Mount Gould Lady Astor Trust Houses

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The Astor Housing Trust was controversial from the very beginning, with disagreements between the political parties as to whether or not it should be built. Between 1924 and 1928 Lady Astor Housing Trust built 92 houses in Mount Gould at a cost of £50,000. Originally, Lord and Lady Astor were hoping to have these houses built in Prince Rock, but owing to no land either being available or suitable, it was decided to build them at the newly developed Mount Gould.

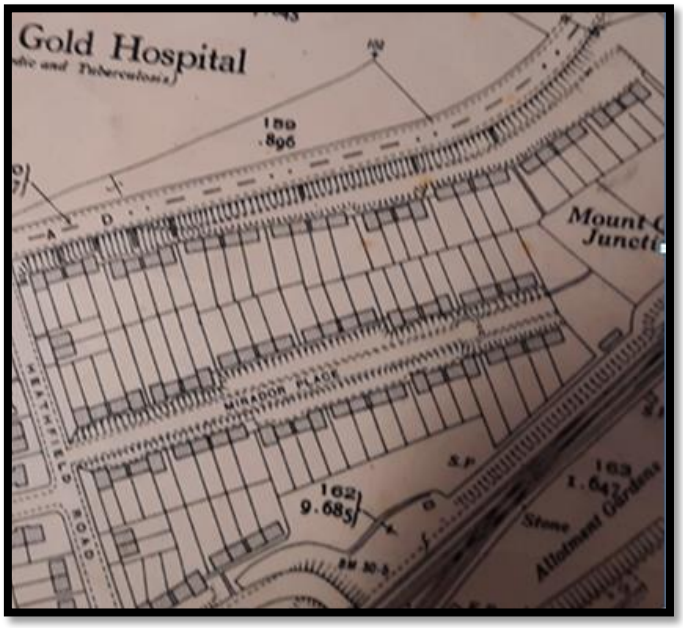

Figure 1: Map of Astor housing estate, Mount Gould, Plymouth. The streets were named Mirador Place, Heath Road and Mount Gold Terrace.

The population of Plymouth first heard about Lady Astor's plans for her new housing estate when it was outlined on 21 January 1924 in the *Western Morning News*. It was reported that Lady Astor had to put this idea aside during the recent election. 'There was not a whisper while the contest was in progress, when I asked Lord Astor a few weeks ago to tell me something about the scheme.'[1]

The idea of a housing trust for the working classes originally came from Lord Astor. As he was one of the governors of the Peabody Trust and Plymouth Housing Trust, Lady Astor's

[1] *Western Morning News*, 21 January 1924.

housing trust would be along very similar lines, with all the income arising from the rents reverting to the trust to build more and more houses.

The newspaper reported that all sorts of designs were sifted and rejected. One of the first ideas was the provision of some sort of institute, social centre or recreation room in a locality of Plymouth where such an institution might be thought of special advantage to the inhabitants. This idea of an institute did not take shape until 1929 when it was built in Mount Gould.

The newspaper went into more detail:

1. The plan was to establish a Housing Trust for Plymouth, with an initial gift from Lady Astor of at least £10,000
2. The rents of the houses would go to swell the capital, instead of being paid away in interest on money invested for profit. So, capital and income would grow steadily with the years, and the trust will automatically supply some of the housing needs of the growing population of Plymouth
3. The Council has been asked to provide a building site
4. The State will be paying £75 per house
5. A Board of Governors will be appointed on which all the principal interests will be represented including Lady Astor, the Ministry of Health and the Housing and Town Planning Association.

