




‘The Returned Pilgrim’: Nancy Astor and Plymouth

‘AN
UNCONVENTIONAL
MP’: NANCY ASTOR,
PUBLIC WOMEN
AND GENDERED
POLITICAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the evolution of Nancy Astor’s political persona, dating it back to 1908 when she first visited Plymouth when her husband Waldorf Astor was being considered as the junior Unionist candidate for the borough. It reveals how, by 1919 when she was elected, she had already formed the political ideas and identified the key campaigning issues that she would pursue between 1919 and 1945, as a result of her experiences at Plymouth. It argues that Plymouth is a key factor to understanding Nancy Astor’s political identity and expressions of her view, and that the foundation created for these between 1908 and 1919 continued to support her further political development after her election for Plymouth Sutton in 1919. The article thus gives insights into an aspect of Nancy Astor’s development as ‘an unconventional MP’ which has hitherto remained largely unfamiliar to those with an interest in her career and work. It reveals a sustained consistency of engagement with a range of issues relating primarily to women’s and children’s concerns (education, welfare, health, support for employment and training, as well as temperance and promotion of women’s political participation) that were shaped by her involvement with these issues in the microcosm provided by Plymouth.

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Nancy Astor's political career is often described as lasting just short of 26 years, from 1919, when she first won her Plymouth Sutton constituency seat, to the time when she stood down at the July 1945 general election. In official terms, that is accurate, but in reality, given her prominent role during her husband's time as candidate and then MP for Plymouth, she was already, by 1919, an experienced politician. Berry-White comments that the women standing for election in December 1918 had had 'little time to nurse their constituencies and establish themselves in the local community' (Berry-White, 2020: 4). When she stood for election in November 1919, Astor had nursed the Plymouth Sutton constituency for a decade and was well-established there. It also meant that her political ideas and priorities were largely in place as a result of the previous decade of work in Plymouth, ostensibly on behalf of her husband but in reality reflecting her personal, as well as any shared, priorities in terms of social welfare reforms. What is revealed in this article is that the crucial component in her political identity that kept her willing (even determined) to be a politician on the national stage was a local factor, that of Plymouth itself.

Nancy Astor was not Plymouth born and nor did she have any robust ancestral link to Plymouth, though she always emphasised her Virginian heritage and the historical link provided by the association between early colonial Virginia and Plymouth. That helped to fuel her early self-identification as a 'returned Pilgrim', expressed through her sustained insistence that Plymouth was her spiritual home (Fox, 2000: 138), a claim made both in her private correspondence and her public utterances. By October 1919, when she agreed to stand for election in place of her husband, Nancy Astor had been actively involved in local affairs for a decade, negotiating the Plymouth political landscape to promote not only her husband's profile but also a range of social welfare initiatives that she personally identified with. It was she who had, from 1908 on, been the ubiquitous Astor in Plymouth. This local ubiquity continued after her election, and substantially accounts for her successes at her subsequent elections. This article explores the significance of the Plymouth local dimension to the formation and expression of Nancy's political beliefs and activities.

PLYMOUTH AND THE EVOLUTION OF NANCY'S POLITICAL PERSONA

Plymouth is a locale which, in terms of its history in the post-Napoleonic Wars period, has received little attention by way of substantial scholarly research into the regional, national and international role that it played. This was something which Nancy Astor herself realised, and in many ways the frame for her political career from 1908 onwards is provided by her determination not only to improve the lives of Plymothians (especially its women and children) but also to give Plymouth itself the prominence she felt it deserved. She firmly believed that Plymouth was more than just the place from which, aboard the Mayflower, the Pilgrim Fathers had finally departed in September 1620, en route to what would become the USA. But the Plymouth that she arrived in was not the modern Plymouth, in terms of its boundaries. It consisted of three contiguous entities: the Three Towns of Plymouth (the ancient borough), Stonehouse (a small mainly inland county parish originally which had expanded seawards, becoming a small town) and Devonport (a county borough, surrounding the Royal Naval establishment on the Hamoaze). Suggestions had long been made to these three towns that it would make sense for them to merge, but the local politics of the three saw a jealous zeal to preserve their separate identities until they were forced into an amalgamation in 1914.¹ At that point, the exigencies of potential conflict saw the voices of the Admiralty and War Office finally persuading the government that national considerations overcame the need to cater to local sensitivities. The realities of daily living in the Three Towns, however, took little notice of this disunion, with considerable cross-towns traffic in terms of where people lived, shopped, worked and socialised (Stevenson and Rowbotham, 2019). The heart of Nancy Astor's constituency, Plymouth Sutton, was the Barbican area, for example, but the Dockyard in Devonport was a key employer for many of its dwellers. The Plymouth-Three Towns that Mrs Astor encountered on arrival in 1908 was a politically conscious entity – politically diverse in many ways, but

¹ The suggestions date back to at least 1814 in terms of serious discussions at government levels, and were considered again in 1835–37, 1888 and 1902. See, for example, *Parliamentary Papers, Reports from Commissioners*, 1837, vol. 28, London: HMSO, pp.38–40. Amalgamation was formally agreed in May 1914, and Royal Assent was granted on 10 August 1914, coming into force on 1 November 1914.

with the borough of Plymouth itself retaining a radical tradition dating back to its support for Parliament in the turbulent seventeenth century, which also included high levels of support for temperance initiatives (Stevenson, 2018: 97–101). As recent research has underlined, there was also a strong tradition of women-led philanthropy focusing on women and children across the Three Towns, which linked powerfully to an interest in women’s suffrage.² All of this made Plymouth a place in which Nancy Astor was to find kindred spirits from the start.

In assessing Nancy Astor’s political career, emphasis is usually placed on the impact that she had as an MP. While recognised as the first woman to take her seat in the Commons, she has failed to earn much credit for work she did in that period. It is acknowledged that she came out in strong support of women’s causes, for example, but her activism in the struggle for the equalisation of the franchise in 1928 has received little attention, in a large part because she was not a part of the pre-1918 campaign for enfranchising women. For example, Krista Cowman has noted that in 1921, Astor organised a Consultative Committee of Women’s Organisations but in noting its demise in October 1928 does not link this to the successful passage of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 onto the statute books in July of that year (Cowman, 2010: 125).³ Equally, especially after the passage of her successful Private Member’s Bill, enacted as the Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons Under Eighteen) Act 1923 (see Takayanagi, 2020), her public contributions in the Commons have been substantially dismissed. Pat Thane has, fairly, summarised her speeches as ‘rarely impressive, often lightweight, rambling and repetitious, and less effective than they might have been’, noting also her ‘notorious’ habit of interrupting the speeches of others, pulling faces and never, seemingly, learning to observe the rules of the House (Thane, 2020: 6). However, an alternative interpretation of her actions could suggest that such behaviour was deliberate, and intended to convey her low opinion of the House and its members – and that she did not bother with crafting her speeches in the House with any care because, increasingly, it was not an audience that she cared to engage with. She did contribute substantially to Committee work (Gottlieb and Toye, 2013) by providing relevant data that she and her contacts had gleaned (especially from Plymouth). But when she made the speeches that mattered to her during her parliamentary career, these were predominantly those made outside the Commons, especially the ones delivered to local Plymouth audiences, where she could engage freely, and without official disapproval, in the kind of repartee she was good at, especially with auditors she cared about.

The interpretation put forward in this article is rooted in research on Astor’s activities in Plymouth from 1908 onwards, which promotes a realisation that, by 1919, Nancy Astor was already an experienced political activist and speaker, thanks both to her activities on behalf of her husband and her own personal interactions with leading women activists in the Three Towns. It is consequently erroneous to assume that it was not until Nancy Astor stood for election, after her husband became Viscount Astor, that she became politically active in her own right (see, for example, Fort, 2012; Reeves, 2019). But Waldorf Astor had, in reality, been heavily reliant on his wife’s activities in getting him elected in the first place, and subsequently in managing his Plymouth constituency and assuring his re-election in December 1918. From the start, Nancy Astor had got to know the local population, especially in and around the Barbican, in detail – learning names and faces as well as listening to the concerns voiced by the women in particular (Manstead, 2018). Her local politicking and information gathering had substantially shaped Waldorf Astor’s engagement with the issues in the Commons, and later in the Lords when he

² Research into women’s involvement in the movement for women’s suffrage in the Three Towns of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse was not extensive until about 2013. Since then, research conducted by the author and Professor Kim Stevenson has worked to uncover the substantial and sustained involvement of local women from the 1850s onwards (see Rowbotham and Stevenson, 2016). Work on the wider Devon context, conducted by groups such as the Devon History Society, has also added to our knowledge, all building on the indefatigable work of Elizabeth Crawford (see Crawford, 2006). Since summer 1919, the importance of women’s political activism in Plymouth and its roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth century women’s suffrage campaigns has been further revealed by research conducted by the author, aided by Stevenson and a number of student and other volunteers, into the women who surrounded and helped to shape Nancy Astor’s experience, as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund supported project, Plymouth Powerful Women, 1919–2019.

