Women and Political Activism in Exeter in the 1920s

Julia Neville

This paper considers how women in Exeter pursued their ambitions for full participation as citizens in the political processes of the 1920s. It considers how they modified the pre-First World War structures for participation and the election of the first women councillors in Exeter City Council. It then explores how women were involved in three significant issues of social concern in the 1920s: the need to rehouse people living in slum areas; the campaign for the appointment of women police officers; and the need to provide contraceptive services for those unable to afford private provision. Finally, it looks in detail at participation in the general election in 1929 and how a concerted local effort in which women played a leading part achieved the election of an independent MP rather than a party nominee. It concludes that much of what women achieved in Exeter in the 1920s was achieved through structures promoting positive social action, very similar to those that had existed before the war. The formalisation of political allegiances, and the survival of an etiquette which meant that it was not expected (at least in the wards of the old city) that a sitting councillor would be challenged when the time came for his re-election, made it difficult for women even to be selected to stand for local government election.

The City of Exeter

The city of Exeter in 1921 had a population of approximately 60,000,~~—~~ only slightly more than in 1911. It was a cathedral city; centre of the Diocese of Exeter. It was not only a county borough in its own right, but the base for the administration of the ceremonial county of Devon and of Devon County Council. It was a port, whose jurisdiction ran down the Exe estuary to the sea; a major rail junction for both the Great Western and ~~London and South Western Railways~~Southern Railways (as they became in 1922); and the centre of a network of main roads. By 1921 it was no longer a major industrial centre, although there were a number of industrial sites along the River Exe. A substantial number of men were employed in professional and administrative occupations associated with the cathedral, the law and local government, and there were also large numbers of railway workers,

who formed the backbone of the Trade Union movement in the city. Women were chiefly employed in domestic service or in factory work, with a few employed as teachers or nurses.

The city was the social, intellectual and cultural centre, not just for its own residents but for a wider circle of the population around it. Exeter branches of organisations concerned with promoting or opposing the movement for votes for women, for example, had always recruited members from the estates and towns around the city. The Royal Albert Memorial College was the base for the colleges of arts and science, for teacher training, for university extension lectures and student guilds. Similarly the city's wartime role as a military base, transport centre and the location of seven military hospital units had drawn on a network of volunteers from areas well beyond the city's boundaries. While the discussion in this chapter will focus on residents of Exeter, and how they operated within the administrative and parliamentary structures related to the city of Exeter, it will also take account of the wider networks of which Exonians were part.[1]

[1] **Sources:** Sadly no records survive from relevant organisations or political parties (see Thorpe) for Exeter during this period. Newspapers and BMD information.

Section I: New Directions

Women and the Political Parties, 1918–23

Women in Exeter might have felt a sense of disappointment when they learned that, only a few weeks after parliament had passed the Representation of the People Act in February 1918, a parliamentary by-election was to be held in Exeter but they would not be entitled to vote. T~~Sadly,~~ ~~t~~he implementation of the promise of the Act would not take place until the publication of new electoral registers that autumn. In the event~~,~~ the election, which had occurred as a result of the resignation of the Exeter MP, Henry Duke KC, on his promotion as a law lord to the House of Lords, was not contested. There was a pact among political parties that there should be no contested elections during the war. Henry Duke had been a Conservative MP, and the Conservative Party expected the right to nominate his successor. Their choice, Sir Robert Newman, a local landowner, was widely respected. He had been active in the women's suffrage movement for many years. At the Conservative nominations meeting, a woman, Mrs Vlieland, was invited to speak. She assured the meeting that:

> … there was no one they would have more confidence in asking the women of Exeter to support than Sir Robert Newman because he was staunch for the Church, for bettering the social conditions of the masses, and for the improvement of the home life of the people.[2]

The Liberals in Exeter displayed their own confidence in the selection by sending in a Liberal nomination paper for him. Within ten days of Duke's resignation, Sir Robert Newman became Exeter's MP, and he remained MP throughout the 1920s.

This unparalleled display of political harmony should not be taken as an indication that there was no party political activity in response to the momentous changes of the Representation of the People Act, 1918. Within a month of the Royal Assent, both the Liberals and the Conservatives had held meetings in Exeter to discuss the new opportunities. The Women's Liberal Association held a meeting in the Barnfield Hall on 26 February, under the presidency of Mrs Maud Linscott, a long-term supporter of the suffrage movement.[3] The meeting had a practical focus. It featured a speaker from London who 'very lucidly' described the qualifications required to vote and how to ensure you were registered to vote. This was not straightforward as there were different qualifications for voting in parliamentary elections from those that were applied in local government elections. The

[2] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 3 May 1918
[3] *Western Times*, 28 February 1918.

speaker also urged her audience to 'study the problems of their times' and named two important ones as the League of Nations and temperance.

The Conservatives' National Unionist Association (Devon Division) also held a meeting in Exeter that week, where leading women from each local division were present. The Exeter representatives were Mrs Alice Vlieland, a well-known anti-suffragist, and Miss Clara Andrew, a well-known pro-suffragist. The meeting agreed that the aim should be to integrate the men's and women's branches in each constituency, such a change to be led by the women present. Andrew appears to have been a little cautious about the lack of inclusivity in such a move. Although she seconded the proposal, she said that 'as one who had worked amongst them during this war in canteens, hostels etc.', she would characterise 'the women war workers as splendid'. But, she added, although 'these women were going to be of great value to the nation's future welfare […] they wanted leaders, and for this purpose women such as […] Mrs Vlieland were well suited.' The meeting ended with a discussion on how to present their appeal for support. Another Exeter woman, Mrs Fursdon, asked:

> … whether they were to appeal to people to support what was best in each party, or were they to be advised to vote solidly unionist. Were they going to discriminate, for instance, between the right and wrong kinds of Labour and Socialist proposals, or were these all to be lumped together and people advised to have nothing to do with them?

This question was, however, set aside, with the meeting agreeing that at the present it would be right simply to emphasise their support for the coalition until the war had come to a successful conclusion. [4]

The Exeter branch of the Labour Party had only been formed in 1917. However at a May Day rally on 5 May ~~(adjourned to the Franklin Hall because of rain)~~, the speakers included Mary Willcocks, a professional novelist and lecturer, and a stalwart of the Exeter branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. She 'urged women voters' to join the Labour Party.[5] Willcocks had already concluded that 'practical political work could only be done in the political parties', and had determined to throw in her lot with the Labour Party, 'the only one for women to join'.[6] She stood as a candidate for a local government by-election that November. Her workers for the election included a named team of ten people, three of whom were women: Mrs Lucy, Mrs Chinn and Mrs Roberts. Mrs Chinn and Mrs Roberts were wives of trade unionists; Mrs Lucy has not been firmly

[4] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 28 February 1918.
[5] *Western Times*, 6 May 1918.
[6] *Western Times*, 26 October 1918.

identified. The result was disappointing: Willcocks was badly beaten, only securing about a quarter of the vote.[7] She never stood again for office in Exeter.

Non-political Associations Supporting Women's Engagement

Not everything was seen through the prism of party politics, however. In March 1918 there was a meeting for women convened by what was described as the 'Citizenship Association for Women', formed in 1917 by the National Union of Women Workers.[8] It had been intended that this meeting would be chaired by the mayoress, Lady Owen, whose earlier views on women's suffrage are unknown, but in fact she was indisposed and it was chaired by ~~a~~ Mrs F.A. Sanders, wife of the Archdeacon of Exeter. ~~[not identified].~~ Mrs Sanders first read a letter from Owen in which she expressed the view that women 'ought to be their own political party […] Standing outside the party ring […] we shall be able by the promise of our united support, or the threat of our united opposition, to exercise a decisive influence upon national policy.'

Sanders then read a letter from Miss Jessie Montgomery, who for the past ten years had been the prime mover in the women's suffrage movement in Exeter, but who was also unwell. Montgomery advocated that women in Exeter should 'bond themselves together to study in a broad-minded way the problems which confronted the nation.'[9] This was true to the ethos of self-education, which Montgomery had always instilled in the Exeter branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Miss Dugdale, the national speaker, urged the formation of a local branch of the Women's Citizenship Association (WCA), to foster a sense of citizenship; encourage the study of political, social and economic questions; and to 'secure adequate representation of the interest and experience of women in the affairs of the community'. Mrs Vlieland, who had been the chair of the Exeter branch of the National Union of Women Workers (NUWW), then advocated the formation of an Exeter branch to be conducted on non-party lines. She said that 'sixteen women's societies' had elected representatives to form the executive of the association for the first year. [The sixteen societies are unidentified.] The proposal to form a branch was carried unanimously.