As the article pointed out, a town council was tied by laws and bye-laws as well as its strict regard for the ratepayers' pockets, but the advantage of a trust was that it would have more freedom than a municipality could possess in the matter of rents, structure of buildings and various conditions for tenants, combining Lady Astor's wish that the rent should be reduced for every child under a certain age.[2]

Plymouth Housing Committee met on 23 January 1924 to discuss the scheme, with many in favour. Alderman A. G. Crowle thought that such a scheme would be of great benefit to Plymouth as the great need for houses will more than tax the energies of the corporation: 'Schemes such as this, the railway scheme, and others of a similar character, should be very heartily welcomed and assisted by a supplementary grant from the Corporation in addition to the Government subsidy'

Mr Albert E. Webb observed:

> The Scheme is an excellent one… I am sure it will be received with appreciation by every member of the community. At present negotiations are proceeding between the owners of the land proposed to be acquired at Prince Rock, about nine acres in extent, and the Corporation. Whilst I cordially and heartily support this scheme, both on the grounds of philanthropy and utility, I am in favour of going a great deal further. I hope it may be possible in the near future

[2] Ibid.

> to inaugurate a municipal house-purchasing scheme on similar lines to the one adopted many years ago by the Plymouth Co-operative Society.[3]

'The Astor Housing Trust Scheme should go a long way towards solving the housing problem so far as Plymouth is concerned,' declared Mrs C. Daymond.[4]

In February, the *Western Morning News* published an article about Lady Astor's housing trust, which had been discussed from a women's point of view in the journal 'Tide and Tide'. The article goes on to explain in more detail about Lady Astor's scheme:

> In introducing this provision Lady Astor is endeavouring to meet a problem which is particularly acute today, the handicap suffered by parents with a young family who seek for rooms. "No children taken" becomes a very bitter saying when it is heard day after day by homeless or inadequately-housed couples, often able and willing to pay for accommodation, but barred by the possession of what seems to them an asset to the country. With this same need in view, the trust deeds suggest that three-quarters of the tenants should consist of families with young children. Rents are to be payable weekly and time is to be generously allowed for the payment of arrears. With Lady Astor's lead, together with the expectation of a forward housing policy, this may help to galvanise women into putting more thinking, more personal investigation, and more enthusiasm into this difficult technical yet fundamental question.[5]

During 1924, Lady Astor's housing scheme came before Plymouth Housing Committee with various suggestions as to whether it was a good idea or whether Plymouth Town Council should be building houses for council tenants.

On 13 March 1924, the *Western Morning News* said they had been informed that Lady Astor's gift of £10,000 was to be doubled, with Lord Astor also giving £10,000. As the newspaper explained:

> As I understand it, difficulties arose with regard to the conditions of the first offer, one of which was that the Corporation was to provide the land on which the Trust cottages were to be built. It was found that the Town Council had no legal power to leave or give the necessary land to a housing trust. This meant that the scheme must either fall through or the conditions of the offer would have to be revised.
>
> Lady Astor agreed to provide the building site, but as the cost of this land, in addition to the proposed recreational institute, would absorb so much of the £10,000, the balance remaining for the main purpose of building houses would be too small to be of any substantial benefit. Lady Astor's offer is conditional on the Corporation contributing £50 per house towards roads, sewers etc.
>
> Lady Astor was unwilling to abandon the idea of the institute, which was designed to be of benefit not only to the occupants of the Trust houses, but for others living in the immediate neighbourhood. It was clear, therefore, that if the whole scheme was to go forward it was advisable that the Trust Fund should be enlarged.[6]

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[3] *Western Evening Herald*, 23 January 1924.
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Western Morning News*, 2 February 1924.
[6] *Western Morning News*, 13 March 1924.

The next problem arose when it was a question of where the houses should be erected. Originally Lord and Lady Astor were thinking of Prince Rock, but the land they were thinking of was considered unsuitable. Other land in mind was used by allotment holders. One allotment holder wrote in April:

> It is an awkward time to disturb allotment holders just now. Manures have been purchased and seeds have been put in. Lord Astor has undertaken to compensate us for disturbance but we shall want to be provided with other accommodation.[7]

There was a delay in building the houses while the search for land was continuing. Eventually on 9 October 1924 it was reported that The Astor Trust scheme, with the sanction of the Ministry of Health, was proposing to purchase 10 acres of land on the Mount Gold Estate for £24,000.