³ Too little scholarly attention has been paid to this legislation because it adds little to the heroic story of the suffrage and suffragette struggle for the franchise up to 1918. However, this extension of the franchise was not achieved without work and pressure, especially from Conservative women, and Astor herself played a leading role in co-ordinating that pressure nationally as well as in the House of Commons and through the Consultative Committee set up by the House to consider the issue (‘Votes for Women at Twenty-One’, *Western Morning News*, 1 March 1924; ‘Votes for Flappers’, *Western Gazette*, 6 April 1928). For some more detailed further comment on the decade between 1918 and 1928, see Cowman, 2010, alongside Smith, 2014.

assumed his father's title from 1919 on. This raises the question of why Nancy Astor became so engaged with politics at the local level. Why was Plymouth so special in shaping Nancy Astor's politics and political engagement on the national (and international) scene? Part of the explanation lies in her family background and upbringing, in part through her character and in part due to the fact that Plymouth provided an environment in which the personal tastes and ideas which first developed in her early teenage years could be expressed in ways that satisfied her complex character.

Nancy Astor's temperament can appear deeply contradictory. On the one hand she was someone who delighted in her material possessions and her glamorous appearance, and it mattered hugely to her to know she was dressed fashionably, even at times extravagantly (Fox, 2000: 99). On the other hand, her genuine and deeply-held Christian beliefs meant that she was also uncomfortable with her new-found wealth and position and consciously needed a sense of commitment to a mission that improved the lives of those around her. Lacking such a mission, she suffered profound depression in the years immediately following her marriage to Waldorf Astor, as her letters to her closest sister, Phyllis, reveal (Fox, 2000: 134–7). She already had a liking for England, developed an affection for Cliveden and found real enjoyment in finding her place as a prominent hostess on the social scene. But her personal letters reveal the extent to which she did not feel rooted in her new life and its social whirlwind, and was seeking something else. She found that missing dimension in Plymouth.

Plymouth's role in shaping the ways in which Nancy Astor appreciated British politics has not been well understood, but incorporating this dimension to the complexity of her political persona necessitates looking beyond the period when she represented Plymouth Sutton as its MP to consider how Astor had established herself in Plymouth, which also requires a brief consideration of the unique profile of Plymouth itself. Only by examining Astor's engagement with Plymouth from the time she started to campaign for her husband's election, and by locating that engagement within local politics, is it possible to get a fuller understanding of the complexities involved in her political evolution during her years as MP. By 1919, as a result of a decade of political activity within Plymouth itself, Astor had already gathered around her a supportive group of women who were socially active and politically sophisticated. Those Plymouth women were crucial to the nature of her engagement with national politics as well as with the town itself (which would later become a city). Exploring her contribution to national politics through a focus on her Plymouth locus undermines Antony Masters' dismissive claim that she made 'very little impact' as a politician (Masters, 1981: 225). Berry-White's exploration of her seven election campaigns is very revealing of the actual extent of her impact (Berry-White, 2020). An examination of the ways in which she engaged with her constituents illustrates the individual complexities of class politics in Plymouth itself. As part of that, the ways in which Astor related to the politically-engaged and aware women she encountered in Plymouth reveals the extent to which the local shaped the national in her thinking, and especially her engagement with feminist thought and experiences.

It is often assumed that Nancy Astor's engagement with feminism dates from her election (see Cowman, 2010: 125, for example) but this is to disregard the reality that Plymouth and its sister towns of Devonport and Stonehouse had been one of the locations at the forefront of suffrage activity since the 1850s. Women from prominent local families in and immediately around the Three Towns, both Liberal and Conservative in terms of party support, insisted that the need for the enfranchisement of women was demonstrated by the reality that poverty and deprivation bore most heavily on women and children, and received active support from local men in making these arguments. While Nancy Astor's personal political ambitions were, in early 1908, focused on electing her husband rather than herself,⁴ she certainly broadly supported enfranchising women by this stage. This support became active and focused as a result of her encounters with the women of Plymouth. When the Astors arrived there, leading local suffragist women soon became close to them, including Dr Mabel Ramsay and her mother, Ann. They, alongside other local women, drew her into their local welfare activities and educated her in their style of feminist thinking (Rowbotham and Stevenson, 2016). She did also encounter suffragettes in Plymouth (including the formidable Bessie LeCras, one of the

⁴ University of Reading, Special Collections: Nancy Astor Archive, MS1416/1/2/8. Letters 1909 Rachel, Countess of Dudley to Nancy Astor, Letter, 14 February 1909, makes this point clearly.

leading female figures in the local Barbican community).⁵ And it was an event in Plymouth that first led Astor into seeking contact with the WSPU leader, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst in the wake of her arrest off Plymouth in December 1913, establishing a contact between the two women that continued during the Great War (Purvis, 2003: 274).⁶ Less than a week after this dramatic episode, the Astors hosted Mrs Fawcett at Elliott Terrace, who was in Plymouth to address a meeting at Plymouth Guildhall organised by the National Union of Suffrage Societies. Waldorf Astor spoke from the platform, confirming his support for the enfranchisement of women as an essential component in promoting good citizenship, in that this was something which required the involvement of the whole, rather than just half, the population ('Votes for Women', *Western Evening Herald*, 10 December 1913). Nor was this an unusual thing for the Astors. The following year, the couple hosted Lady Selbourne (who had just stood down as President of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association) on her visit to Plymouth, when she addressed the issue of votes for women at a Unionist Party meeting held in the Plymouth Corn Exchange in January 1914. Waldorf concluded the meeting with a speech in which he pointedly referenced Nancy's activities on his behalf by commenting (to laughter) that Plymouth was well aware of an extensive use of female canvassers, adding that women were effective when deployed to convert men to a political cause, and it was illogical therefore to say that women were not fit to vote themselves. He added a comment which is strongly reflective of the impact of his wife's input on his public utterances: 'if women had votes in this country, there would be more beneficial legislation improving the conditions under which women live and work at the present day' ('Mr Astor's Appeal. Last Night's Unionist Meeting', *Western Evening Herald*, 28 January 1914).

The political dimensions to women's living and working conditions were particularly apposite for a Plymouth audience. With high levels of male absence due to maritime activities, this reality was very visible in an urban conglomeration combining both a commercial and state naval landscape. It ensured that by 1908, poverty and slum dwelling were long-established key themes in Plymouth politics (Rowbotham and Stevenson, 2016). From the start of her engagement with Plymouth, in 1908, Nancy Astor responded to the message that local poverty was a political question and one that women were best suited to address. She had experienced and witnessed poverty and its impacts on women and families, first in her own home life and subsequently in local Ragged Mountain communities (Fox, 2000: 21–39). There, she was profoundly influenced by Reverend (later Archdeacon) Frederick Neve. During Nancy Astor's impressionable teenage years between 1892 and 1895, Neve had furnished her with the 'simple moral certainties' that shaped much of her adult sense of self, and her consequent opinions and beliefs about the nature of social challenges and strategies to resolve dilemmas (Fox, 2000: 135).

Neve was an Englishman who arrived in Virginia in 1888, aged 33, in answer to a missionary call by the American Episcopalian Church for workers for the impoverished Blue Ridge Mountains (Scruby, 2016). Four years later he encountered Nancy Langhorne, newly settled in Mirador, and already an intrepid horsewoman. Recognising her energy and potential for zeal in a righteous cause, Neve persuaded the teenage girl to accompany him on his itinerating missions into the rural recesses of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Nancy Astor's personal understanding of poverty, based on her childhood experiences, became expanded by encountering the poor families in the Ragged Mountains area with him, afflicted in their poverty by high levels of ignorance, drunkenness and violence (Fox, 2000: 55–6; 135–6). That it left a lifelong mark is apparent in

⁵ For more on Bessie Le Cras, see <https://research.reading.ac.uk/astor100/bessie-le-cras-counting-agent-for-nancy-astor-by-oonagh-gay/> (last accessed 28 January 2021). It is likely that further investigation of sources, such as the records of the Virginia House Settlement set up by the Astors (incorporating the boys' Victory Club and the girls' Batter Street Club), will show that that Le Cras remained in contact with Nancy Astor through the range of local social welfare initiatives. It was Le Cras, also, whose name headed the petition from the women of the Barbican addressed to Lady Astor, appealing to her to stand for election in November 1919, and promising to galvanise support to help get her elected. This is clearly the background to her appointment as an Election Counting Agent.