[7] *Western Times*, 7 November 1918.
[8] The Citizenship Association for Women had, in fact, changed its name at the end of 1917 to the National Women Citizens' Association.
[9] *Western Times*, 5 March 1918.

Jessie Montgomery took the lead in setting the direction of the WCA branch. Their meeting at the end of May was held in the Guildhall, and she both presided and addressed the meeting on the objects of the association. She asked her audience to imagine an Exeter with:

> […] an Association of hundreds of women who were full of a sense of responsibility; [who] were unselfish, broad-minded and anxious to do their part in the various departments of the State. She believed there was really no end to what such an Association of really keen and thoughtful women might be able to accomplish.[10]

She appealed to those present to encourage other members of their own organisations, both women and men, to join the association, where she strongly felt 'all opinions' should be represented. Indeed, the newspapers reported, 'several new members joined'. Her vision for the association was that it should be 'a means of education, of practical work, of widening the circle of those who felt a responsibility and interest in citizens' work'.[11] Olga Fletcher, who had been the Exeter National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) secretary as well as a committed member of the NUWW, then announced that 'a course of intensive social study' was being prepared.

Montgomery set out a vision for the greater engagement of women in 'municipal government'. Montgomery herself had substantial experience of local government as a co-opted member of various education committees for more than twenty-five years. She suggested that women should attend council meetings and learn what were the difficulties that confronted the council. Their aim should be to get 'a certain number of women' on the council, but these should be 'the right women'. The characteristics of 'the right women' were not further described, but Montgomery prescribed moving with caution and getting to know one another so as to be ready to put forward women candidates when opportunities arose.

With Montgomery at its head, the Exeter WCA might indeed have developed into a force to be reckoned with. She had not only already led the city's principal women's suffrage movement, she had also taken local aspirations to become the seat of a university almost to the point of success. Unfortunately, early that October she died~~,~~ while away in a Southampton nursing home for an operation.[12] Her death was described by the *Western Times* as 'an irreparable loss'…[~~,~~having

[10] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 29 May 1918.
[11] *Western Times,* 29 May 1918, alternative account of the same speech.
[12] ~~*Western Times,* 14 October 1918.~~

removed] ‘a familiar figure and powerful force whom it could ill afford to lose at the present juncture.’[13]~~14~~

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Without such a leader, the new WCA faltered a little. In the absence of detailed records it is difficult to track its progress. The association did hold an open meeting in the run up to the general election, and a national speaker addressed the topic of ‘why women must use the vote’. However, Alice Vlieland ~~(already mentioned in the context of her role with the Conservative Party)~~ presided at the first annual general meeting (AGM) in 1919 and suggested that they had been ‘very stagnant’, attributing this to the demand there had been for volunteers to ‘work in the war hospitals and other war-related activities.’ A new secretary came forward:~~—~~ Miss Dangerfield, a retired headmistress who had moved to Exeter. B~~—and b~~y the following AGM it was clear that the branch had been studying housing issues. They raised the urgent need to clear the slums with the city council and that it had established a play centre in one of the overcrowded areas.

The branch affiliated to National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship after an address from Eleanor Rathbone in February 1920. After that, though, it offered support at the local elections in November 1920 to Edith Splatt, standing in the local council elections, ~~then it~~it then seems to have veered back towards the traditional remit of the NUWW in investigating and ameliorating social problems. Some correspondence that autumn suggests dissatisfaction. ‘A Woman Voter’ had a letter published in the *Gazette* five days before the local elections, in which, in the course of arguing for a Women’s parliament to which candidates would be elected via some kind of proportional representation, she said:

> Take our Citizens’ Association (women’s). It is a languishing affair, a hole-and-corner society. But should it be beyond women’s wit to organise on the existing voting lines a miniature election which would give for Exeter […] a parliament which should be a microcosm of the macrocosm? Elected members must be prepared to meet each day, certain procedure to be arranged; and they would discuss […] the policy put forward by Parliament and suggestions, which would have the weight of an elected assembly, for the improvement of our beloved country.[15]

The proposal attracted little attention. In January 1921, the branch held a fundraising event for their play centre initiative. The *Gazette* reported branch membership to be about 150.[16] The ‘Chairman of Committee’, Miss K. Noddall (ex-NUWSS), ‘urged the need for close study of the public questions of the moment’, which were defined at the AGM as ‘women jurors, juvenile delinquents, equal pay

[13] *Western Times*, 14 October 1918.
[14] ~~*Check*~~
[15] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 27 October 1920.
[16] *Western Times* and *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 27 January 1921.

for equal work'. She later agreed to ask the MP to support the Guardianship of Infants Bill and oppose a Licensing Bill, likely to have a retrograde effect on reforms achieved by the temperance movement. Members were also said to have a rota to attend and report on meetings of the city council.[17] Miss Dangerfield retired as secretary and was followed by Miss Pollard (unidentified) and Miss Shorto (headmistress of a well-regarded small private school) in quick succession.[18]

~~First Women Elected to the City Council~~

~~The election of women to local government bodies was one of the aspirations of activists. Exeter had never had a woman councillor, although a woman had stood for election as a Liberal in 1913. Securing women on the council – able to cast their vote as councillors rather than merely advise as co-opted members – was an aspiration shared by women of all political persuasions, and none.[19]~~

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~~After Mary Willcocks, the first woman to stand for election was Edith Splatt, a journalist and long-time suffrage activist.[20] Splatt stood unsuccessfully twice: in November 1919 and November 1920, with the backing of the Exeter Women's Citizens' Association. When the elections for 1921 were announced, she decided to stand in a different ward – her home ward – and to stand under the banner of the newly formed Ratepayers' Association, a body formed to oppose the alleged profligacy of the council. Florence Browne, the other woman who stood for election in 1921, had also agreed to stand for the Ratepayers' Association, but she was then invited to stand as a Conservative candidate and decided to accept their nomination. (Her husband, who had died in 1920, had been one of the local Conservative councillors.) Both Splatt and Browne won seats in 1921; Browne being returned unopposed.~~

~~Despite this double success, few women stood for election during the 1920s and even fewer were successful. Emilie Reed, already a Poor Law Guardian, whose husband was already on the city council, won a seat for the Conservatives in 1925. Rachel Allen was elected at a by-election for Labour in 1928 and re-elected in 1930. In fact, once a woman was elected she was re-elected time and again, without any opposition [?]~~

[17] *Western Times*, 27 April 1921.
[18] Miss Pollard was elected on a temporary basis at the AGM in April 1921; Miss Shorto appears as secretary at the 'first meeting of the autumn season', reported in *Western Times*, 1 October 1921.
~~[19] Select quotes~~
~~[20] For more information on Splatt, see my 'Challenge, Conformity, Casework' article.~~

[What degree of discussion and where about the successful women councillors – Splatt, Browne, Reed and Allen?]

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Candidates for the election were all proposed and seconded by local ward residents. These names were published in the local papers at the beginning of the 1920s, although by the middle of the decade no such detail was provided. The availability of the census information only a few months earlier in June 1921 allows identification of the women who participated in this area of the democratic process.

Women Signing Nomination Papers for Candidates in the November Municipal Elections, 1921[21]

Exeter City Council had member wards and councillors retired in rotation, meaning that there was the potential for an election in each ward every year. Six of those nominated were unopposed in 1921 and there were eleven contests. In all, twenty-eight candidates stood: eight Conservatives; seven for the Ratepayers' Association; six Labour; five Liberals; and two Independents.

Fifty-three women and one hundred and twenty-three men signed the nomination papers for the twenty-eight candidates. Two candidates had no nominations from women. There is little discernible pattern in the numbers of nominations, though most of the Labour candidates were nominated by two men and two women, suggesting this might have been a deliberate policy. The fifty-three nominations by women analysed by party supported show twenty nominations for Conservatives; fourteen for Ratepayers' Association candidates; twelve for Labour; and three for the Independents. Only four of the fifty-three women signed nominations alongside nominations by their husbands.

Closer consideration of the fifty-three women who took part shows that they were evenly spread among the three principal age groups: 35–44, 45–54 and 55–64, with just two under 35 and two over 65 years of age. One of the women over 65 was a long-term suffrage activist, supporting one of the two woman candidates. The only other known suffrage activist supplying a nomination was Olga Fletcher, former NUWSS branch secretary who supported the Independent Labour candidate in Polsloe.