'Applications will be made to the Ministry for sanction to borrow £20,725 in connection with the purchase. The transfer of the 10 acres will be made direct to the Astor Housing Trust for £5,077.'[8] The newspaper reported that Lady Astor said that the trust was to be a perpetual one, the income and rents being devoted to the erection of more houses towards the general development and extension of the scheme, detailed provisions of which will be submitted in two trust deeds, the trust, so far as the same relates to housing, to be under the direction of representatives of the council, the Ministry of Health and the donors. It was resolved that Lady Astor be informed that the Housing Committee agreed generally to the proposals.

Finally, in March 1925 the committee agreed to the proposals of the governors of the Astor Housing Trust for the erection of 40 houses at Mount Gold. The rents of 24 of the houses were to be 8s 9d per week and of 16 houses, 10s 6d per week.[9]

In April 1925, when addressing the General Council of Sutton Division Conservatives, Lady Astor said:

> I have realized in a small way how difficult it is to get houses put up in connection with the Astor Housing Trust. Assuming that everyone wanted to help the matter I find it is simply amazing the number of difficulties which have kept on resenting themselves and sometimes I despaired. It almost seemed as if some people thought we were trying to rob the rates instead of giving houses. I do hope that matters are now really under way.[10]

The next problem the Astor Housing Scheme encountered was that the tenders for the erection of 40 houses were too high for acceptance by the governors of the trust or the Ministry of Health. There were many adverts for new tenders.

Finally on 28 August 1925, the *Western Morning News* reported that work had commenced at the end of Beaumont Road for the provision of 80 houses on a site of 10 acres. The paper reported that the workmen were on site and preparing the foundations and were hoping that the

[7] *Western Morning News*, 2 April 1924.
[8] *Western Morning News*, 9 October 1924.
[9] *Western Morning News*, 6 March 1925.
[10] *Western Morning News*, 24 April 1925.

houses would be ready for occupation by the end of the year, though they wondered if the corporation was being optimistic.

The newspaper stated that the houses were to be:

> Ornamental in character and larger than those presently being built by the Corporation. They were to be of brick on the ground floor and slate facing above, built in blocks of two and four houses and the spacious gardens of each block will be walled off from those adjoining. Each dwelling will have a parlour and some will contain four bedrooms and others three, the desire of the Trust being to accommodate as far as possible persons having large families. Electric lighting was to be installed throughout.
>
> The architects were Messrs Hennell and James of Russell Square, London and the contractor was Mr W.P. Hill of Plymouth. The Trust will be controlled by a body of governors, including the present chairman of the Housing Committee (Mr Albert Webb) and Miss Mary Bayly.[11]

In October 1925 Lord Astor visited the Astor Housing Trust site at Beaumont Road and was satisfied with the progress that had been made. He said that:

> 40 houses were being built, 16 of which are of the living-room, kitchen and scullery type and the remaining 24 are of the type containing living-room and kitchen only.
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> During October the estate had many visitors who were of the opinion that the two types of houses being built were suitable for the majority of those who are now in search of housing accommodation.
>
> Four houses were completed and occupied by that Christmas. It was hoped that the remainder would be ready at the rate of one per week so that within about nine months there will be accommodation for some 200 people.[12]

By January 1926 the following advert in the *Western Morning News* stating that requests for application forms should be made in writing to the secretary, Lady Astor Housing Trust, Virginia House, Palace Court, Plymouth. Applicants were also asked to state the number and age of their children.[13] In 1927 there were adverts asking for those wishing to live in an Astor House to apply.

During 1927 there was much controversy over which land Lord Astor was to build his hostel/institute on. On 5 February 1927 the Public Health Committee of Plymouth Town Council read out a letter from Lord Astor asking if they would be prepared to grant a site on the land recently appropriated for hospital extension at Mount Gold for the purpose of a hostel and an institute. The original plan for the Astor housing estate included provision for an institute on the lower side of Beaumont Road, but it was now suggested that this building might be erected on the higher side, somewhere in fairly close proximity to the University hostel.

[11] *Western Morning News*, 28 August 1925.
[12] *Western Morning News*, 27 October 1925.
[13] Western Morning News, 26 January 1926.