⁶ It was Plymouth Chief Constable Joseph Sowerby who orchestrated the arrest of Mrs Pankhurst onboard her ship in Plymouth Sound, to avoid trouble on the streets caused by the large crowds of suffragettes who had descended on Plymouth to disrupt her anticipated arrest. Sowerby, an ardent temperance activist, was a good friend of the Astors and, as the Astors were in Plymouth in December 1913, they would have been likely to have discussed the incident. Mrs Pankhurst did return to Plymouth, on 13 January 1918, to address a meeting at Plymouth Guildhall on behalf of the Women's Party, the re-named WSPU. Both Astors were present; Major Astor's speech emphasised their support for women's enfranchisement, and confidence it would contribute to the new world that would emerge post-war ('Women's Power', *The Suffragette*, 25 January 1918).

many of the comments she made later when recollecting that period in her life as seminal, with itinerating journeys where she had to ‘ride miles and jump fences’ when dealing with even poorer parishes than she saw in Plymouth (‘Mrs Waldorf Astor Reopens Bazaar’, *Western Evening Herald*, 12 November 1912). It also underlines that the particular themes she championed when an MP herself were rooted in her pre-1919 Plymouth experiences. In working to remedy the impacts of poverty, she emphasised education in its broadest sense, but particularly for children, and temperance. These headlines spilled over into concerns for physical health, hence her interest in outdoor recreation for all ages, and moral health, especially relating to concerns over juvenile delinquency and criminality.

Neve’s continuing importance with regard to how Astor comprehended and related to Plymouth is revealed through their regular correspondence, continuing until the former’s death in 1948. Neve’s responses consisted not only of exchanges of news but also of advice on a range of moral issues associated with her social welfare initiatives, particularly those in Plymouth. Education, temperance and health were constant themes (University of Reading, Special Collections, MS1416/1/4/118 and MS1416/1/4/119). In them, Nancy Astor credited Neve with first giving her a sense of mission that focused on the needs of a particular place, something which provided the foundations for the initiatives she was later to develop at Plymouth. She openly acknowledged her debt to his advice and thinking, as in the public tribute to Neve as her mentor at a Plymouth Garden Fete in 1910, organised on behalf of the Church Missionary Society. She referred in glowing terms to the impact of Neve’s inspirational work on her and its current relevance to what she hoped to see achieved in Plymouth (‘Church Missionary Society Fete at Mannamead’, *Western Morning News*, 23 June 1910).⁷

Essentially, the importance of these letters between Astor and Neve lies in the indications that they provide of the emotional nature of Astor’s identification with Plymouth. Work on ‘the impact of place on people and their quality of life’ has highlighted the complexity of research in this area, in that ‘Sense of place is a factor that converts the space into a place with special behavioural and emotional characteristics for individuals’, but equally, this emotional dimension makes quantifying research outcomes difficult (Hashemnezhad et al, 2013: 5). Astor’s perceptions of Plymouth were shaped by her highly personal interpretations of its history, which included a belief that, as a Virginian, she was ‘returning’ to an ancestral homeland. She also had a capacity to look beyond the concrete reality of the urban slum, viewing it in a more abstract sense, as a type of community landscape where she identified the Barbican inhabitants as sharing the key characteristics of the impoverished rural communities she had encountered in her youth. Her sense of mission towards the latter thus became transferrable (Vali and Nasikheyani, 2014). This chimes with the idea that a ‘reciprocal relationship’ exists between a landscape and an individual where ‘place identity is commonly defined through an emotional attachment to a particular setting’ (Peredun, 2018: 766). This represents a development of Tuan’s original conceptualisation, where the extent to which, while searching for a sense of ‘familiarity’, space and place provide the ‘environmental equivalents of the human need for adventure [but also for] safety’ (Tuan, 1977: 202). This emphasis on familiarity as safety has become understood as providing insights into how an individual’s emotional sense of belonging in a location helps to confirm the extent to which the mental dimension is core to the development of place identity. More recently, scholarship has built on this mental, or psychological, dimension to understanding space and place and to issues of identity, especially in relation to gender and to class. Linda McDowell, reflecting on the work of Doreen Massey and others, points to the extent to which ‘power relations’ work to ‘construct the rules which define boundaries’, both physical and metaphysical (McDowell, 2018: 4). For her, ‘what people believe to be appropriate behaviour and actions by men and women reflect and affect what they imagine a man or a woman to be and how they expect men and women to behave, albeit men and women who are differentiated by age, class, race and sexuality’, as well as change over time and according to the impact of different spaces (McDowell, 2018: 7).

Interpretation of Nancy Astor’s style of political engagement, both local and national, using perspectives shaped by considerations of space and place identity, also relates well to Griselda Pollock’s definition of feminism as a phenomenon framed by ‘changes that women desire

⁷ This was far from a solitary mention – see also, for example, ‘Sale of Work Opened by Mrs Astor’, *Western Morning News*, 30 March 1911, where Neve’s work was also a core part of her speech.

for themselves and the world’ (Pollock, 2005: xv). Such perspectives also work to reveal the complexity of Nancy’s identity in relation to space and place, and the extent to which she was, in many ways, ‘out of place’ (certainly in terms of class and gender expectations). That, in itself, helped her to relate to feminist women, in particular those in Plymouth, who were themselves often ‘out of place’ in terms of traditional gendered expectations of behaviour and actions, as this article will reveal. In the working class communities of Plymouth, its maritime character ensured that women, more than men, were regularly the fixed points within the cultural and emotional environment, providing them with an everyday authority within their locale. That dislocation of the traditional structure of masculine-dominated hierarchical authority aided Nancy’s identification with parts of Plymouth such as the Barbican, as a place where women, rather than men, provided the sense of stable community permanence in daily living (Cuba and Hummon, 1993: 120).

In other words, Plymouth provided a space where Nancy Astor’s complex, multifaceted identity could be framed and presented to the world in ways that satisfied and made sense to her – she found a location which gave shape and purpose to her philosophy and consequent political activities over the succeeding years. There was a sustained historical nostalgia within it, as her idea of being a ‘returned Pilgrim’ was rooted in a conviction that she was returning to a place that had an intrinsic ancestral power over her, giving her both a right and a duty to involve herself in local communities in ways that looked forward and which testify to the challenge she presented to stereotypes of place identity, based on both traditional class and gender expectations (for example, see Cuba and Hummon, 1993). Exploring, as Nancy did, the community profile of the inhabitants of the Barbican (a key location in the Plymouth and then Plymouth Sutton constituency) are crucial to an understanding of why Plymouth was so central to Nancy Astor’s personal political profile. Her style of engagement with that community explains the emergence of her identity as a politician in her own right, in that her political interests and initiatives between 1908 and 1919 were the basis for her political engagements locally and nationally when she was an MP.

THE ASTORS DISCOVERING PLYMOUTH

Nancy Astor’s personal identification with Plymouth was not a development expected by either Nancy or Waldorf when they had arrived in Plymouth for the first time in 1908. That was the year that Waldorf Astor was persuaded by his wife to make his broad political interests, including in social welfare matters, into concrete ambitions by putting himself forward as a potential candidate for the Unionist or Conservative Party (the terms were then used interchangeably and signalled support for continued union with Ireland). The Countess of Dudley wrote to Astor that she was ‘so glad’ that her ‘nice husband was going in for serious politics’.⁸ With his wealth and connections, Waldorf Astor could easily have been gifted a safe constituency and a guaranteed seat at the next election. Neither of the couple wanted this. They requested a seat that he would have to fight to win. In the summer of 1908, he was invited to visit Plymouth for the local party to decide whether or not to adopt him as a junior candidate for the borough. In accepting the invitation to visit, he was agreeing to stand for election in a constituency which had a reputation for being radical and voting in Liberal MPs, and which was effectively considered unwinnable by a Conservative candidate.

As is underlined by the initial press reaction to his adoption, both locally and nationally, most commentators considered that this would be a testing ground for him before he moved on to a winnable seat (‘The Representation of Plymouth’, *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 18 July 1908; ‘A Unionist Candidate’, *Globe*, 18 July 1908; ‘Plymouth’, *Scotsman*, 18 July 1908). He was adopted as the junior of the two candidates put up for election in the borough, and the more experienced political aspirant, Sir Mortimer Durand, was subsequently adopted as the senior candidate. In terms of his reception by his would-be constituents, Waldorf, though a Unionist, was far from a conventional party member. He engaged locally with the usual things expected of a political candidate – inflected in his case by his reputation as a sportsman. Thus

⁸ The University of Reading Special Collections: Nancy Astor Archive, MS1416MS1416/1/2/8 Letters 1909, contains a series of letters between Nancy Astor and close friends like Rachel, Countess of Dudley and Louisa, Countess of Antrim, which reveal how these women expected that Nancy Astor would play an active role in her husband’s new career as a would-be MP.

it was announced on 29 July 1908 that Waldorf had accepted the role of Vice President of the Plymouth Regatta Committee ('Port of Plymouth Regatta', *Western Morning News*, 29 July 1908). He contributed to the building fund for the unfinished new St Augustine's Church in Alexandra Road ('St Augustine's Church, Plymouth', *Western Morning News*, 28 October 1908), and supported the Wembury Dock Scheme in the hopes of promoting Plymouth's share of the foreign mail market ('Mr. Waldorf Astor. The Wembury Dock Scheme and How Plymouth Could Benefit', *Western Morning News*, 26 November 1908).