[21] See Appendix for table.

~~Most of the women were married or widowed, with only five being single. The single women comprised two living on private means, one confectioner, one teacher and one clerk. The spread of husbands' occupations for the married women ranged widely across occupational classifications including professional workers; managerial and administrative workers; clerical workers; sales workers; transport and communications; and craftsmen. It represents a microcosm of Exeter society at the time, and the only significant feature was the number of women married to or dependent on railway workers, all of whom supported Labour candidates.~~

Exeter and District Society for Equal Citizenship

It appears that in 1922 the old Exeter Equal Citizenship (EC) branch was reorganised. The *Western Times* refers to it in July 1922 as 'the recently formed Exeter and District branch of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship'. The name change suggests that what had originally been a branch for Exeter city residents alone now encompassed a broader geographical spread of membership. One of the members proposing a resolution at the inaugural meeting was Mrs Juanita Phillips, the first woman mayor and first woman magistrate in the county, who came from Honiton. Both she and Mrs Eleanor Acland, from Broadclyst, later chaired the group. Perhaps more importantly the change drew Olga Fletcher back in to work. She became Secretary to the new organization, a post she then held throughout the 1920s.

References in the newspapers, and also in the *Women's Leader*, suggest that the SEC in Exeter worked to influence issues at both national and local level. At a national level, in addition to sending delegates to NUSEC debates, the Society was fortunate to have as its local MP Sir Robert Newman, referred to by Eleanor Rathbone on one occasion as 'our guardian angel in the House of Commons'.[22] Newman was a long-term advocate for women's rights and a Vice-President on the Exeter SEC for which, on occasion, he chaired meetings. As an MP, he had actively promoted bills prepared by women's organisations, such as the Separation and Maintenance Orders Bill (1922), the Married Women (Employment) Bill and the motions that led eventually to the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in 1928. He was always open to listening to what women had to say; when SEC had a discussion on whether or not women in public service should resign on marriage, it was resolved to send Sir Robert a note of the discussion which fed into his own contribution in the married women's employment debate.[23] National links were also used to find outside speakers

[22] Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., cxxx, cols 1930-1: 21 June 1920.
[23] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 21 May 1927.

on topics of current interest, and when these were national figures like Eleanor Rathbone, who spoke on Women and Pensions, or Alison Neilans, who address the need for the Equal Moral Standard, the meetings were open to the public.[24]

There is more trace of the SEC's activities on local issues, probably because they seemed of more interest to local newspapers. The SEC began with an effort to secure the appointment of women magistrates to the Exeter bench. More than two years after the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 none had been appointed. The Society collected signatures in support of their resolution, sent it to the Chair of the Local Advisory Committee, and were gratified to find that the next list of JP appointments did include four Exeter women, although they noted with regret that only one was a SEC member.[25] Their main target, however, was Exeter City Council, and their three principal campaigns, on housing, on women police, and on better reproductive health, are discussed in the next section.

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The first woman to stand successfully for election was Edith Splatt, a journalist and long-time suffrage activist, who was elected in November 1921.[26] Splatt had stood unsuccessfully twice: in November 1919 and November 1920, with the backing of the Exeter Women's Citizens' Association. When the elections for 1921 were announced, she decided to stand in a different ward – her home ward – and to stand under the banner of the newly formed Ratepayers' Association, a body formed to oppose the alleged profligacy of the council. Florence Browne, the other woman who stood for election in 1921, had also agreed to stand for the Ratepayers' Association, but she was then invited to stand as a Conservative candidate and decided to accept their nomination. (Her husband, who had died in 1920, had been one of the local Conservative councillors.) Both Splatt and Browne won seats in 1921; Browne being returned unopposed.

[24] *Women's Leader*, 8 February 1924; *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 19 January 1926
[25] *Western Times*, 1 July & 22 August 1922, 8 Jan 1923; *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 5 December 1922.
[26] For more information on Splatt, see my 'Challenge, Conformity, Casework' article.

Despite this double success, few women stood for election during the 1920s and even fewer were successful. Emilie Reed, already a Poor Law Guardian, whose husband was already on the city council, won a seat for the Conservatives in 1925. Rachel Allen was elected at a by-election for Labour in 1928 and re-elected in 1930. In fact, once a woman was elected she was re-elected time and again, without any opposition.

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~~[Take the narrative through to 1929]~~

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Section II: 'Meddlesome Women'

The organisers of the 'C~~Exeter Local Government C~~onference of Women Councillors, Guardians and Magistrates' held under the auspices of the Women's Local Government Society in Exeter in October 1922 ~~[describe origins]~~ must have hoped that the broad agenda they covered over three days would attract more women to work in councils as guardians or as magistrates. In reality~~ – in Exeter, at least –~~ little changed. Although a few women did stand for election – most notably Olga Fletcher, the SEC secretary who stood as a Liberal candidate in Heavitree in 1923 – they were generally unsuccessful. Only two women were elected to Exeter City Council: ~~one~~ a Conservative in 1926~~5~~ ~~(the wife of a sitting councillor)~~ and ~~one~~ a Labour candidate in ~~a by-election in 192~~19277~~7~~. The three women guardians on the Exeter board increased to six in the 1919 elections, whilst the Exeter women guardians in St Thomas remained at three. Those numbers remained the same until Boards of Guardians were abolished in 1930 ~~(no data re St Thomas yet) and then the proportion increased no further~~, though as individual women retired an alternate woman was elected. ~~No new women were elected as guardians [not true]. No additional women magistrates were appointed until 1928.~~ The lack of women's voices at council and committee meetings was particularly frustrating. It placed a considerable burden on the two women councillors to cover the breadth of the agenda and introduce women's views. It also meant that in order to advance their social agenda, the women of Exeter needed to work in different ways. They turned back to what had been their pre-war experience, using pressure group politics through voluntary organisations.

There was a long tradition of women's activism in the charitable sector in Exeter, often involving women in the families of the cathedral or diocesan clergy, and the wives of the growing numbers of doctors. Sometimes this was regarded as perfectly appropriate, even if it was coupled with suffrage activism. There was no hostility to Miss Montgomery's efforts to develop higher education at the Royal Albert Memorial College. There was no overt hostility to Miss Rose Harding standing as a guardian ~~or being a head of the League of Honour~~. Even Miss Clara Andrew's efforts to support Belgian refuges in the First World War, while intensely irritating personally to those who were seeking a more structured effort, were not considered inappropriate of themselves. It was more difficult, however, to challenge council policy. Efforts in the Edwardian era to gain financial support from the council for the 'Baby Welcome' infant welfare clinics led, apparently, to the

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women advocates for such a course becoming known as the 'Society of ~~Meddlesome~~ Worrying Women'[28].

This section explores how women's activism in the development of public services evolved in the 1920s by considering three specific initiatives: the rehousing of families living in Exeter's slums; the campaign to appoint women police officers; and the provision of access to sexual health services for those who could not afford to pay. It demonstrates how women in different roles identified problems, helped make them visible, proposed solutions and, when local government failed them, promoted alternative solutions.

Provision of Alternative Housing for Families Living in the Slums

Exeter was not a ~~bad~~ dilatory housing authority. The first 'council houses' had been built before the First World War, and the council embraced the new opportunities to co-fund council housing development with the Ministry of Health in the period immediately after the First World War. They identified a number of slum areas and recognised their responsibilities to rehouse their occupants. The rehousing of 'families who have outgrown their accommodation or […] are obliged to quit their residences' was the third priority on the council housing waiting list, after families affected by the war.[29] But the neat equation of slotting slum families into new council houses was unworkable. The new council houses, built to Ministry standards, had to be let at rents that were out of the reach of slum families. A family in Exeter's West Quarter might be paying 5s a week or even as little as 3s for a single room. Rents in the council houses were 9s 6d for the cheaper 'non-parlour' house. Discussions in the council[30] and speculation in newspaper columns reviewed possibilities such as reducing specifications (which would disable the properties from receiving a Ministry grant) and building tenement blocks, which some on the council saw as a retrograde step. Nothing, therefore, was done. The process of condemning houses as unfit for human habitation and issuing owners with closing orders continued, but families thus displaced had to make shift to find their own alternative and, in an already overcrowded city, this was not easy. One brave woman tenant, Annie Cann, whose family lived in a property which her landlord had been ordered to make good, took the council (which had issued a closing order requiring her ejectment) to court. She explained to the

[28] This epithet was remembered by Councillor Mrs Browne in a speech to the Council, *Express and Echo*, 30 November 1929. ~~Alice Vlieland refers to this.~~

[29] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 8 May 1920.