Lord Astor believed that the institute would serve and benefit the recreational and educational interests of the people living on the Astor Estate and the large Corporation Estate.[14]

On 23 September 1927, Lord Astor wrote in the *Western Morning News* about the controversy over him asking for land to build the institute on the Mount Gold Hospital site. It was suggested there was a dispute between him and the council:

> I am not conscious of any dispute between the Plymouth Corporation and myself, or the Astor Housing Trust, but a good deal of delay and difficulty has arisen out of an offer of mine made last January to build a public hall for the joint use of the tenants of the new Corporation houses and the tenants of the Astor Estate on Mount Gold.
>
> The position is perfectly simple. My original intention was to build a recreation Institute for the use of the tenants on the Astor Estate. When the Corporation came along and decided to build their house at Mont Gold I changed my plans. I thought that something bigger would be more suitable, something in the nature of a public hall, which could be used by the tenants of the Corporation houses as well as those on the Astor Estate. There was only one possible site that would suit all the people and that was right at the end of the Mount Gold extension.
>
> When I approached the Corporation in January last and asked for half an acre they offered me a ten years' lease on the site. This was no good to me. The hall I have in mind will cost thousands of pounds and nobody but a fool would build an expensive building with only ten years' security in front of it. Since then I have had a further communication from the Corporation asking me to wait for a final decision until the question of hospital accommodation has been settled. These hospital negotiations may last for months, or even years and I cannot wait.'[15]

Lord Astor said he would keep his offer open until the end of October and if there was no decision, he would abandon his offer of £10,000.

On 12 October 1927, Plymouth Corporation decided to sell Lord Astor about half an acre of land at Mount Gold for the purpose of erecting an institute, despite a heated protest by Mr E. W. Perry, Labour, who decaled that the purpose was the purely political ascendancy of the majority party in the council. Dr Bushnell declared that a site adjacent to a place where there were tuberculosis patients was essentially not the place for a social centre and vice versa. They needed all the land at Mont Gold for hospital purposes.[16]

On 24 October 1927, Lord Astor responded to Labour's criticisms:

> I am again forced to clear up misunderstanding created by the Labour Councillors' statements in opposing my offer of a public hall at Mount Gold. Mr Perry said that he could not imagine that the institute was only offered from philanthropic moves and my "aim and object" must be political propaganda. It would be impossible to use the hall as a centre for Conservative propaganda as one of the trustees was to be the chairman of the Plymouth Housing Committee who might be a Labour Councillor.
>
> I was told by the medical officer of health that the proposal would not hamper the programme of the Health Committee. The medical officer expressed this to the committee also. In spite of

[14] Western Morning News, 05 February 1927.
[15] *Western Morning News*, 23 September 1927.
[16] *Western Morning News*, 12 October 1927.

> this, Mr Perry, as well as Dr Bushnell and Mr Medland, each in his own picturesque language, refuses to give an inch of this land for the institute. The other Labour Councillors supported them by vote.
>
> Finally, I want to give Mr Perry my personal assurance that he is mistaken in believing that I offered the institute to bring about his defeat in Friary. I deliberately take so little part in municipal politics that I had forgotten he represented the ward.[17]

Not everyone was against the Astor Housing Scheme. At a meeting of the residents of Mount Gold district on 29 October, 1927, the following resolution was passed:

> We in Mount Gold area feel grateful to Lord Astor for his very generous offer to build a public institute in the neighbourhood of Mount Gold. We deeply deplore the despicable opposition from political opponents and hope Lord Astor will carry out his original intentions and not regard the un-warrantable construction which has been placed on his actions.[18]

Lady Astor was angry on behalf of her husband, as the following article on 1 November, 1927 demonstrates:

