

# The Blue Plaque

## Nancy Astor

Nick Rennison

Born in America in 1879, Nancy Astor came to Britain as a young woman after the failure of her first marriage and was soon remarried to the wealthy politician and newspaper proprietor, Waldorf Astor.

She became the first woman to sit in the British Houses of Parliament in 1919 when she fought and won a by-election in the Plymouth Sutton constituency. The seat had previously been held by her husband who had moved into the Lords on inheriting his father's viscountcy.

She was not in fact the first woman to be elected to parliament. That distinction belonged to Constance Markievicz who had been returned for an Irish seat the previous year but, as an Irish nationalist, she had refused to take the oath required to enter the Commons.

Nancy Astor attracted attention because she was the first woman actually to take her seat in parliament. She remained in the Commons as a Conservative MP for the next twenty-five years. Outspoken on social issues, particularly those affecting women and the family, she was also a firm believer in the evils of the demon alcohol and an advocate of temperance reform.

Her maiden speech in the Commons warned about the perils of drinking and, in 1923, she introduced a Private Member's Bill that aimed to raise the age at which one could buy alcohol to eighteen.

During the 1930s she and her husband were strong advocates of peace with Germany at almost any price and Cliveden, their country house in Berkshire, was a meeting place for those politicians who believed in Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.

After war was declared, however, Nancy Astor became a stern critic of Chamberlain's conduct of it and she voted against the government in May 1940, helping to bring Churchill to power. She decided not to stand in the first post-war election in 1945 and spent the last two decades of her life out of the political limelight.



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