[30] E.g. *Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 1 October and 22 October 1919; 4 February 1920. Councillor Miss Splatt expressed concern at a regional housing and town planning meeting (*Western Times*, 27 May 1922), questioning whether they could 'adequately deal with the slum areas … if they waited for an ideal which might never be realized'.

magistrates that she had been unable to find alternative accommodation and was willing for the family to live on the lower floor alone while work was done on the roof. The magistrates were persuaded and the family stayed on.[31]

The issue of the need for alternative provision burst back onto the city council agenda in the autumn of 1924. A proposal discussed at the October council meeting[32] for the redevelopment of a site behind the High Street as council offices and committee rooms aroused the ire of the Chair of the Public Health Committee (PHC), who objected that 'the Council had no right to go on spending hundreds and thousands of pounds on various schemes without dealing adequately with the slum areas of the city.' It was addressed at a SEC meeting in the Deanery, reported on 11 November 1924.[33] The members passed a resolution 'to support Dr Steele-Perkins [the PHC chair] in his attitude towards the slum areas of the city, and begs the council to take action in this matter before proceeding with municipal buildings.' Councillor Mrs Browne, who was present, 'pledged herself to do her utmost to get the slums cleared before embarking upon ornamental buildings'. The SEC letter was reported by the Town Clerk at the debate held at the November council meeting. It supported the motion being presented there by Steele-Perkins for the formation of a committee to be tasked with the work of demolition, clearance and rebuilding in the West Quarter. A senior alderman took umbrage at what he regarded was a criticism of the council's housing record, and Browne had to defend the society against the 'insinuation [...] that nothing had been done.' The council did, however, agree to the creation of the new committee, which started work early in the new year.[34]

The new committee did make progress on tackling the slums, focusing on one particular area of the West Quarter. It was not, however, able to resolve the problem of affordability of new housing for low wage earners with large families; a problem only resolved by the 1930 Housing Act's provision for subsidised rents. The progress made on rehousing slum residents in Exeter at the end of the 1920s was only achieved through the involvement of women in the new public utility societies developed to tackle this problem: the Church Army Housing Society and the Exeter Workmen's Dwellings Company. Women were prominent amongst the trustees and members of these societies, which together – while only founded in 1926 – had succeeded in building seventy-nine new houses by 1930. The papers of the Exeter Church Army Housing Society (CAHS) do not survive, but the

[31] ECC Sanitary Committee, 30 June 1921; 13 October 1921; *Western Times*, 23 September 1921.
[32] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 29 October 1924.
[33] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 11 November 1924.
[34] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 26 November 1924.

names of the thirteen-strong committee given in the newspaper included eight women. These were, in addition to the founder, Mrs Sowton Barrow, an Exmouth women who had founded the CAHS, the two women city councillors, Browne and Splatt; three wives of city councillors, Mrs Thomas and Mrs Cunningham; and three women of significant social status, the bishop's wife, the Dean's wife and a cousin of Lord Clinton's. The Exeter Workmen's Dwellings Society had three women directors: the bishop's wife, Lord Clinton's cousin and Lady Radford, an early woman justice of the peace (JP). The organisations do not seem to have involved any women from outside the traditional do-gooding classes at the top table.

The Campaign for Women Police

One of the outcomes of the 1922 conference, which had drawn together women from across the county, had been the establishment of an organisation known as the Devon Council of Women on Public Authorities (DCWPA). Although it was affiliated to the National Council of Women, its membership was restricted to women who held public office. It functioned primarily as a forum for hearing about the latest in policy ideas from national speakers. (Organisations in the far South West sometimes found it difficult to attract speakers from London, and were more likely to be able to do so if the speaker felt they were addressing a county-wide audience). The DCWPA invited speakers on topics such as film censorship or Poor Law reform, and on occasion opened up the meetings to their male colleagues.

Generally, the meetings were intended to act as the basis for women to make up their own minds about the issues raised, but occasionally the group was moved to collective action. One such initiative was the question of pressing for the appointment of women police officers. Women police were not unknown in Devon: the urban authorities of Exeter and Plymouth had both employed women police officers during the First World War, and Lady Astor, MP, a strong supporter, had served on a committee immediately after the First World War, which had set out terms and conditions for their employment. When the Geddes Committee recommended sweeping cuts to public expenditure in 1922, however, women police posts became victims to the economies Exeter and Plymouth put in place. The county of Devon had never employed women police at all, arguing that they would be of little use with such a large county to cover.

At the October 1922 conference, there had been a proposal to pass a resolution on the topic of women police, but it had been ruled out of order as no resolutions were to be taken during the conference. It was, however, agreed that there would be a separate meeting to consider the issue at a

later date. This was set up in May 1923 in the Barnfield Hall in Exeter[35] and chaired by Sir Robert Newman, MP. Mrs Gamble, the then chair of Exeter SEC, was on the platform and one of the speakers. The event was launched by Commandant Mary Allan OBE, of the London Metropolitan Women's Police Service ~~[some bio points about her, Women's Auxiliary Service, London]~~, ~~,~~ ss~~s~~peaking from her own direct experience. Her view was that women police should undertake the same duties as their male counterparts, and indicated that she personally had never found it impossible to tackle issues such as the arrest of drunken men. She also drew attention to the fact that in another rural county, Gloucestershire, there were four policewomen: two for the county and two for the borough of Gloucester. [36]

Mrs Gamble emphasised the importance of having women police, who would be better able to tackle the issue of sexual exploitation, the 'difficulties and dangers to the inexperienced girl' who nowadays had 'so much more independence' and therefore so much more opportunity for 'foolish behaviour'.

The May 1923 event ended with the passing a resolution proposed by Lady Peek JP, who said that it was her experience as magistrate – even though brief – that had convinced her. The resolution read that 'this meeting of citizens urges the necessity of including women in the police force with the legal powers and status of constables'. The Mayor of Exeter (Rowsell) who was on the platform expressed himself in favour of the objects of the meeting, though concerned about the cost.

Although the matter then seems to have been dropped for some months, ~~it was revitalised by the publication in 1924 of [CHECK DETAILS] the report of a committee on – commended to Chief Constables by the Home Secretary. It had even been referred to by Stanley Baldwin in his election address [check details].~~ Sir Robert Newman MP, presiding again at an Exeter SEC meeting in November 1924, urged that action be initiated speedily as it was easier to promote change at the beginning of a parliament's elected term. In fact, however, parliamentary action was not specifically necessary. The watch committees or, in the case of the county council, the County Joint Standing Committee had all the power they needed. What was lacking was the will and – at least to the 'economists' on the council – the means.

At the end of 1926 there was a concerted effort, organised by the DCWPA, to lobby both the city and the county authorities. Chronologically, the county deputation came first. A deputation

[35] *Express & Echo*, 7 May 1923.
[36] *Express & Echo*, 11 November 1924.

presented the case for women police to the Devon Standing Joint Committee, introduced by an East Devon county councillor, Sir John Kennaway (there were no women county councillors at the time) and led by Juanita Phillips, JP and Honiton Borough councillor. She argued that women police officers would be 'of much service' in first escorting women and girls to and from prison and supervising women in police cells, and second visiting cinemas during performances and patrolling parks and open spaces. The bishop's wife, a member of the deputation, added that she considered women police officers should conduct interrogation of children and 'keep the county roads in a good moral state', referring to the 'impropriety she and the Bishop had observed on their journeys'. A Women's Institute (WI) delegate also spoke. The proposal was referred on for discussion in a subcommittee with instructions to consult the watch committees in Exeter and Plymouth. The chief constable, though referred to as in opposition to the proposal, politely said that he 'was never opposed to any innovation that will be to the efficiency of the force.'[37]

The Exeter Watch Committee did not meet until the end of December. The same resolution was submitted to members, introduced by Councillor Mrs Browne, who was herself a member. The deputation consisted of three representatives from Exeter SEC, the Free Church Council, and the other woman city councillor, Miss Splatt. The bishop's wife sent her apologies as her husband was ill, along with a long letter in support of the proposal. After three of the deputation had spoken, the Watch Committee promised to give the resolution their consideration.[38]