> "Although I will take any hit they like to give me I will not take a hit at Lord Astor sitting down," declared Lady Astor at the Sutton Ward Conservative Association, referring to the controversy concerning the suggested Institute at Mount Gold. "One of the cruellest things ever said about anybody was that my husband was not interested in people who were suffering from tuberculosis. It takes a great deal of charity when I think of my opponents. When this election is over I hope they will be gracious enough to apologise to my husband for having made that appalling insinuation that he was thinking of the well and not the ill and that he was trying to rob the sick of a place to get well in.
>
> There is a great difference between the Astor Housing Trust and the Corporation houses. We have not a house on our estate which has less than three children in it and most of them have seven to ten. The Corporation have got people living in theirs with one child and there are more children in the Astor Trust houses than there is on the whole Corporation places put together. Astor Trust was founded for working men and women with large families because we know how difficult it is for them to get a place when they have large families. They need not think that we shall get any credit for those houses in our lifetime. Long after we have gone the Astor Trust will be building houses with the money collected and there will be more and more houses for working men and women with large families."[19]

There were letters in the newspaper from working people recognising Lord Astor's contribution, as Mr C Coombes writing from 6 Tresillian Street writes on 1 November 1927:

> As a working man residing in Sutton Ward, I should like to ask Mr Perry to state whether he is willing to withdraw his charges of unworthy motives in reference to the offer of an Institute at Mount Gold by Lord Astor and whether he recognizes the previous efforts of Lord Astor to stamp out the dread scourge of tuberculosis nationally and especially locally in the direction of playfields for the children; also the provision of the Astor housing of large families under good sanitary conditions at Beaumont Road.[20]

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[17] *Western Morning News*, 24 October 1927.
[18] *Western Morning News*, 29 October 1927.
[19] *Western Morning News*, 1 November 1927.
[20] Ibid.

Dr Bushnell appealed to Lord Astor to change his plan for the site and on 2 November 1927, he wrote:

> Sir, My conclusions as to the unsuitability of the Mount Gold Hospital site for a social centre have been questioned in the Press, and, in the interests of our consumptive patients, I ask to give the data from which they were drawn and to make an appeal.
>
> Mount Gold Hospital site is simply not the place for a social centre for healthy men, women and children. Lord Astor, who signed the report of the Royal Commission on Tuberculosis, as chairman in 1912, will be among the first to agree to his own findings, which state officially the approved area required for hospital sanatoria for tuberculosis and the accommodation required thereon for different grades, ages and sexes in the disease.
>
> I am only a member of the Public Health Committee, but I know we have to provide for the wants of 150 patients and more. Every square inch of these 22½ acres at Mount Gold is, therefore, earmarked for this object and they are the only suitable acres of accessible sunny southern land belonging to the Corporation left to solve a social evil waiting since 1912.
>
> I appeal to Lord Astor to divert his generous offer of £10,000 from a social centre at Mount Gold to workshops for consumptives in our hospital grounds. Our patients deserve it and all the beauties of the site and no one has testified to this with more authority than the noble lord.[21]

Lord Astor responded to each of the misconceptions on 16 November 1927. He explained that he did not spring an election stunt in 1927, as plans for the institute as applications for the land were made before then.

The next misconception he tackled was the charge that the institute would interfere with consumptives:

> I had to approach the Council as they had a monopoly of the land. When the Council bought the Mount Gould property in 1924 they provisionally allocated 11 acres to the Health Committee for extension of the Fever and Infectious Diseases Hospital not for a tuberculosis sanatorium. In view of what has been said it is important to remember that the Council have never at any time decided to use these 11 acres for consumptives.
>
> Then there is the misconception that the Mount Gold patients would be in a source of danger. It was Dr Bushnell in the Council who pointed to this as a reason for not having the institute close to the patients. Not unnaturally people have assumed that if it would be dangerous to have these cases near an institute and it would be also unwise to increase largely the infectious patients close to the big child population that will soon be in the municipal houses at Mount Gould.
>
> Lastly take the charge that I have gone back on a compact made with and approved by the Council to erect an institute on the Astor Estate. There never was such a compact.
>
> The Astor Trust submitted to the council a plan for the first lot of 40 houses to get approval for the lay-out of a road on the estate. This was passed by the council in June 1925. This plan showed a rough provisional lay-out for another 52 houses. This rough sketch indicated a site for an institute. But this second half of the plan was not then submitted to the council for approval. Later another plan was laid before the council for the development of the second

[21] *Western Morning News*, 2 November 1927.