Waldorf Astor's liberal social values were powerful and made visible in Plymouth – though a free trader by instinct, he had his own views on the need to support the working man and the importance of developing and maintain good relations with both local friendly societies and trades unions. Consequently he became an honorary member of the Plymouth Court of the Ancient Order of Foresters ('Ancient Order of Foresters. Mr Waldorf Astor Initiated', *Western Morning News*, 24 November 1908), following it up with the Bristol and West of England and South Wales Operatives Trade and Provident Society. He became Vice President of the latter, because – in the words of the Secretary – 'it was a pleasure to them all that Mr Astor should have consented to be associated with a working class body like themselves' ('Mr Waldorf Astor. Thrift and Old Age Pensions', *Western Morning News*, 18 January 1909). He reached out to his potential working class electorate in Plymouth with a genuine and enthusiastic interest in their concerns ('Working Men Conservatives. Mr Astor and Trades Unions', *Western Morning News*, 26 April 1909), and met with a warm response in consequence. His health was the key hindrance to his local activities.

However, two months after his arrival, Waldorf Astor had, on doctor's orders, to retreat to Scotland to recover his health after the exertions of early campaigning, returning to Plymouth at the end of October. This set the pattern for the rest of his time as an MP. He came and went from his constituency between January and December 1909, largely at the dictates of his doctors, but on 28 December 1909, with the General Election of January 1910 in view, he was eager for his first campaign.⁹ The local reportage over the eighteen months between his adoption and the January election indicates that he had become personally popular – something attested to by the results. On 17 January 1910, the polls showed that while the two Liberal candidates were elected, Waldorf had significantly narrowed the gap – with the gap between Waldorf and the second Liberal candidate elected standing at a mere 311 votes. The Liberal majority in 1906 had been 2,367 ('The Election', *Western Morning News*, 18 January 1909). He had certainly created a place for himself locally.

THE NANCY FACTOR IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

It cannot be denied that Waldorf Astor made a personal mark on Plymouth between July 1908 and the January 1910 election. However, it is no disparagement to him to say that he owed much of his success in the constituency to the Nancy factor. From the start she threw herself with enthusiasm into the fight, and she proved herself to be indefatigable in the cause of getting him elected, and in cultivating the constituency on his behalf. The result was to make Plymouth *her* place in particular. Nancy Astor's version of spousal constituency work went far beyond the usual kinds of political activities expected of a candidate's wife. She certainly undertook the usual duties expected of a Unionist woman, becoming, for example, prominent in the local Primrose League.¹⁰ Strikingly attired, she was appointed the Dame President of the local branch, even though she was the wife of the junior (or inexperienced) candidate ('Summary of Today's News', *Western Morning News*, 18 November 1908). Lady Durand, wife of Sir Mortimer – the other Plymouth candidate – was not, in terms of social eminence or management skills, in the same league and the local glitterati of Plymouth and South West Devon recognised this

⁹ As the local newspaper reportage details, Waldorf Astor visited to make speeches to the Plymouth Conservative Party on 21 January 1909; in March and April; and in June, before departing for Scotland in July. He returned to Plymouth in October 1909, leaving again for Scotland in November to complete his 'rest cure' ('Mr Astor', *Western Morning News*, 20 November 1909).

¹⁰ The Primrose League was the body founded in 1883 to spread Conservative principles and also intended to enable women to become politically involved in support of their menfolk rather than in their own right. The Plymouth branch of the League was particularly flourishing, and had been committed to advancing local philanthropic causes as well as party activism and fund-raising since the 1880s.

in according Mrs Astor the prominence that might have been expected normally to go to Lady Durand.

Despite the emphasis on Mrs Waldorf Astor as a hostess or appearing – spectacularly attired – at local garden fetes, charity bazaars and similar events in the reportage during the 1908–1910 period ('Mrs Astor's Reception', *Western Morning News*, 17 August 1909), Nancy's personal focus was elsewhere. She had discovered the Barbican while exploring Plymouth in the weeks leading up to Waldorf's formal adoption as Unionist candidate for the borough, and immediately identified in that notorious slum what was to become her place. The Barbican was the space in which she would develop the political priorities that shaped the rest of her political career, stemming from the needs of the women and children she encountered there. From the start Astor claimed that she had 'recognised' Plymouth because it was 'so very like my first home, Virginia' (Fox, 2000: 138–40). It may seem a strange connection to make, given the contrast between an urban and a remote rural landscape. However, the poverty and deprivation she encountered in the female-orientated overcrowded slums which dominated Waldorf's potential constituency provided, for her, a sense of recognition and familiarity with the social profile of the conditions that she had found with Frederick Neve when itinerating in the Ragged Mountains there (Davidson, 1983). This identification enabled her to develop a comforting sense of Christian duty which was to sustain her morally in her various political engagements for the rest of her life. She felt it was for her to work to remedy the ills she identified in Plymouth and in other areas where there were similar challenges.

In relating philanthropically and directly to his constituency, Waldorf was aligning himself with the still relatively small number of contemporary MPs and aspiring candidates for Westminster who had a personal association with settlement work. This included men like the politically-aspirant Clement Attlee as well as figures who came from working class (and/or) Nonconformist backgrounds originally, like Henry Vivian, the Liberal MP for Birkenhead 1906–1910, and the majority of the Labour MPs elected in 1906 (Porter, 2005).¹¹ Men with a sense of social mission like Waldorf Astor included Labour figures like Ramsay Macdonald, Frederick Jowett and Will Crooks, who had maintained local contacts in the communities of their birth, often filtered through trades union channels links. For them, women's issues in any detail were not often a high priority. Exceptions here included Ramsay Macdonald, one of the borough MPs for Leicester, and J.R. Clynes, MP for Manchester North East. However, despite their sympathies for women's rights and acknowledgement of a need to deal with women's interests, they did not spend substantial amounts of time talking to local women in the slum areas of their constituencies (Francis, 2000: 191–2). It is true that Ramsay Macdonald's wife, Margaret, was active in the Women's Labour League, from its foundation in 1906, along with Mary Middleton (wife of James Middleton, then Secretary of the Labour Party) and that the League set up a number of provincial branches, including in Leicester (Collette, 1989: 3). But in 1908, their constituency campaigning amongst local women in support of individual candidates had yet to develop in any organised sense. Figures like Margaret Bondfield, later to join Astor in the House after her election for Northampton in 1923, were also active on the national scene in the women's suffrage campaign, contributing also to activism for trades union and similar national issues (Collette, 1989: 101–02). However, such national activism diminished their time for the kind of detailed and concentrated local campaigning that Astor favoured in Plymouth, first on behalf of her husband and subsequently in support of her own election and re-election.

The importance of the Plymouth factor in this process cannot be underestimated because it gave Astor a place where she could be 'Nancy' in a way that was possible nowhere else. On the national scale, she was less remarkable and less effective. Plymouth provided a unique space, one that she established for herself by her own efforts, rather than being one awarded to her because she was Mrs Astor, or Mrs Shaw, or one of the Langhorne girls. Equally, it was a place that valued her not just because she was agreed to be a beautiful and well-dressed woman, and one who was representative of a high social status and visibly monied. She created her place in Plymouth because of what she was in terms of her character and abilities – it was those aspects which won the hearts of the local community, and she knew it. Astor was, unusually for a woman of her status, undaunted by the constant threat of violent disturbance that was an

¹¹ It should be noted that with his Conservative beliefs, Waldorf Astor had little time for socialist thinking and his encounters with the working classes in Plymouth did not challenge this perspective.

everyday accompaniment to Plymouth Barbican's daily life. Ten days before she first set foot in Plymouth on 25 June 1908, John Livingstone was convicted of a midday assault on a neighbour – William Jones – in Moir-street,¹² who described Livingstone as behaving 'like a lion let loose' when he attacked Jones and his wife. As this was a regular occurrence involving Livingstone, he was sentenced to prison for a month ('A Prison Assault', *Western Evening Herald*, 15 June 1908). It was for this reason that the police rarely patrolled singly in the Barbican or Millbay areas, along Union Street or in neighbouring Stonehouse (see, for example, 'Plymouth Constables Assaulted', *Western Morning News*, 26 August 1908).

Nancy, however, was prepared to go there unattended or with a female companion at most. Dressed practically, and with stout shoes to cope with the rough street conditions, she went into the Barbican, aiming to meet and get to know its women. A typical example of those she encountered there was Jane Green, wife of William, a fruit-hawker of Southside Street in the Barbican, with a reputation for persistent violence both in the community and against his wife ('Alleged Assault on a Wife', *Western Evening Herald*, 9 July 1908). A mother of five, she had custody of her children and was to be dependent on her husband fulfilling his obligation of paying maintenance of 10 shillings per week (four of which would go in rent). There was also often violence between local women over issues like rent, as in the example of Mrs Amelia Seccombe of Hill Street and Mrs Hearson of Lower Street, or accusations of malicious gossip, as with Mrs Rachel Drury and Mrs Polly Beard of Cromwell Street; more often than not, straitened financial circumstances were at the root of the disturbances ('In a Plymouth Public House; Plymouth Neighbours' Grievance', *Western Evening Herald*, 31 August 1908). Engaging with households and families like these were her key focus. What made Plymouth an ideal location for Astor were the physical and cultural realities of the Three Towns, and specifically the borough of Plymouth, the parliamentary constituency she first worked to win for her husband, and then won for herself. In more detail, the core of the constituency, in terms of population density, was made up of the Barbican slum area, and the areas immediately around it. From Nancy Astor's perspective, the relatively small space of the generally crowded urban constituency made it a space with which a determined individual could become closely – indeed, intimately – acquainted. Its notorious reputation was, for her, an inducement rather than a deterrent.