Neither initiative was successful. The County Joint Standing Committee decided against the appointment of women police by one vote.[39] The Exeter Watch Committee apparently decided not to take the issue any further. Their decision was not included in their report to the full council, and Splatt was only able to raise it there and ask for a report by fastening onto an item in the report relating to payments to the police matron.[40] Her question elicited no satisfactory response. The Watch Committee chair, Mr Lucas, later claimed that the committee decision to turn down the proposal had been unanimous. Councillor Mrs Browne tartly pointed out that the committee were not unanimous. 'She, for one, would never cease from demanding women police.'[41]

A year later, the women made a further joint approach with a meeting in Exeter, to be followed by meetings in Honiton, Torquay and Bideford. This time the organisers had called upon a woman

[37] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 1 December 1926.
[38] *Western Times*, 31 December 1926.
[39] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 26 March 1927.
[40] *Express & Echo*, 23 February 1927.
[41] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 2 February 1928.

member of the Gloucestershire Standing Joint Committee to give details about the operation of the scheme there. The Exeter meeting, which was the first in the sequence, was again presided over by Sir Robert Newman, MP, and supported by members of the DCWPA (including Councillor Mrs Browne), the Mothers' Union, the WI, Temperance Associations, Exeter SEC, the Free Church Council, the Diocesan Association for the care of Friendless Girls, the Girl' Friendly Society, YWCA, Girl Guides, Women's Co-operative Association, two women JPs and a county councillor. Lady Astor sent her apologies but wrote a letter in support.[42]

It was at this meeting that the Exeter Watch Committee chair was compelled to acknowledge his mistake about the unanimity of the Watch Committee in Exeter in opposing the proposal. He did indeed acknowledge also that he had been impressed by the Gloucestershire speaker's description of using women police to interrogate witnesses. However, he remained convinced that the availability of a police matron and a welfare worker was quite sufficient in a city like Exeter 'which, on the whole, had a fairly high standard of morality', only having needed to deal with thirteen cases of indecency over the previous five years.[43]

Nonetheless, in spite of their continuing advocacy for the appointment of women police officers, the DCWPA conceded in its report for 1928 that it had failed to achieve its aim.[44] No women police were appointed in any of the three police forces in the county before the Second World War.

Although the goal of appointing women police was not achieved during the 1920s, the campaign for their appointment demonstrates how women across the city and county were able to co-operate over policy issues and co-ordinate action to achieve the maximum impact.

Tackling Maternal Mortality

The final case study exploring the actions of Exeter's 'meddlesome women' is further illustration of activism within the council and outside it: the way that the concern growing during the 1920s about the numbers of women dying in childbirth prompted women to press for changes to antenatal and maternity care.

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] *Western Times*, 5 April 1928.

The Maternity and Child Welfare Act 1918 required local authorities to make arrangements for attending to the health of expectant and nursing mothers, as well as for children under school age. These arrangements were usually focused on child welfare clinics, where women could seek advice about their own health as well as their children's, either as part of a dual purpose session or in a designated antenatal clinic. Clinics like these had been established in many areas on a voluntary basis even before the First World War, and Exeter had such a network.

During the early 1920s, child health improved (the rate of infant and child mortality decreased in Devon as elsewhere in the country). Campaigning groups therefore turned their attention to the health of mothers, noting particularly that the maternal mortality and stillbirth rates had not fallen for more than 20 years. The numbers of women nationally who died in childbirth was still about 3,000 per annum.

In Exeter this was a cause championed by the Society for Equal Citizenship and, politically, by the Labour Party. Exeter's Maternity and Child Welfare Committee was chaired from the early 1920s by Councillor Mrs Browne, who was a member of the Society for Equal Citizenship, and it had provided support to the local voluntary District Nursing Association for the creation of a maternity home in Dix's Field. The aim of establishing this was to ensure that women whose home conditions were unsuitable could give birth somewhere dry, warm and comfortable, with expert midwives on hand – and paid for by charitable organisations.

In 1924, however, a Welsh woman called Rachel Allen arrived in Exeter. Her husband had been appointed as the deputy official receiver and the couple had moved into the city from South Wales. Allen had practised as a qualified midwife before her marriage. She was both personally and professionally interested in improving maternity care and kept up with developing ideas about it through attendance at national and local conferences.

Her experience led to her becoming a member of the Maternity and Child Welfare Committee, initially on a co-opted basis and then later – after she had stood and won election as a Labour candidate in St Thomas Ward – as a full member. She believed that one of the factors contributing to the high rate of maternal mortality was the inadequate training of doctors in obstetrics, a view she voiced to some consternation at the national conference of the Sanitary Institute in Exeter in 1927. One of her early initiatives was to ask the Medical Officer of Health to review the cases of women who had died in childbirth over the previous three years. In March 1929 she tried to press the council, via the committee, to agree a policy that an inquest should be held on each woman who

died in childbirth, a course of action which the Mayor, himself a doctor, could not contemplate as he felt that mothers were aware of the risks, which could not be entirely eliminated, and anyway that post-mortems were ‘very distressing’. Allen responded that this idea was already being considered by the Ministry of Health and that while it might be ‘rather unpleasant for the people concerned’, they had to take into consideration the benefit it was going to have on the rest of the community. She was supported by fellow councillor Edith Splatt, who said that such inquiries were more likely to implicate ‘social evils’ than the professional skills of doctors or midwives. But the council would not agree it.

Allen’s second initiative in support of maternal health was more successful. She became involved in the very 1920s question of birth control and, in particular, the provision of contraceptive advice free of charge to working-class women. She seems again to have worked with the Exeter Equal Citizenship Association (ECA) and come up with a proposal for a voluntary-run clinic staffed by a ‘lady doctor’ and a nurse. This would have made advice available for only a small fee, instead of the guinea (£1 1s) that the ECA’s president said that private doctors would charge. The ECA held a public meeting on the proposal, both to explain it and to raise funds to cover its costs. Many of the audience, including the bishop’s wife and the well-respected Catholic priest, Father Barney, were hostile, believing strongly that family size should not be limited. Allen said that she herself was one of eleven children and she had seen how hard her mother, a tailor’s wife, had had to work. She did not want other women to have that experience. The clinic opened at the beginning of January 1930 and, more than that, in February 1930, the council agreed that doctors at the infant welfare clinics might refer women there for free advice if it was considered that the birth of a further child might be a danger to their health. A restricted service, and of course one only available to married women, but a step forward.

Sadly, Allen was unable to continue her campaigning. She died suddenly on a visit back to her family in Wales only a few months later.

Section III: The 1929 Election

A 'Beautiful Dream'

Exeter women were fortunate in their parliamentary representation in the 1920s. The Exeter MP from 1918 to 1931 was Sir Robert Newman, a local landowner and someone who devoted his life to public service. First elected to the Board of Guardians and to the Rural District Council for the area surrounding the city in 1895 when he was 24, he had been president of the Exeter Conservative and Unionist Association since 1904 and was elected to Devon County Council in 1907. As described above (see p.4), he became the Conservative MP for Exeter at a by-election in 1918.[45].

Sir Robert had been a long-term supporter of women's suffrage. He had presided at the meeting in February 1909 when the Exeter branch of the NUWSS was first formed, and was elected its first president.[46] He often spoke in the House of Commons about issues affecting women such as equal pay for teachers or the lack of women on local government bodies. The *Women's Leader* once referred to him as 'our guardian angel in the House of Commons'.[47] As an MP, he had actively promoted bills prepared by women's organisations, such as the Separation and Maintenance Orders Bill (1922), the Married Women (Employment) Bill and the motions that led eventually to the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in 1928. He defined himself as 'a progressive, working towards "the removal of those three terrible dreads … Unemployment, and Poverty in Sickness and Old Age".'[48]

His progressive views, however, did not always sit easily with the members of the Exeter Conservative and Unionist Association (EC&UA). He was pro-Free Trade at a time when his party had shifted to protectionism. He had always made a point of saying when selected that he would vote according to his principles, even if this meant sometimes voting against his party. After 1923, however, party discipline assumed a greater importance, and influential members of the EC&UA started to be more critical when he did not support the policies they wanted. When, after the General Strike in 1926, the government introduced a Trades Disputes Bill that Sir Robert failed to