> half of the estate (with 52 more houses). In January, 1927, the council approved of this plan, which did not contain a site for an institute.
>
> In the Minutes on 23rd November, 1925 it was agreed that the institute should have a community centre, providing both educational and recreational facilities. It was decided to work as far as far as possible with the Plymouth Local Authority with the aim of making the institute a centre for the whole area
>
> Now, Sir, may I end with an appeal to those Labour Councillors who have obviously been acting on a complete misunderstanding of facts. Cannot we all work together for the benefit of Plymouth? The late Mayor (Alderman Moses) urged the people of Plymouth "To drop their bickering and to forget the things that divide them." I do not care who I work with for the betterment of Plymouth provided he means business. Nor do I care what his views are on other (e.g. economic or political) matters. For heaven's sake let us drop all this suspicion and so-called class prejudice which have created so much misunderstanding and bitterness.'[22]

In 1928 the Mayor inspected the Astor Housing Trust houses. His party went to the Astor Trust Estate where there were about 400 children living. 'These houses are delightfully laid out, with an abundance of grass land, and the whole trust, comprising 92 houses and a playground, appears to be very well kept.'[23]

On 19 April 1929, the Mount Gold Institute was opened, which was to be used for the purposes of recreation, educational and social intercourse for the local residents. It was to be run on a contributory membership basis and its activities would be strictly non-party and non-sectarian.

> Occupying a commanding site overlooking River Plym, the Institute is designed on attractive lines and has an imposing entrance hall, which gives access to a well-equipped gymnasium fitted with shower-baths and a large billiards-room and kitchen. At the head of a flight of steps is a spacious central hall, containing a stage at the back of which are a number of classrooms, which will be used by the members for group study. Over the vestibule is a room set apart for the use of young girls and women. A billiards room and gymnasium had been provided and an upper room had been set aside for exclusive use of the women and girl members, where their own social circles could meet and discussion groups be formed.[24]

In 1933 the Tenants Association of Astor Housing Trust announced Lord Astor would pay for the entire cost of making up Mount Gold Terrace, £1 617 3s 9d.

[22] *Western Morning News*, 16 November 1927.
[23] *Western Morning News*, 9 June 1928.
[24] *Western Morning News*, 19 April 1929.

Figure 2: Astor Estate, Astor Hall and Astor Drive.[25]

[25] <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/29_map_text_panels_final.pdf>.

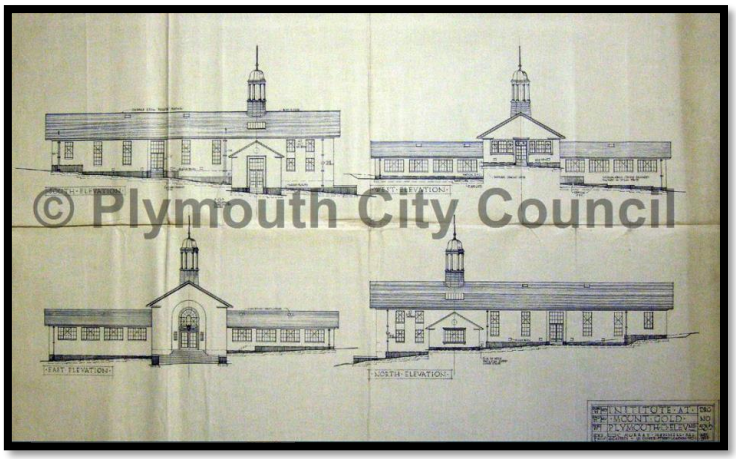

Figure 3: The Astor Institute on Beaumont Road: Plans and associated building notice showing development of the Lady Astor Housing Trust Feb 1926, 1927.
Architects: C Murray Hennell and C H James.
Plans and associated building notices showing erection of headquarters in 1965 and 1968 for the 24th Plymouth Boy Scouts Group within the Astor Institute.
Date: 1926–68.[26]

[26] The Box, Ref PCC/60/1/9340.