She rapidly discovered that the daily realities of life in the Barbican had changed little since 1901. In that year, the Plymouth Town Council had been warned by a deputation from the Three Towns Association for Better Housing that, according to the reports of Medical Officers of Health from 1899, the town was, 'next to Liverpool', the most densely populated area in England, with all the accompanying problems that brought ('The Housing Problem', *Western Morning News*, 12 March 1901).¹³ Still worse, they added, the same reports indicated that in the Barbican area, the 'average number of persons per house was 8.5', compared to a mere 6 in Liverpool, with the 'proportion of the inhabitants in Plymouth occupying tenements being considerably in excess' of other large towns. Countrywide, the death rate in Plymouth (of 38 per 1,000) was the highest of such places, with much of the housing in the Barbican being labelled 'deadly' ('The Housing Problem', *Western Morning News*, 12 March 1901). But little was done. In 1906, A.T. Grindley, Secretary of the Three Towns Housing Association returned to the attack, writing *The Warrens of the Poor*, a detailed exposé of the failures of the Town Council and other Plymouth luminaries to deal with housing issues (Alfred Jane, 'The Warrens of the Poor', Letter to the Editor, *Western Evening Herald*, 28 May 1906).¹⁴ The following year, he followed his pamphlet up via a letter to the local press warning that a proposed inquiry by the Town Council into overcrowding in Plymouth was not even addressing the most densely packed and insanitary areas (which he suggested were the Frankfort and Octagon wards). He concluded his letter by emphasising that 'these large slum areas' continued to be a disgrace to the borough (A. T. Grindley, 'Housing at Plymouth', Letter to the Editor, *Western Morning News*, 25 January 1907). In the summer of 1908, Nancy Astor stepped into this still unimproved slum,

¹² This was a small courtyard in the Barbican which no longer exists.

¹³ Printed copies of the various Medical Officers of Health Reports from different localities were widely read and commented on by contemporaries, and are available in the Wellcome Library.

¹⁴ This, interestingly, was focused on the particular problems of women. Welsh-born Arthur Grindley was an Inland Revenue Officer, posted to Plymouth in the 1890s. From a Nonconformist background, he and his wife became socialists and members of the Social Democratic Federation. Both were active in local Three Towns politics from the mid-1890s on, but Grindley was posted to Sheffield in 1908, and then to Bootle in 1913. By 1922, they had returned to Wales, living in Aberystwyth.

now challenging to become the second worst in the UK after serious efforts at improvement in Liverpool (Rowbotham and Kandiah, 2020: 22–7).

It is a testament to her determination to continue to invest her time and money in Plymouth that the Astors made a crucial decision in January 1910, in the wake of Waldorf Astor's failure to be elected as an MP in January 1910. The expectation of the Conservative and Unionist Party, and of most Plymothians, was that – especially having made so creditable a showing, and reducing the size of the Liberal majority – the Astors would move on to find a more 'winnable' constituency. His fellow Conservative and Unionist candidate, Sir Mortimer Durand, certainly did.¹⁵ Nancy Astor in particular was adamant that this was not going to happen (Waldorf might have been persuadable): on 16 January, the day after the election, she announced that she 'was not discouraged' and promised (tellingly in terms of her own sense of her significant political contribution to the election, as well as prophetically) that she would 'win Plymouth before I die' ('Mrs Astor's Resolve', *Western Morning News*, 17 January 1910). She assured the local party that the Astors had committed themselves to Plymouth, and were going to stay in Plymouth. In the aftermath of this statement, they set about proving this by purchasing a property, instead of continuing to rent 5 The Esplanade. The choice of 3 Elliot Terrace, with its prominent position on the Hoe, was made by Nancy Astor because of the visibility of this symbolic indication of Plymouth as their place.

The constitutional crisis over the refusal of the House of Lords to pass the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget that had shaped the January 1910 election led to a hung Parliament: the crisis over the role and powers of that House continued unresolved into November. In that month, the Liberal Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith, decided to return to the country and a new General Election was called in December 1910. The outcome was, broadly, a repeat of the January election, but in terms of Plymouth it brought about an upset, with the two Conservative candidates ousting the sitting Radical (Liberal) MPs.¹⁶ Waldorf headed the polls, with 8,113 votes, closely followed by Arthur Shirley Benn, with 7,942 votes. It was a stunning victory in what the local press described as a 'strenuous fight' ('Great Victories at Plymouth', *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 8 December 1910). But as the local party was to acknowledge at a reception held in Plymouth Guildhall to thank constituency workers in February 1911, Mrs Astor was owed a particular sense of gratitude for making Plymouth 'the brightest spot in the election' ('Notes in the West', *Western Morning News*, 11 February 1911). The pages of the *Western Morning News* were substantially given over to extensive reporting of the event, including the news that one local leading Conservative Mr J.Y. Woollcombe had been warmly applauded when he reflected that Mrs Astor 'had gone home to the hearts of all in Plymouth' ('Great Unionist Reunion in Plymouth Guildhall', *Western Morning News*, 11 February 1911). It was also noted that 'The reception accorded Mrs Astor rivalled that of her husband' ('Mr Astor's Thanks', *Western Morning News*, 11 February 1911). Her response is indicative of the extent and impact of her work in the constituency, and her own consciousness of this. She referred to the 'sarcastic references to her silent work' made by the local Liberal interest, adding that 'If my work was not silent, I hope, at least, it was effective' ('Mrs Astor on "Silent Work" That Annoyed Liberals', *Western Morning News*, 11 February 1911). The events of 1910 provide a testament to that effectiveness.

In her February 1911 speech in Plymouth, Astor talked of her 'delight' in being the 'wife of the member for Plymouth', referring to her relentless campaigning ('Mrs Astor on "Silent Work" That Annoyed Liberals', *Western Morning News*, 11 February 1911). Her determination and energy as an indefatigable political campaigner had become something of a national joke within the Party: in March 1911, Lord Selbourne told her that 'he believed she was the only wife of a candidate in England who had thoroughly enjoyed the election and wanted another' ('Sale of Work Opened by Mrs Astor', *Western Morning News*, 30 March 1911). Having achieved the goal of getting Waldorf elected to Westminster, however, there was no resting on her laurels. Instead, Astor increased, rather than diminished, her Plymouth mission work. Certainly she had

¹⁵ Sir Henry Mortimer Durand had returned to the UK after a career in the Indian civil service, and then the Diplomatic service, due to the ill-health of his wife Ella, who died in 1913. Durand came behind Waldorf Astor in votes in the January 1910 election, despite being the more experienced and 'senior' candidate, and rapidly sought another seat. He was never successful in being elected, however.

¹⁶ This was the last time an MP was elected in the Liberal interest in a Plymouth constituency: thereafter the key competition has been between the Conservative and Labour Parties.

a next General Election in her sights but this also gave her the space in which to implement a number of social welfare projects that she had in mind after over two years in Plymouth.

PLYMOUTH LOCAL POLITICAL PRIORITIES

It was, then, Plymouth which introduced Nancy to feminist activism in ways that made sense to her. Never one to cope well with abstract ideas, her variety of feminism first arose from working with local figures who demonstrated a focus on women-centric social welfare issues. Her speedy connections with a number of Plymouth feminist philanthropists such as Miss Fanny Gage-Goodfellow was crucial to her emergence as a feminist activist in the Three Towns arena. A locally-noted singer from a well-known local family, Miss Gage-Goodfellow had initiated the idea of holding regular teas and entertainments for 'Plymouth Street Waifs' during the winter months in 1905, enlisting the help of the local Boys' Brigade, using locations like the Batter Street Mission Hall. Those so identified were not orphans but rather boys belonging to local working women of the Barbican; these boys roamed the streets between the end of school hours and the hours when their mothers might return home, or might go out to play in the streets during the evenings, with all the potential that had for mischief ('Plymouth Street Waifs. Tea and Music During the Winter', *Western Morning News*, 4 December 1905).¹⁷ The success of the first event in 1905 ensured the survival of these gatherings, indicated by them becoming weekly events.