[45] Paul Auchterlonie, 'A Man of Principle? Sir Robert Newman, MP for Exeter, 1918–1931, and his relationship with the Conservative Party' in *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science* (2021), 153, pp. 33–56.
[46] *Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 26 February and 20 April 1909.
[47] *Women's Leader*, 16 March 1928.
[48] Auchterlonie, 'A Man of Principle', pp. 42–45.

support whole-heartedly, the Executive Committee, on the motion of the chairman and supported by the chairman of the women's branch, Lady Davy, took the decision that the candidate they selected to fight the next election would need to be someone who was 'a Conservative and Unionist and a loyal supporter of the party'. Sir Robert responded that he would fight as an independent candidate at the next election, determined 'to retain absolute freedom of judgment […] a freeman representing a free city in a free Parliament.'[49]

The decision not to invite Sir Robert to stand again was not well received in all Conservative circles. The *Western Morning News* – a Plymouth-based paper, not quite as fiercely partisan as the Exeter papers – reported that 'the chairman and twelve members of the Women's Committee in one of the wards' resigned in protest on hearing the news.[50] The Rector of one of Exeter's slum parishes, conscious of Sir Robert's work to promote the need for better housing, wrote to the papers to say, 'I have hitherto always voted as a Conservative, but the time comes when, in the interests of the Church, the nation and all the people, we must put Christianity before politics.'[51] A brief notice on 11 November also showed that Newman's former election agent and the EC&UA's treasurer, Sidney Andrew, had resigned.[52]

Newman stated that he did not propose to retire and would stand at the next election as an independent, not 'some kind of Conservative'.[53] An organisation to support his candidature was formed almost at once. Alfred Loram, JP, former mayor and major employer in the city,[54] wrote a letter to the *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, offering to convene a meeting of 'active men and women of any party or no party' to form a committee to support Sir Robert's candidature.[55] The meeting was held within a fortnight and passed a resolution to support the independent candidature of Sir Robert Newman.[56] Women were represented among those who spoke at the meeting and those whose letters were read out. Mrs Simmons, who stated that she was a member of the Conservative Committee of her ward (St Thomas), said that she had canvassed for Sir Robert:

> […] and knew that he had taken a tremendous interest in the people, not only just before an election, but after the election was over. She knew of many cases in

[49] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 25 October 1927.
[50] *Western Morning News*, 10 November 1927.
[51] *Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 26 October 1927.
[52] *Western Times,* 11 November 1927.
[53] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 4 November 1927.
[54] Loram owned the Cathedral Dairy in Eastgate. He had been a Liberal before the war, but was no longer active in politics.
[55] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 28 October 1927.
[56] *Western Times,* 11 November 1927.

> which he had helped ex-Service men get their pensions. She also referred to the interest Sir Robert Newman took in the people who lived in the slums.

A Miss Hicks [not identified] also spoke. One of the letters read out in full at the meeting came from Dame Georgiana Buller, a woman of considerable standing in the city. She had run the 1,400 beds in the Exeter War Hospitals for the War Office from 1914 to 1919 and was at that point engaged in setting up an orthopaedic hospital for 'crippled children' in Exeter. She had written:

> I have voted for Sir Robert Newman in the past, and intend doing so in the future if opportunity occurs, because I believe he can be relied upon to put honesty before political expediency when these two things clash, as on various occasions they must do. In my opinion it is not in the interests of the country that parliamentary representatives should place party loyalty above all other considerations.[57]

Buller was immediately asked to become involved in the campaign. When Loram held a first public meeting of Newman's supporters, at which Sir Robert spoke, Buller was present on the platform and proposed the resolution approving Newman's action and pledging support.[58] Her involvement guaranteed support. A Miss Bicknell wrote to the paper in support of Newman, adding 'The women of Exeter have a fine leader to follow in Dame Buller'.[59] Buller was also on the platform at the public meeting in April 1928 in St Thomas, which was also supported by the Mrs Simmons who had spoken at the initial supporters' meeting and three other named women: Mrs Langmaid, Mrs Dolling and Miss Bickington.[60] She continued to support the campaign over the next eighteen months, speaking or presiding at the public meetings held in Newman's name.

It seems likely that St Thomas was the ward from which the Conservative Women's Committee had resigned en masse when the EC&UA decided not to support Newman, and it was felt that this, rather than the city centre, would be a good recruiting ground. The second of the public meetings was held in the suburb of Heavitree, on the other side of the city. While Buller did not appear, Mrs Olga Fletcher moved the vote of thanks. Olga Fletcher had been the secretary of the Exeter branch of NUWSS in the 1910s, the secretary of the Exeter Citizens' Association for a while after the war. She was, she said, a lifelong Liberal, and had indeed stood unsuccessfully as a Liberal candidate in the 1923 city council elections.[61]

[57] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 11 November 1927.
[58] *Western Morning News*, 10 December 1927.
[59] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 17 December 1927.
[60] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 14 April 1928.
[61] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 21 April 1928.

By early 1928 an organisation to support Newman, the Exeter Independent Parliamentary Association (IPA), had been created and its offices established at 7 Southernhay East. Its secretary had formerly been secretary to one of the ward Conservative associations, and his new organisation mirrored that ward-based structure. His assistant, the 'lady secretary', was a woman: Miss Joyce Harris, educated at Exeter Middle School but living in Starcross. Like the Conservatives, the association had a separate branch for women, whose first chair was Olga Fletcher. In the summer of 1928 the new Representation of the People Act became law, and all political parties began to consider seriously how they could attract the votes of the large tranche of young women who would for the first time have a vote in a general election. Fletcher urged that 'the new voters should be taught how much they owed their privilege to men like Sir Robert Newman', who had been instrumental in ensuring the bill was placed on the political agenda.[62] There does seem to have been a particular effort to follow up this group, as the *Western Morning News* noted a special meeting for 'younger members' addressed by Newman in January 1929 and Mrs Loram, wife of the IPA chair, organised an event for new voters in March 1929.[63]

Once the year's local government elections were over (the Exeter IPA played no part in them) the women's branch arranged a public meeting in the Barnfield Hall in the centre of the city. The chief purpose of this was for the audience to hear Newman speak, but the association also invited Mrs Clara Daymond (a Plymouth councillor who had chaired the Plymouth NUWSS branch and now chaired the Plymouth Citizens' Association) to speak on his behalf. Her speech was followed by one from Fletcher who described Newman as 'a champion for women from the very beginning'.[64] Fletcher took the chair at a subsequent women's branch meeting in January 1929, described as 'well attended' where Newman spoke about the local government and Poor Law reforms being introduced by the government.[65]

Newman's support for the rights of women to vote continued to feature in the campaign. He himself on one occasion referred to a book he treasured because it had been given him by Dame Fawcett and contained 'an expression of thanks for the encouragement he gave the women's franchise movement in the old days'.[66] A speaker at an IPA social event referred to the fact that many of the 'local mandarins' of the Conservative Party no doubt found it 'neither pleasant nor convenient' to be reminded how many of them, unlike Newman, had opposed the women's vote. 'Rumour had it',

[62] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 3 November 1928.
[63] *Western Morning News,* 19 January 1929.
[64] Ibid.
[65] *Western Morning News*, 17 January 1929; *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 16 March 1929.
[66] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 16 March 1929.

he said, that 'the [Conservative] candidate's father and the chairman of the Women's Committee were both opposed to the extension of the franchise'.[67]

The IPA, reviewed by the *Western Morning News* in early 1929, was described as being able to count on substantial support from women because of Newman's work on behalf of 'the women's cause' throughout his career. It referred, though, to the organisation of women's support as 'proceeding as part of the general campaign', with women's meetings and social gatherings, and plans for canvassers to be sent out to make 'special inquiries' once the new list of voters was issued'.[68] Women were also involved in fundraising activities, primarily whist drives and dances.[69] The reports of these contain lists of women who won prizes, but there is no certainty that any of them were otherwise active in the party.

