the positive impact she left on the women and children of Plymouth in particular. Furthermore, throughout the exhibition there were posters that detailed newer ventures of female empowerment throughout Plymouth and inspirational women over the 100 years since Nancy Astor decided to stand for parliament. Women such as Mrs Louise Simpson, who in 1924 became the first Plymouth Women to sit as a Magistrate and was also a town Councillor, particularly interested in women's and children's welfare issues.

The town crier John Pitt and the Lord Mayor of Plymouth officially opened the event, which was then followed by a play 'Touching the Past' (Hugh Janes 2019) and film 'Nancy Astor: A Returned Pilgrim' (Time-Lock 2019) that demonstrated the struggles and passions of Nancy Astor and the women of Plymouth that came before her in their efforts to get the vote. There was also information in the film about the Chief Constable of the time when Emeline Pankhurst was arrested in Plymouth and his efforts to clean up the city. This resonated with a lot of the work Nancy Astor did, as she was very passionate about improving all areas of Plymouth, especially the Barbican 'slums'. She recognised the importance of Plymouth's heritage and was physically involved, walking the streets to see what needed to be done. From this she was very passionate about opening hospitals and nurseries, including the Margaret McMillian nursery. The event was a true celebration of Nancy Astor's life and work, as school children from Plymouth Massachusetts came across to England to celebrate this. They brought with them 12 flags made in each of the 12 public schools in Plymouth, Mass., to symbolise the unity of Lady Astor's public service and how women from across the world are proud and inspired by the work she did.

The posters at the exhibition were a great signpost of all the triumphs of women in Plymouth over the past 100 years. However, they did also advertise that there are many more women that have been forgotten in history, although this does not make their story any less inspiring. For this reason, the Hoe Neighbourhood Forum were urging anyone with any information of other women that have made great political or social steps in Plymouth's historical fight for equality, to bring this information forward. This was a day celebrating the work of Nancy Astor, the work of women that have followed in her footsteps and to remind and influence the women of the future to keep building what they started and gather momentum in politics to ensure that not only is the voice of women heard but that it cannot be ignored.



City bus that circulated Plymouth giving free journeys to school children to commemorate the 100 years since Nancy Astor's election.