

# 100 YEARS AGO

THE FIRST WOMAN TO TAKE A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT



**The Viscountess Nancy Astor**

(19 May 1879 – 2 May 1964)

**Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor** was the first female Member of Parliament to take her seat. She was however, not the first woman elected to the Westminster Parliament. That was achieved by *Constance Markievicz*, who was the first woman MP *elected* to Westminster in 1918, but as she was an Irish Republican, she did not take her seat.

**Nancy** moved to England and married her second husband, Waldorf Astor. The couple were well matched, as they were both American expatriates with similar temperaments. They were exactly the same age, born on the same day, 19 May 1879.

After the marriage, the Astor couple moved into **Cliveden**, a lavish estate in Buckinghamshire on the River Thames, not far from Reading. The home was a wedding gift from Astor's father. Nancy Astor developed as a prominent hostess for the social elite.

Through her many social connections, **Lady Astor** became involved in a political circle called Milner's Kindergarten.

**Astor** had not been connected with the women's suffrage movement. She was not popular for her vocal campaign for teetotalism and her ignorance of current political issues. **Astor** appealed to voters on the basis of her earlier work with the Canadian soldiers, allies of the British, other charitable work during the war, her financial resources for the campaign and her ability to improvise. Her audiences appreciated her wit and ability to turn the tables on hecklers. She rallied supporters of the current government, moderated her Prohibition views, and used women's meetings to gain the support of female voters. A by-election was held on 28 November 1919 and she took up her seat in the House on 1 December as a Unionist (also known as a 'Tory') Member of Parliament.

**Nancy Astor's** accomplishments in the House of Commons were relatively minor. She neither held a position with much influence, nor a post of ministerial rank, although she did gain passage of a bill to increase the legal drinking age to eighteen.

During this period **Nancy Astor** continued to be active outside government, supporting the development and expansion of nursery schools for children's education.

Her wealth and persona also brought attention to women who were serving in government. She worked to recruit women into the civil service, the police force, education reform, and the House of Lords. She remained popular in her constituency during the 1920s, but her success declined after that. It is thought that her work for juvenile victims of crime led to a Departmental Committee on Sexual Offences against Young People, which reported in 1925.

Cliveden, Buckinghamshire