Parliament was dissolved on 10 May 1929, with the election called for 30 May. The IPA arranged the formal adoption meeting for Newman on 15 May in the Barnfield Hall which, as the *Western Morning News* reported, was 'crowded to overflowing'.[70] Nominations day was 20 May. For Newman, eighteen proposers were listed, eight of whom were women; and there were eighteen seconders, including four women. Many women also featured on the long list of assentors. The *Devon and Exeter Gazette* sniffed that there were 'many well-known Liberals' among his supporters, and these included, in addition to Olga Fletcher, the long-standing suffrage activist Miss Adelaide Baly, the first woman to stand for election in Exeter; Lady Owen, the wartime mayoress; and Lady Radford, one of Exeter's first women JPs. Edith Splatt, a suffrage activist and now an independent city councillor, also supported him. A large number of the women whose names appear cannot be identified, but the list does appear to include not only the well-to-do but people of lower social status. Hilda M. Browne (a seconder) and her husband Edgar (a proposer), for example, lived in a flat at the back of what had once been the Sun Inn off South Street. Hilda was a clerk at a high street tailors and Edgar a blind pensioner. As Loram had recently said 'the dining room of many homes might have ceased to be with them, but the kitchen and garden were all right.'[71]

[67] *Western Morning News*, 12 April 1929. His reference to the anti-suffrage views of the chairman of the Women's Committee probably referred to her predecessor, Mrs Vlieland, who certainly attended an anti-suffrage meeting in Exeter in 1913 (*Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 4 February 1913).
[68] *Western Morning News*, 17 January 1929.
[69] E.g. those reported in *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 9 January, 7 and 16 February, 23 March and 5 April 1929.
[70] *Western Morning News*, 16 May 1929.
[71] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 15 May 1929.

The election campaign proceeded along traditional lines. There were frequent meetings, both indoors and in the open air. A women's meeting, where Olga Fletcher presided, was held.[72] This included outside speakers: Juanita Phillips, former suffrage activist and the first woman mayor in Devon, and Elizabeth Macadam, a former secretary of the National Society for Equal Citizenship. Another outside supporter, Dame Edith Lyttelton, addressed the final rally in the Lower Market.[73]

Although a black cat, brought as a good-luck token to that final meeting, refused to sit on Newman's lap,[74] the result of the election was a triumph for the IPA. Newman headed the poll with over 16,000 votes, taking 49.5% of the vote. His majority was over 7,000. The Labour Party took second place for the first time, and the official Conservative candidate was relegated to third. At the celebratory rally in London Inn Square, Georgiana Buller said 'This is the best day's work we have ever done for the city, and I am proud to be one of its citizens'.[75] The 'beautiful dream', of which Newman had spoken, the wish that he could 'go to Westminster to represent the whole of his constituents' had been achieved.[76]

It would be wrong, however, to believe that the IPA stormed through the campaign without opposition, or even without opposition from women. Labour party activity was rarely reported in sufficient detail to show who the activists were, but the Conservatives intended to hold the seat, and in that campaign one of their most effective leaders was a woman, Anne, Lady Davy.

Davy had been elected chairman of the EC&UA Women's Branch in 1926 on the retirement of the previous chair, Mrs Alice Vlieland. She had come to Exeter as a doctor's wife in 1906 and, as Mrs Mortimer, had worked with Vlieland, another doctor's wife, in the early voluntary child welfare organisation, the Babies Welcome clubs. After the death of her first husband she had married another doctor, Sir Henry Davy, with whom she had worked in the Red Cross where she had been quartermaster general for the Exeter War Hospitals. Sir Henry had died in 1922 and Davy had moved to a more convenient house in St Leonard's with Joyce, her daughter from her first marriage. She had occupied herself with a number of charities such as the Exeter District Nursing Association, the Exeter Child Welfare service and the Lying-in Charity, and had taken a particular interest in the promotion of Exeter's Ladies' Swimming Club.

[72] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 25 May 1929.
[73] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 28 May 1929.
[74] *Western Times*, 31 May 1929.
[75] Ibid.
[76] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 15 May 1929. Newman claimed that 'he was told it was a beautiful dream, but it was better to dream a beautiful dream than always to have an ugly nightmare'.

By early 1927, Davy had already begun to consider what changes might be necessary should equal franchise be introduced.[77] She planned a series of meetings of Conservative women, with the aim of educating them on topical issues. In her introduction to the first of these, in March 1927 she referred to the Stourbridge by-election, where the Conservatives had lost a seat to the Labour candidate, as the prompt for the 'education of women'.[78] In the autumn, the EC&UA branch chair, Arthur Thomas, who appears to have been rather overwhelmed by the situation, had involved her in the discussions that led to the deselection of Sir Robert Newman,[79] and it was her summation at the executive meeting that Newman himself felt had completely encapsulated the position, and put him in a position from which there was no retreat. She had said:

> My duty is chiefly to the women, and I ask them to bring their sound common sense to work to decide whether or not a man who follows the direction of his conscience is as valuable to his party as a man who pledges himself to follow the direction of his leader.[80]

For Davy, party discipline was paramount.

Newspaper references show Davy present at many of the women's meetings during 1928, appealing to ward committees to 'pull together, work hard and steadily for the next year', and urging them to return Mr Baldwin as prime minister again 'for the sake of the peace and prosperity of the Empire.'[81] She often attended with the candidate or the candidate's wife and appears to have paid particular attention to developing good relations with women in St John's Ward, one of Exeter's principal slum areas. The women's section of St John's Ward organised fortnightly socials in a local hall, to which women were able to bring their young children. At one such meeting, with Davy present, the candidate's wife referred to having had the pleasure of 'meeting them in their own homes' and invited them to raise questions about pensions.[82] An outing to the seaside – three charabancs full of people – was also arranged for members in September 1928.[83] No other ward seems to have been the focus of such attention, with between fifty and sixty women attending, and it was referred to as 'one of the liveliest cogs in the machine of the women's unionist organisation',

[77] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 11 December 1927.
[78] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 3 March 1927.
[79] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 25 October 1927
[80] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 10 December 1927.
[81] *Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 1 May 1928, to St James's Ward members. She is also recorded at meetings in St Matthew's Ward (her own), St Petrock's Ward, St John's Ward, St Paul's Ward, Trinity Ward, St David's Ward and St Thomas Ward.
[82] *Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 10 July 1928.
[83] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 7 September 1928.

with its winning combination of speeches and socials.[84] This may, in part, have been created by the dynamic Mrs Berry, secretary to the ward women's branch, wife of a baker in Grendon's Buildings.

In spite of the campaigning efforts of Davy and other Conservative women, Exeter was one of the 152 seats that the Conservative Party lost in the general election in 1929. After the election, the Labour Party, as the largest single party, formed a minority administration. Newman often voted for the measures they proposed. But in spite of his assertion at the Victory Fete that August that he would 'stand for Exeter as long as anyone nominates him',[85] in January 1931 he decided not to stand again. Possibly he had by that time been made aware he was to be offered a peerage, and he did indeed become Lord Mamhead after the election in October 1931. The IPA was not able to find a candidate willing to be nominated in their interest, although there was a suggestion that Buller might do so. Instead Buller switched her support to the Liberals in the 1931 election and sent a pre-election message of support to Lady Acland, the Liberal candidate.[86] The IPA did not last long after that election. The final reference to it is dated December 1931.

When Newman was elected in May 1929, Miss Knight-Bruce announced to the post-election rally: 'We are writing upon the pages of the history of the world something new and something great.' No doubt many of those in the audience hoped that would indeed be the case and that the 'beautiful dream' of selecting the best person to represent the constituency could be repeated. But the circumstances of Newman's success were difficult to repeat in other seats. He had built his reputation not just by his contribution to legislation to improve lives but by ten years devoted to case work on behalf of his constituents. He was described as a 'sort of political rainbow […] washy green, tinged with pink, with a little blue and yellow thrown in',[87] but this was to prove increasingly unattractive to political parties who preferred people of single solid colours. Elections of characters truly independent of mainstream political parties – at least outside the university seats – would almost never take place.

[84] *Devon & Exeter Gazette,* 22 January 1929.
[85] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 9 August 1929.
[86] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 27 October 1931.
[87] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 3 November 1928.

Conclusion

At 60,000 people, the city of Exeter was large enough to support a substantial organisation where women could come together to consider how best to promote and pursue the role of active citizens, and how to make sure that issues that were perceived to be a priority for women were taken forward. The Exeter-based group attracted women resident in a circle around Exeter who had no similar forum in which to discuss such topics, and this wider 'Exeter and District' role was recognised in a re-organisation of the group in 1923. The Equal Citizens' Association attracted women of all political persuasions, but existed in parallel with party political structures for Liberal, Conservative and Labour women. Women might choose to work within one structure or the other for preference, but there were women who worked in both, such as Olga Fletcher, who stood as a Liberal candidate for the city council but became the first secretary of the Exeter and District CA.

