

Margaret Wintringham (1879-1955)

First female Member of Parliament

Margaret Wintringham was Lincolnshire's first female Member of Parliament and a pioneer amongst female representatives at Westminster.

Her maiden name was Margaret Longbottom and she was born on 4 August 1879 at Keighley in Yorkshire. She trained as a teacher and throughout her life was active in community organisations. In 1903 she married a Grimsby timber merchant, Thomas Wintringham.

Among many bodies with which she was involved, she was a member of the Grimsby committees organizing relief for Belgian refugees during the First World War, a member of the Lincolnshire Agricultural Committee, and was a magistrate from 1920 onwards. In that year she and her husband moved to Louth when Thomas Wintringham was elected as Liberal MP for the town.

Thomas Wintringham had a heart attack and died in the library of the House of Commons on 8 August 1921. The Louth Liberal party, faced with a by-election in six weeks, turned to his widow as their candidate. She agreed to stand on the astonishing condition that she did not have to speak in public because she was in mourning.

She attended campaign meetings which were then addressed on her behalf by a variety of people, including local Liberal Party members, her two sisters, and women's movement activists such as members of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship. Another person who expressed her support for Mrs Wintringham was Lady Astor, the first, and at that time the only, woman in the House of Commons. This support came despite the fact that Lady Astor sat for the Conservatives. She felt that the cause of women in Parliament was more important than party divisions.

Margaret Wintringham won the by-election, which took place in September 1921, and retained her seat in the General Election of the following year. The Conservative government called another General Election on the issue of tariff reform in December 1923 when she again retained the Louth seat for the Liberals. There was no party with a majority after this election and Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government fell after less than a year. In the October 1924 General Election the Liberals were annihilated and Margaret Wintringham was one of those to lose her seat.

As an MP she was an advocate not only of her own constituents but also of women's and children's issues generally. Her career in the House of Commons is summed up by the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: "She helped to carry the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, a measure for the protection of young girls, through its parliamentary stages. She spoke on many issues during her short parliamentary career, including agriculture, children's rights, consumer protection, the need for women police officers (whom she believed were important for the protection of women and children), and the plight of the rural unemployed."

This work led to close collaboration with Lady Astor and the two became lifelong friends, though they could hardly have been more different. Nancy Astor was sophisticated and volatile, aristocratic and witty (“I married beneath me. All women do”), whereas Margaret Wintringham was practical, sensible and from a completely different social background. Nevertheless she was often a guest at Nancy Astor’s palatial home, Cliveden in Buckinghamshire.

She remained highly active in public life; she sat on the Royal Commission on the Civil Service from 1929 to 1931, was a member of the Lindsey County Council from 1933, worked with the Women’s Land Army during the Second World War and was a long-term campaigner for nursery education. She died on 10 March 1955, aged 75, and is buried at Little Grimsby.

Sources:

Margaret Wintringham’s own copy of *The Development of Adult Education for Women*

(Lincolnshire Archives: MISC DON 166)

Letter from Margaret Wintringham, written at Cliveden, 1928

(Lincolnshire Archives: Goulding Papers/C/3/127)