Astor had been recruited to support this initiative soon after her arrival in summer 1908 and continued and developed it, notably founding the Victory Club for boys in 1916, to provide them with a permanent location for recreation. Astor also formed good relationships with a number of other feminist philanthropists focusing on the living conditions of the Barbican. Tellingly, in terms of her erratic engagement with party loyalties, these included women like the wife of a local doctor, Mrs Robert Simpson, who was a Liberal. She also engaged with local men who were supporters of the struggle for the women's franchise, including Frank Underhill and Frederick Winnicott, leading figures in the Plymouth Mercantile Association, a local benevolent institution bringing Three Towns' businessmen together. When, in December 1911, the Plymouth Mercantile Association launched its Christmas Appeal to local newspaper readers, the purpose was an essentially female-focused initiative: raising extra funds to enable the Association to establish two Day Nurseries (or Creches) in the borough. It is telling of the feminist orientation of local politics in Plymouth that such a campaign could be described by its male backers as 'the best Christmas gift' the Association could give to Plymouth ('The Chairman of the Plymouth Mercantile Association', *Western Evening Herald*, 18 December 1911). The noted local suffragist Dr Mabel Ramsay (another local Astor friend) endorsed this, and went further when she explicitly emphasised that 'the establishment of a crèche is distinctly a woman's affair' ('A Women's Question Especially', *Western Evening Herald*, 21 December 1911).

Nancy Astor was the organiser behind the donation of £100 given in Waldorf's name, and went on to become the moving figure in this cause. Premises on Whimple-street were taken, and the first nursery, catering to under-5s belonging to the women of the Barbican, opened to great acclaim on 15 April 1912. However, despite over £5,000 being raised to establish and sustain the premises, it was agreed that the funds were insufficient to enable the second nursery to progress. Then, in September 1912, it was announced that a second nursery would open in premises on Cecil-street, thanks to the 'generosity of Mrs Astor', who had undertaken to defray the £200 per annum running costs of the second site, which would be larger than the Whimple-street facility ('Plymouth Creche Scheme Advanced A Further Stage Through Mrs Astor's Generosity', *Western Daily Mercury*, 20 September 1912). Formally opened by her on 2 December 1912, she explained she was naming it the Francis Astor Day Nursery after her son, because he was named after Francis Drake – and she hoped that after her death, he would always have an interest in it, ensuring its enduring legacy ('New Day Nursery. The Second Opened. Mrs Astor's Gift', *Western Daily Mercury*, 3 December 1913).

Subsequently, Nancy Astor persuaded her father-in-law, William Waldorf Astor, to cover the costs of establishing and running the third day nursery envisaged in the original vision. Named

¹⁷ On the whole, girls were likely either not to have gone to school or if they did, to have returned home to undertake a range of domestic duties for their mothers including childcare, laundry mending, cleaning and cooking.

after his grandson and namesake, it meant that Plymothians were responsible only for the costs of sustaining the Whimple-street day nursery ('Another Splendid Gift. Third Nursery to Be Given By Mr W.W. Astor', *Western Evening Herald*, 1 January 1913). The level of Nancy's direct involvement in making possible Plymouth's day nursery visions as well as her detailed knowledge of Plymouth are emphasised by a new initiative pioneered in them, at Nancy's instigation. The 'senior girls' of the Palace Court Board School were to be allowed to serve a three-month apprenticeship in infant care, to qualify them for employment as well as teaching them 'mothercraft' for their own future families ('Mother Craft Instruction At Day Nursery, *Western Evening Herald*, 29 January 1913).

The significance of this episode is that it reveals on the one hand how Plymouth's needs, and the response from the philanthropic community and the rest of the Three Towns, provided a frame for Nancy's focus on her own mission there. On the other, it indicates how swiftly Astor became energetically involved with ongoing initiatives that were essentially feminist as well as local, lifting them to a new level of efficiency both by exercise of her own ability to suggest innovations and her capacity to put them into practice by investing money in them. A key area of concern in Plymouth was day-care provision for the children of working mothers, especially those from the Barbican area. The idea of crèches or day nurseries for working mothers had developed as an alternative to the dangers of baby-farming. This was a term used to describe practices which had become an ongoing Victorian sensation, thanks to a number of high-profile criminal cases where both legitimate and illegitimate children, usually under a year old but rarely more than two, had been 'adopted' by women who had promised to care for these offspring (Hostettler, 2007: 246) but instead, as a result of either deliberate acts or neglect, had been responsible for their deaths (Rossini, 2014: 38–50).

Alternatives, including a move towards adoption as a legal, rather than a social, process, were slow to catch on in England.¹⁸ Nationally, and for a variety of reasons including the cultural emphasis on personal maternal responsibility for child-rearing and the operation of the Poor Law, both charities and local councils were reluctant to undertake responsibility (Caroli, 2016: 189–218). Day nurseries were different to nursery schools, the principles of which had been advanced by the Education Act 1902, in that they were intended to help working mothers by providing safe childcare, rather than teaching the young. Feminist philanthropists in Plymouth had been discussing the crèche or day nursery concept as early as the 1890s, thanks to the good offices of figures like Dr Rosa Bale and her protégé, Dr Mabel Ramsay, supported by male local sympathisers like Frederick Winnicott and Sir Joseph Bellamy. By the time that Nancy Astor arrived, there was therefore already an interest, if not an enthusiasm, for the idea in Plymouth because of the high number of working mothers whose employment involved them having to labour outside their homes, making the idea potentially respectable as it need not include issues relating to child neglect.

NANCY ASTOR, PLYMOUTH POLITICS AND THE GREAT WAR

The feminist activity that Nancy Astor and her co-workers engaged with in Plymouth increased in intensity during the 1914–1918 war years. With the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, Waldorf's work over the next years would lie mainly in London with relatively infrequent visits to Plymouth. His local reputation was enhanced by his becoming Major Astor, with his absences justified by his being actively involved in war work. But Nancy Astor was substantially on the spot in person, and she enthusiastically engaged with Plymouth's war efforts from the start. Astor told a women's Salvation Army Home meeting on 4 August, the day war broke out, that 'if England had to go to war, she hoped and wanted to be in Plymouth', so she could help the women there whom, she knew, would be the hardest hit by the misery of war ('Salvation Army Home League. Address by Mrs Astor', *Western Morning News*, 5 August 1914). She used the occasion to announce her plans, which were fleshed out in more detail over succeeding days, for a women's support network in Plymouth, cross-party and non-sectarian, where those women with menfolk 'defending England's honour' would be visited regularly to give comfort and enable a monitoring of their practical needs ('Notes in the West', *Western Morning News*, 7 August 1914). Plymouth's engagement with war work was in many ways typical – the

¹⁸ Adoption did not become a legal matter until the Adoption of Children Act 1926, another piece of legislation in which Nancy Astor actively involved herself.

Mayoress, Mrs Baker, took a lead in engaging other middle-class women in Plymouth with a variety of initiatives set up by Queen Mary, including her Needlework Guild (making comforts for troops, such as bandages, as needed), and the Women's Employment Guild (Rowbotham, 2018). Where it became atypical was when Nancy Astor added her own initiatives, further cementing her identity as a Plymothian.

Between 1914 and 1918, with Cliveden handed over for the use of Canadian soldiers (the War Office had declined its use), Nancy Astor mainly split her time between Plymouth and the house in St James's Square, London, where Waldorf Astor was based. These years cemented her impact on the place and her acceptance as a Plymothian. She recognised and valued her regular descriptor as 'the most popular lady in Plymouth' (see for instance 'Mrs Astor at Plymouth', *Western Evening Herald*, 1 July 1914; 'Notes in the West', *Western Morning News*, 3 July 1914; 'Mrs Astor's Activities at Plymouth', *Western Evening Herald*, 1 December 1914). When lauded as a woman of 'remarkable and rare gifts' who had the knack of 'being at home anywhere and everywhere', certainly in Plymouth, Nancy Astor's response was deprecating but also revealing of her sense of shared local identity ('Mrs Astor's Activities at Plymouth', *Western Evening Herald*, 1 December 1914). She insisted that she felt was 'only doing what every woman in Plymouth would like to do'; it was just that in her case, she was 'luckier than some because she could afford to do more than some could do' ('Mrs Astor's Activities at Plymouth', *Western Evening Herald*, 1 December 1914).

With the possibility of conflict looming (though the expectation in the spring and early summer of 1914 was that it would be civil conflict in Ulster; see Rowbotham, 2018), the government forced the Three Towns to amalgamate into a single entity under the name of Plymouth, essentially in order to improve administrative efficiency for the Admiralty and War Office. On the outbreak of war on 4 August, there seems to have been a widespread local consensus that its unique profile as a naval and garrison town, but also as a commercial port with a huge responsibility as a depot and point of departure for goods and people, brought special challenges. There would be a substantial influx to the town's population for a start, and those women – and men – who were used to involving themselves in social welfare initiatives to help the local community would have to extend their scope of action. Nancy Astor rapidly assumed a leading role in the majority of the new, as well as the existing, initiatives. As she acknowledged in one local speech that she genuinely had a finger in every local pie ('Mrs Astor's Activities at Plymouth', *Western Evening Herald*, 1 December 1914).

