



In 1923 she was responsible for the first Private Members' Bill ever passed by a woman, the Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to persons under Eighteen) Bill. The principle that alcohol cannot be sold to anyone under the age of 18 remains to this day.

She won seven elections between 1919 and 1935, retiring from Parliament in 1945. The MP who replaced her was also a woman, Lucy Middleton, who held the seat till 1951 when Astor's son Jackie became the MP.

### An unconventional MP

Taking on a culture of insidious sexism and often outright resentment, she spent almost 2 years as the only woman in the House of Commons.

She supported welfare reforms, equal voting rights and access to the professions for women. She was also supportive of other female MPs regardless of political party.

Her performance in the Chamber tended to lack discipline and she was prone to indiscriminate heckling.

Arguably her greatest political challenge was accusations of hosting the 'Cliveden Set' of alleged pro-German appeasers who held too much influence outside of Parliament.

She reluctantly resigned from Parliament in 1945 on her husband's advice, after an erratic performance during World War II, it was a wise decision. She had served as an MP for 26 years.

*"I will miss the House; the House won't miss me."*

*The other members "would rather have had a rattlesnake than me" in the House of Commons*

(BBC 1956)

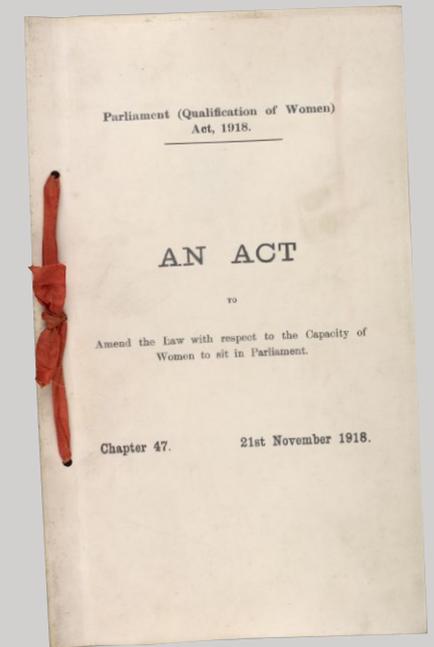


Conservative women MPs on the House of Commons Terrace, 1931, (Nancy Astor is top left) Parliamentary Archives HL/PO/RO/1/188

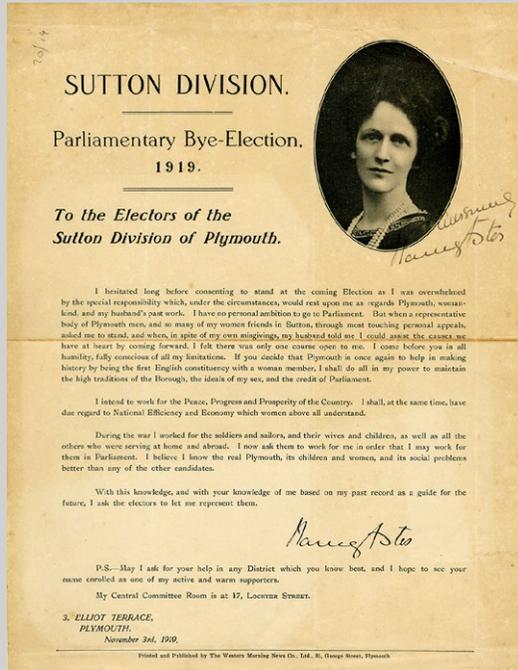
In 1928 Astor remembered her early days in the House – "I had the privilege of being the first woman in the House of Commons, and sometimes I used to doubt whether it was a privilege. When I stood up and asked questions affecting women and children, social and moral questions, I used to be shouted at for 5 or 10 minutes at a time. That was when they thought that I was rather a freak, a voice crying in the wilderness". Many MPs refused to speak to her, Churchill later told her "we hoped to freeze you out".

# Nancy Astor MP

The First Woman to Sit in the House of Commons 1919-1945



In 1918 Parliament passed the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act which allowed women to become MPs for the first time.



Nancy, Viscountess Astor's election leaflet 1919  
Parliamentary Archives BRO/1

## A "Fighting Woman" Plymouth Sutton 1919

*"If you want an M.P. who will be a repetition of the 600 other M.P.s don't vote for me. If you want a lawyer or if you want a pacifist don't elect me. If you can't get a fighting man, take a fighting woman. If you want a Bolshevist or a follower of Mr Asquith, don't elect me. If you want a party hack don't elect me. Surely we have outgrown party ties, I have. The war has taught us that there is a greater thing than parties and that is the State."*

Nancy Astor campaign speech

Nancy Astor stood as a Unionist candidate (now the Conservative Party). Many had reservations, including the Unionist Party Chairman, Sir George Younger, who said "the worst of it is, the woman is sure to get in".

## Electioneering

Nancy was at her best on the hustings where her natural wit and charm endeared her to voters of all classes. She had a flair for the dramatic and could hold her own with anyone.

Interestingly after World War I Plymouth Sutton had a majority of women voters.



Introduction of Lady Astor as the first woman MP in 1919 by Charles Sims, RA RWS (1873–1928) oil on canvas ©Plymouth City Council (Arts & Heritage)

## In Parliament

Astor was elected in a by-election on 15th November 1919, although she had to wait until the 28th for the results to be announced. She had more votes than the Labour and Liberal candidates combined.

Nancy arrived in Parliament on 1st December 1919 to take her oath. David Lloyd George and Arthur Balfour were her sponsors. When called to swear her in Lloyd George set off before the others and was pulled back and scolded by Nancy!

*"...I am perfectly aware that it does take a bit of courage to address the House on that vexed question, Drink."*

On 24th February 1920 Astor stood alone amongst an audience of over 500, mainly hostile, male MPs to deliver her maiden speech. Her subject was close to her heart - the need for restrictions on the sale of alcohol. Her speech emphasised the damage it caused to women and children as well as the economic cost to the country.

## Who was Nancy Astor?

She was an American, born in Virginia in 1879 and married into the wealthy Astor family.

She was a divorcee, something which came to haunt her.

She was elected to Parliament for Plymouth Sutton in a by-election in November 1919, replacing her husband who had previously been the MP.

Despite her claims of 'ardent feminism', suffrage campaigners were initially dismayed that the first woman MP had never had ties to their movement.