Although women in the suffrage movement had often expressed the view that they wanted to support candidates with the right agenda rather than candidates with a particular party alignment, the 1920s was instead a time when party politics became more significant in the creation of opportunities. The 1929 general election, in which an independent candidate fought and won the parliamentary seat against Conservative and Labour opposition, was an ~~aberration~~anomaly, never to be repeated, but analysis of the campaign activity ~~does~~ show**s** women as well as men fiercely engaged in the process. On local government issues, however, it is questionable whether the progress made in Exeter – even with four directly elected women councillors – was either more speedily achieved or different in outcome from what it might have been in earlier times with co-opted women on committees and pressure group activity.

Appendix One

Women Signing Nomination Papers for Candidates in the 1921 November Local Government Elections

	Name	Ward	Candidate Supported	Personal Details
1.	Balsom, Ada Helen	St David	Conservative	m., age 56, 21 Haldon Road, no occupation entry, husband a clerk for City Brewery, live-in servant
2.	Baly, Adelaide Mary	St Leonard's	Conservative	s, age 69, retired teacher, staying at St Minver in Cornwall, with sister Frances, Annie Radford and Minnie Fraser (home 29 Barnardo Rd)
3.	Billett, Lilian	St David	Conservative	m., age 49, 33 Haldon Rd, household duties, husband absent, son apprentice G & King
4.	Bolt, Emily	St Thomas	Ratepayers	m. age 45. 6 Alphington Rd, husband a master baker, she clerk in baker's business, three children 11–22
5.	Bradbeer, Agnes Jane	St David	Conservative	m., age 39, St Agnes, St D Hill, home duties, husband is brush manufacturer heir, traveller
6.	Brewer, Eva Helen	St James	Ratepayers	m., age 39, 59 Longbrook St, home duties, husband a tailor, son
7.	Broad, Gertrude	Cowick	Labour	m. age 36, 59 Old Vicarage Rd, husband GWR inspector, son
8.	Broom, Sarah	St Thomas	Labour	1923 ER gives Sarah Broom at 20 Willey's Ave. On 1921 census as Ellen Broome (widow, hoh) Is Sarah Ellen Brown at her 1937 death – probate. Age 64y 6, widow, b Bradninch, home duties. The sons are all GWR men
9.	Burgoyne, Rosina Mary	St David	Conservative	m., age 44, 5 Bonhay Rd, home duties, husband an auditor, two children
10.	Came, Susan	Trinity	Labour	m, 41, 3 James St, home duties, husband a postman
11.	Campfield, Mabel	Cowick	Liberal	s, age 46, 12 Waterloo Rd, clerk Min of Pensions. Palace Hosp., invalid sister, has servant
12.	Chinn, Mary Ellen	Exwick	Labour	m, age 44, 11 Cornwall St, home duties, husband station inspector GWR

13.	Croft, Annie	St Matthew's	Labour	m age 54, 96 Sandford St, husband a signalman d and son, son on railway
14.	Domney, Alice	Belmont	Ratepayers	Alice *Dewdney*, 24 Toronto Road, m., age 46, home duties, husband a driver for LSWR
15.	Drake, Annie Elizabeth	Polsloe	Ratepayers	m., age 61, 22 Polsloe Rd, home duties, husband a retired teacher
16.	Eccles, Rosa Annie	Belmont	Ratepayers	m, age 49, 41 Mount Pleasant road, m, husband a civil service clerk, son
17.	Edwards, Rebecca	Polsloe	Ratepayers	w., age 64, 3 Pinhoe Rd, home duties, sister, live-in servant
18.	Eveleigh, Kate Eliza	St David	Conservative	m., age 39, 63 St David's Hill, home duties, husband a builder
19.	Fletcher, Olga Marie	Heavitree	Ind. Lab	m., age 51, 48 Polsloe Rd, home duties, husband lecturer, UCSW, 2 ds, live-in servant
20.	Fowler, Louisa	Cowick	Labour	m, age 42, 26 Wellington Road, home duties, husband a GWR guard, no children
21.	Godsland, Sarah Ann	Trinity	Independent	w, 76, living at 4 East Grove Rd, St Leonard's, son a provision merchant manager
22.	Harbridge, Gertrude	Belmont	Ratepayers	m, age 49, 70 Old Tiverton Road, husband insurance commission agent, son and daughter, no occupation given for daughter
23.	Havill, Sarah	Wonford	Conservative	m. In 1911 Sarah Havill age 55 was living at 66 Wonford Street, Wonford, Heavitree. She was married to Albert Havill who gave his occupation as farmer
24.	Hawkins, Annie	St Thomas	Labour	36 Willey's avenue, widowed mother age 63 and daughter, single, age 40, both called Annie.
25.	Heath, Kate	St Thomas	Ratepayers	Kate Heath appears on the ER in 1926 at Beachcroft, Alphington Road On the night of the census Georgina Kate Heath age 55 b Exeter St Thomas was visiting the Coles in Revelstoke. She stated she had no occupation
26.	Herbert, Jessie Sarah	St Sidwell's	Conservative	Not found

27.	Hill, Annie Louisa	St Sidwell's	Conservative	m, 32, 13 Clarence Place, Well St, husband ex-serviceman out of work. Invalid, son age 12
28.	Hodge, Edith Ellen	St Matthew's	Labour	m, age 39, 36 Codrington St, home duties, husband fitters mate GWR, three young children
29.	Holman, Hetty Georgina	St Matthew's	Liberal	m, aged 44. 73 Sandford St, home duties, husband stone mason, two daughters one married, husband lives there too
30.	Kestell, Esther May	Exwick	Labour	m, aged 37. 11 Landscore Rd, household duties, husband a carpenter
31.	Manley, Emily Ellen	St Matthew's	Liberal	w, age 54, 27 Sandford street, home duties, with two sons, fireman and packer
32.	Morrish, Alice	St Sidwell's	Ratepayers	w,. 63, 44 Paris Street, sick nurse, for St Sid'w parish, no other household member
33.	Mudge, Anna Maria	Wonford	Conservative	m, 56, 3 Salutary Mount, home duties, husband a builder
34.	Munro, Louisa	Belmont	Conservative	m, age 63, home duties, husband accountant for a building society, grandchild
35.	Newberry, Emma Jane	Exwick	Coalition	m, age 46, Ashley Mount, Redhills, house duties, husband marine store dealer
36.	Newcombe, Lucy Mary	Cowick	Liberal	s, age 52, school teacher Okehampton Road Girls, 4 Church Road, has servant
37.	Oakes, Ellen Winifred	Wonford	Conservative	M, 38, Gras Lawn, four servants
38.	Pitts, Jessie Marion	Trinity	Independent	m. 42, Trews Weir House, husband a paper manufacturer
39.	Risdon, Edith Mary	St James	Ratepayers	m., age 59, 3 Devonshire Place, home duties, husband private means
40.	Roper, Dorothy Alice	St Petrock's	Conservative	m, age 32, home duties, 12 Southernhay West, wife of Dr Frank Arthur Roper, two children under 10, servant
41.	Rowe, Edith Emma	Belmont	Conservative	s, age 54, home duties, aunt of householder, railway shunter
42.	Shooter, Elizabeth	Heavitree	Ind. Lab	m., age 56, 43 Ladysmith Rd, house duties, husband a carpenter, son

43.	Spear, Bessie Sophia	St Sidwell's	Ratepayers	w, 36, 63 Summerland Street, baker own account, three children under 10
44.	Timewell, Emily Montague	St James	Ratepayers	m., age 58, 5 Poltimore Square, home duties, husband newspaper subeditor, d and grands
45.	Townsend, Mary C	St Leonard's	Conservative	m., age 51, 19 St Leonards Rd, home duties, husband a printer, live-in servant
46.	Tozer, Florence	Rougemont	Conservative (U)	m., age 62, 20 Velwell Villas, home duties, husband Ferris retd bank cashier, live-in servant
47.	Tozer, Louisa Emma	St James	Ratepayers	s. age 59, 42 Sidwell Street, confectioner on own account, living in three rooms
48.	White, Thirza Ann	Heavitree	Independent	m. age 49, Callacotts, Whipton, home duties, husband a self-employed wheelwright
49.	Williams, Ellen Frances	Exwick	Coalition	Not found in Exwick
50.	Wotton, Mary Ann	Trinity	Labour	M, 38, 19 Coombe Street, home duties, husband labourer for timber merchant
51.	Wreford, Harriet	Belmont	Ratepayers	m. age 55, 35 Toronto Road, home duties, husband a carpenter, out of work son