In terms of retrospective acknowledgment of her work during the Great War, attention has been paid to her work with soldiers and sailors. She was active in a wide range of work to benefit not only the wounded who, returned to the UK, ended up in Plymouth hospitals before being sent elsewhere, but also those troops held locally that were awaiting deployment. There were also expanded garrison numbers, entrusted with ensuring the security of Plymouth itself. She was, however, not exactly conventional in her approaches. With the wounded, instead of visiting wards and soothing fevered brows with improving conversation, Mrs Astor 'daily takes her motor cars full of patients for long pleasant drives in the country' or invited them to tea at Elliot Terrace (A. Keast, 'The Wounded', Letter to the Editor, Cardiff, *Western Mail*, 27 May 1915). Equally, she was very aware of the need to cater to troops passing through Plymouth, and came up with the idea of recreation halls as an alternative to the pubs and bars of the Barbican and Union Street. A scheme for nine such locally-funded halls was rapidly evolved (the Astors contributed substantially, and YMCA was to donate funds for another four). When the first such hall opened on 10 November 1914 at Crownhill, Major-General Ponton commented that it was easy to make appeals for clothing for men in the trenches, or help for the wounded, but 'it was left for Mrs Astor to suggest the giving of recreation rooms', comfortable alternatives to the usual places of resort for the off-duty men ('Entertainment Hall for Troops', *Western Evening Herald*, 11 November 1914). Construction and opening of these continued apace, so that in January 1915, the fifth recreation facility was opened at Penlee Battery, for those on deployed duty ('Astor Recreation Hut Opened at Penlee', *Western Evening Herald*, 15 January 1915).

However, the bulk of Astor's time and energy was devoted to identifying and then making efforts to alleviate the difficulties (practical and moral) of the women of Plymouth, including their families, and those arriving there to undertake war work. She commented on this in the first weeks of the war, insisting that 'there was a great work for women to do' – partly because

'women could elevate men', or girls could lead them into 'bad habits' ('Salvation Army Home League', *Western Morning News*, 8 September 1914). On 13 October 1914, Waldorf Astor, on a visit to his family from London, opened Lockyer Hall, a new YWCA facility on Alfred Street. The 150 intended users of the hostel accommodation, and of the wider leisure and recreation facilities were the girls brought to Devonport and Stonehouse areas for war work ('Plymouth YWCA Facility', *Western Evening Herald*, 13 October 1914). This also, for Nancy Astor, meant a heightening of her existing focus on the poor women and girls of the Barbican and other deprived areas of the Three Towns, one that went beyond the usual philanthropic provision of garments and food. She was on all the usual wartime fund-raising committees in Plymouth, especially those managed by Queen Mary (Astor was part of the royal circle; see Rowbotham, 2018: 191–214) – notably the Prince of Wales Relief Fund and Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, and she also worked with the Soldiers and Sailors Family Association (SSFA, later SSAFA). But her key local efforts were focused through the local branch of the Central Committee on Women's Employment, formed for 'the prevention of distress' by 'enabling women to keep going as self-supporting units' but also having the potential for a post-war employment legacy ('Plymouth and Women's Work', *Western Morning News*, 18 September 1914). Astor was instrumental, aided by her friends Mrs Hurrell and Miss Boyes-Fowler (both noted suffragists), in arranging instruction classes so that inexperienced seamstresses in need of employment but 'not yet proficient' could learn to 'become expert in this kind of work' ('War Shirt-Making at Plymouth', *Western Evening Herald*, 12 November 1914). As well as continuing to support the three existing day nurseries in Plymouth, she realised that women's maternal responsibilities were affected by a complex range of factors from the local disruption to schooling¹⁹ to the shift work patterns associated with urgent war work.

In October 1914, the Batter Street Girls' Club opened, to provide a place for unmarried girls to go in their leisure hours. Initially it was an evening enterprise, but it expanded to a daily resource which included training for girls and women in a range of skills, including carpentry, cooking and light electrical engineering, intended to suit them for post-war work as well as work to help the national cause during the emergency of war itself. Nancy Astor's priority was to create schemes which would promote opportunities for local girls and women to earn a decent income from their efforts, as she emphasised in a speech when she described an encounter with a local Plymothian who had told her 'We don't so much want clubs for the girls as a living wage' ('The Root of Much Evil', *Western Evening Herald*, 16 October 1916). Astor continued that she agreed that a club was 'not a panacea for the difficulties that beset a life of a young working girl', which was why she sought to make these clubs more than venues for leisure ('The Root of Much Evil', *Western Evening Herald*, 16 October 1916).

Nancy Astor also understood the need to develop skills which would cater for women and girls who were less physically able, including girls injured in the course of war-work. One of the most prominent manifestations of this was her imaginative decision to set up a local artificial-flower-making industry, because it was light work, potentially profitable and requiring only nimble fingers. She had imported (at her expense) an instructor from the Mayfair Flower Makers, London, to teach interested girls this new skill, at which the Plymothians advertisedly demonstrated a 'remarkable aptitude'; her first sale of their efforts took place in 3 Elliot Terrace on 6 March 1917 ('Mrs Astor's Artificial Flower Sale', *Western Evening Herald*, 5 March 1917). The second sale took place in January 1918, by which time it had been established that the 'crippled' girls would be trained and work during the day, while 'more fortunate' girls wishing a longer-term alternative to previous employment could avail themselves of the facilities and training in the Club during the evenings ('Cripple Girls of Plymouth In A Promising New Industry', *Western Morning News*, 31 January 1918). The publicly expressed aim on her part was to offer post-war alternatives to girls and women to prevent them having to resort to traditional forms of low-skilled and poorly paid exploitative home-work, or 'sweated' labour ('Cripple Girls of

¹⁹ Shift work, for example, could see children unable to go to school if too young to go unescorted, or children (particularly girls) might be kept off school to provide childcare. Equally some schools might have to close because their premises were requisitioned by the Admiralty or other agencies for war purposes including emergency hospital accommodation, billeting and holding stores, leaving children to roam the streets, something acknowledged with concern in the local press. See for example 'The Schools and the War', *Western Morning News*, 17 August 1914.

Plymouth In A Promising New Industry', *Western Morning News*, 31 January 1918).²⁰ Over the next years, she continued to promote the industry – and it did indeed establish itself as a successful inter-war industry for Plymouth women ('Artificial Flowers. Lady Astor's Interest In Plymouth Industry', *Western Morning News*, 26 November 1919).

It is impossible to document the full scale and detail of Nancy Astor's war work in Plymouth, but the visible legacy included her involvement in setting up the Girl Guides locally, and developing the Victory Boys' Club to complement the Batter Street Girls' Club (Popple, 2006). Throughout the war years, Nancy never lost sight of her duty as a constituency campaigner to promote her husband's chances of re-election at the post-war General Election, which everyone was anticipating would occur as soon as Lloyd George could manage it. During the war years of 1939 to 1945 when she was the local MP, it can be said that, as an examination of her involvement underlines, what Nancy did in and for Plymouth was substantially along the same lines as what she had established during the previous conflict (Fort, 2012: 283–7; Tait, 2006). There were no new initiatives. This time, the Virginia House Settlement (formally set up in 1925) acted as the channel through which activities similar to those developed between 1914–1918 through the Batter Street Girls' Club and the Victory Club were made available to both Plymothians and war-drawn incomers, civilian and military (Gould, 2010: 4–6). The key difference was that the styles and technology of warfare changed and the extensive physical damage done to Plymouth during the 1941 Blitz meant that the plans that she and Waldorf came up with for post-war reconstruction had to be more radical than those they had evolved in 1917 and 1918, and pushed for during the interwar years (Gould, 2015). As in the previous conflict, she focused on issues like nutrition, availability of milk, the provision of supplies and canteens; these were her priorities in contributing to debates and asking questions in the House.²¹ As she was also Lady Mayoress to Waldorf's Lord Mayor, she was on the spot and visible in Plymouth, regardless of the personal risks she ran. But she recalled how important that visibility had been in Plymouth during the Great War and was determined not to let the city down. Her presence was both an inspiration and a practical asset there (Fox, 2001: 443–5).

Back in 1918, with a general election in view, and having sustained an inspirational role in Plymouth during the war years, Nancy Astor was able to keep Waldorf well-informed about local issues and priorities. In the closing months of the war in particular, he used this to argue for the inclusion of locally popular topics such as setting up a Ministry of Health in the post-war reconstruction era ('Welfare', *Western Mail*, 25 June 1918). He also regularly visited Plymouth during 1917 and 1918 to chair local meetings on the proposals for women's suffrage under the proposed new legislation giving universal adult male enfranchisement and a limited female representation, culminating in the Representation of the People Act 1918, with a focus on engaging with potential local women voters ('Plymouth Unionists and Women's Franchise', *Western Morning News*, 24 October 1917). But as this discussion of her contributions to the Plymouth community indicates, her local activities went far beyond that, demonstrating her deep personal commitment to the welfare of women and children in particular. Her personal popularity, already high before the war, was even higher after it, because of the reciprocal affection for her that was felt locally.

THE MP FOR PLYMOUTH SUTTON, WORKING TO RESHAPE POST-1918 PLYMOUTH

Increasingly in the interwar years, the challenge to the Astor hold on Plymouth Sutton came from the rise of Labour, rather than from resurgent Liberalism, thanks to the high profile of the Plymouth Co-Operative Society in particular, which resulted in very complex municipal as

²⁰ Artificial flowers were widely used for hats and dress adornments, and also for table and other household decorations. While the former category in particular was largely catered for by the London-based artificial flower industry, the UK-based industry had never produced sufficient to cut the demand for imports.

²¹ The charge has been made (see Fox, 2001: 446–7; Fort, 2012: 292–3) that Nancy Astor had become an embarrassment and unpopular in the House. The unpopularity with male MPs was far from new but the claim that she was making random and unhelpful comments is not sustained by a careful examination of *Hansard*. It is perfectly possible that such comments were made behind the scenes and in committee work, but it is also likely that she just continued to be the kind of nuisance she always had been, asking awkward questions of the kind that government would prefer were not asked. The difference in the war years was that, thanks to Claud Cockburn's determined and venomous campaign against the 'Cliveden Set', her comments were liable to misinterpretation and used to attack her. See Gottlieb, 2016.

well as national politics (Hilson, 2006: 85–130). One reason was that while it is true that a radical element in the Three Towns was shifting towards Labour, the Astors had, through their activities between 1908 and 1918, effectively stolen the mantle of liberalism locally through their espousal of issues dear to Plymouth hearts. This helps to explain Waldorf Astor's landslide re-election in December 1918, but also works to re-emphasise the Plymouth dimension to Nancy Astor's political profile when she stood for election in November 1919. It helped here that Nancy, despite being the wife of a rich man, personally had no sense of class consciousness and no time for the class system she found in the UK. Interestingly, in the light of her own future political beliefs, which would be demonstrated when she became an MP, even before taking her seat in the Commons, as a result of her six years of involvement with Plymouth, she had already lumped together both Liberals and Labour, alongside Radicalism, as the obstacles to genuine social reform, arguing that they promoted class hatred. For her, that was why she believed the Conservative and Unionist Party was the best vehicle for achieving the changes needed in Plymouth ('Mrs Astor at Plymouth', *Western Morning News*, 2 July 1914).

Her successful level of Plymouth engagement also helps to explain why she made no real effort to counter or defuse the hostility she encountered in Westminster. She already had the kind of audience she enjoyed addressing in Plymouth. Tellingly, the day after her election, on 29 November, she delayed her departure to London to the Sunday so she could address the men working at the Devonport dockyard (numbers of whom were her constituents). A strike was planned over a reduction in hours, intended to maintain maximum employment. At the Keyham Gate entrance, Nancy Astor stood up in her car as the day's work ended for the workers and gave her audience 'a straight talking to', as several of them commented later. Astor forcefully emphasised they had to think of their mothers, wives and children – and accept the reduction in hours as the best way of ensuring a majority of the Barbican had money coming in to give their families. She also promised – and kept her promise – to lobby the government incessantly on local welfare issues ('Dockyard Ballot. Appeal to the Men by Lady Astor MP. Conscience First', *Western Morning News*, 1 December 1919).

This continuing emphasis on the local dimension in her activities as MP is key to understanding Nancy Astor's ability to win a further six election campaigns but also enhances an understanding of the persistent local dimensions that she brought to the kinds of causes that she supported as an MP. Takayanagi rightly references Astor's extensive, if substantially unacknowledged, impact during her Parliamentary career, on a wide range of causes relating to 'the lives of women and protection of children' (Takayanagi, 2020: 3). In that committee work, as well as in her more public contributions to Commons debates, Plymouth was constantly invoked. A survey of her involvement in committees and debates also reveals that the roots of all her political activities between 1919 and 1945 were established before she entered the House of Commons. As an MP, she took Plymouth and its interests with her to Parliament, indicating that her comment 'I stuck to Plymouth: Plymouth stuck to me' was more than an electioneering slogan (Berry-Waite, 2020). For example, the resource of providing day nurseries for working women continued to be a high priority, based on her Plymouth experience. She was convinced that the Plymouth data showed they were 'tremendously wanted' nationally because 'they helped women who had to go out to work' ('Working Women's Children', *Western Morning News*, 12 November 1925; 'Social Services', *Northampton Chronicle and Echo*, 14 May 1931). She consistently reminded audiences at meetings across the country of this, insisting that 'She constantly came across mothers who could not do this [work] but for the day nursery' ('Working Women's Children', *Western Morning News*, 12 November 1925). Another example of campaigning on issues dating back to 1911 is provided by educational provision, including debates on the school-leaving age, girls' education and provision for school-children of sports and recreational facilities. Even before Fisher's Education Act 1918, Plymouth had, under local bye-laws, supported a school-leaving age of 14. As an MP, in and out of the House, Lady Astor used Plymouth data to argue for raising it further to 15 or 16 as the 'only way of giving poor children a chance' ('School Leaving Age Should Be Raised Says Lady Astor', *Western Gazette*, 29 July 1927). She returned to the theme in 1930, when she insisted that following the example of Plymouth was the 'right thing' for the government when developing its school-leaving policy ('Lady Astor and Education', *Western Morning News*, 18 November 1930).

This sense that Plymouth was an effective microcosm for addressing national political issues could, however, lead her astray. In 1931, she took up the cause of seasonal workers in relation

to the regulations introduced under the Unemployment Insurance (Anomalies Regulation) Act 1931, fearing the impact on the women and families of individuals such as waiters in Plymouth hotels. In response to a Miss Jenkins, acting on behalf of such workers, she promised to do 'everything she possibly can' to overturn the potential anomalies that she had been told existed.²² Her interventions in the House on the topic were treated dismissively because it rapidly became plain that she did not actually understand the realities involved, even in Plymouth. When she contacted the four women (including two she worked with regularly, Mrs Clara Daymond and Mrs Hester Robins) on the Plymouth Public Assistance Committee seeking data which would support her arguments, the response was not what she had expected. There was, she was told, no indication of any negative popular feeling about the operation of the Means Test, and the legislation was working well in Plymouth.²³ This was undoubtedly one of the times when an invocation of a Plymouth case study let her down, something which happened again in 1934 over a very similar issue in relation to debates in the Commons over the Hotels and Restaurants Bill. Her reliance on local data to extrapolate conclusions to the national landscape was unfortunate, though as Eleanor Rathbone commented in the same debate, her comments were also misinterpreted by the House and on the evidence provided by a careful reading of the debate, quite deliberately so, confirming the ongoing resentment both of Astor and of female MPs generally (*Hansard*, HC, 6 February 1934).²⁴

CONCLUSION

In 1937, a year when Lady Astor used Plymouth examples to contribute to public and political debates on the value of outdoor education and council grants for nursery schools, on shorter working hours, pension equality for women, the need for women police and unemployment amongst fishermen, she was made a Companion of Honour by George VI. Talking of her delight in being so honoured, she reflected that 'If the Plymouth people had not allowed me to put social services before party politics, I would not have got this kind of honour', and insisted that 'it all comes back to Plymouth' ('King Honours Lady Astor', *Western Morning News*, 24 July 1937). It is difficult to argue against that conclusion – for her, quite genuinely, her politics all, and always, came back to Plymouth. Her loyalty to Plymouth was clearly a major factor in getting her re-elected, because as confirmed by the reportage in the press, and the huge number of personal letters in the archives to her from Plymothians, the voters of Plymouth actively appreciated her sense of commitment. In 1945, the impact of standing down from her constituency on her sense of self-worth and personal identity was immense – she was pressured, rather than persuaded, into so doing by figures including her husband Waldorf. Lady Astor herself believed she still had another election in her, and on the evidence of her continuing local popularity, it is not impossible that she could have won. Astor was never seen by the majority of male Conservative MPs as a party asset, but time and again, her constituents demonstrated that they thought differently, at least in terms of her ability to be an asset to the city she had worked for so indefatigably. It is for this reason that understanding Lady Astor as a politician requires an understanding of Plymouth and her commitment to a location that gave her a value for herself and her work. She lobbied for Plymouth to become a city (which it did, in 1928), and when she became a Freeman of that city in July 1959, it was, for her, an official acknowledgement by Plymouth that although she had ceased to be one of its MPs, she was still a Plymothian, if a controversial one, as underlined by the local events surrounding the celebrations of her centenary.

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²² The University of Reading, Special Collections: Nancy Astor Archive, MS1416/1/1/1064, Letter, Lady Astor to Miss Jenkins, December 1931.

²³ The University of Reading, Special Collections: Nancy Astor Archive, MS1416/1/1/1064, Letters to Lady Astor, 24 November 1931, unsigned.

²⁴ *Hansard*, HC, 285, 6 February 1934. Available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1934-02-09/debates/1cdb5da9-d0eb-4358-bb51-b929bf868802/HotelsAndRestaurantsBill> (last accessed 5 February 2021).

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