

# MARIE HART...

## ...a Mayor to Remember

by Fr Peter Sherred

"You judge a democracy not by the opportunities you give to the majority but by the opportunities you give to minorities." This was a quotation found in a 1978 autograph book belonging to Marie Hart and it helps one to understand her approach to her role in civic affairs and defines her approach to life. Not only was Marie twice Mayor of Dover but she was also Mayoress as well acting in such role for her good friend and colleague Kathleen "Bobbie" Goodfellow when she was mayor. Marie died on 10th January 2008.

Marie Lambert was born on 21st June 1918 the second of three daughters of Margaret (Peggy) and Richard Lambert. Her early life was based in her native Yorkshire centred on Leeds. Her mother died when the three sisters were young (Margaret was 7, Marie 5 and Alice a mere 13 months) and the family faced immediate problems for there was no social service provision or Welfare State at the time and the loss of his wife gave Marie's father a particularly difficult challenge. He had to work and was unable to cope with the care of his young daughters who were to find themselves placed in a one-parent orphanage run by Quakers in Leeds. Their father never remarried and he would bring his daughters home every weekend, for he was a caring man alert to his responsibilities to his children. The girls stayed at the orphanage until they reached the age of 14 although Margaret stayed on as a helper until Marie reached

14 when they both moved back home to live with their father. Alice moved back home upon reaching her 14th birthday and kept house. As was customary at that time the two senior girls went out to work at an early age and became seamstresses/machinists in the Leeds factory of Heaton's. It was here, with her experiences of life, that the later Marie Hart's formative influences were established. One incident demonstrated the young Marie's determination to fight for rights and for minorities. The factory had only one clocking off machine so the last girl to leave would always be about fifteen minutes late leaving work. Marie approached management and suggested a second machine was acquired. The request was refused as one was deemed sufficient. "My grandmother wore a bustle but I do not have to," said Marie when presenting the management with a choice - either a second machine was acquired or the last girl would be entitled to 15 minutes overtime. A second machine was acquired! Marie went on to form what was believed to be the first Union for Women. When the owners of the factory came to visit, Marie was no shrinking violet. "I am Marie Lambert who organises the Union so if you have come to see me (they had) please come and introduce yourselves rather than skulking behind the coat-rails." When war broke out in 1939 Marie, with Margaret, joined Brays munitions factory producing ordnance for the Royal Navy. There she rose to be an inspector. Her reason for leaving this post was redundancy i.e. the war had ended!

This first phase of her life provided her with experiences which were to influence her approach to life and politics in later years. She had lived in the "real world" where she had confronted hardship, inequality, injustice and oppression.

In a second phase of her life she was to become a familiar person in her adopted town of Dover. What she made of this parochial town, tucked away in a valley and inward looking, after all her experiences "up north" is hard to say, but she first came to Dover in the 1930's for family holidays as there were relatives living in the area. An uncle had married a Dover girl and cousins were born in Dover. In 1947, with Margaret and herself as bridesmaids, she attended a dance at the Town Hall where she was to meet a former Royal Naval cook who was working on the Southern Railways ferries running from Dover. His name was Fred Hart who at that time was living in Limekiln Street with his mother and father. Marie and Fred over the years were to become very familiar as a couple in and around Dover. However, it all started slowly and strangely! Fred was quite smitten by the two bridesmaids he met at the dance and one in particular. Therefore, he asked Margaret if he could write to her. When he did this caused some difficulty as Margaret already had a boy friend so Marie asked her sister what she would do with the letters and she took it upon herself to respond as Margaret. Now this all worked perfectly all the time Fred was in Dover and "Margaret" was in Leeds. There came a time when Fred decided he would visit Leeds to see Margaret and the truth came out. It was a defining moment for the two of them for they were to marry - but not until March 1958 as Fred made haste slowly. In 1957 he had invited Marie down to Dover and upon inquiring what she would like for Christmas received the

answer "only you"! Having purchased the ring in Gunn's the jewellers they married in a little Baptist church in Leeds because they could not marry in the Church of England as it was Lent! When they visited the Registrar for a licence and Fred wrote down on a form his occupation as "ship's cook Merchant Navy" the Yorkshire Registrar removed his glasses, looked at Marie and said, "Good God lass! Do you know what you are letting yourself in for?" She did and they were to be married for nearly 50 years until Fred's death in 2006. They first lived in Dover in a flat in Park Street opposite the police station, then moved to 47 Dour Street where they lived together until Fred's death and then Marie alone until her move in October 2007 when, terminally ill, she returned to Leeds. Just before she died she signed a cheque as 'Mrs Marie Hart' saying it took her long enough to achieve the title so she would always use it! This second phase of her life, namely her union with Fred, was to give her a long and happy marriage with stability and security on which she could base the third phase of her life - her interest in politics. Fred gave sterling support to Marie in her public roles and they supported each other in all the challenges they faced. They were quite simply inseparable - with Marie benefiting from Fred's enjoyment of cooking and his role of choosing the hats she acquired for her civic duties.

It was in those roles that many Dovorians will remember Marie. She and Fred were staunch members of the Labour Party in Dover and she was a Councillor for Tower Hamlets ward for many years. Theirs was the Labour Party of Ernest Bevin, Aneurin Bevan, Stafford Cripps and Clem Atlee, a party committed to the creation and expansion of a Welfare State and the abolition of injustice whether economic,

social or otherwise. Marie was not a person to sit on the fence, waiting to see which way the proverbial cat would jump and then join a bandwagon, preferring to lead by example and following her principles. Neither she nor Fred had sympathy with the rebranding of names and principles in the pursuit of power and in that they showed how principled they were as a couple. They may not have been fashionable but they were good socialist comrades who fought for social justice, the rights of the underprivileged and the advancement of the Welfare State and Marie was not diffident about expressing her views on the modern direction of the party of which she was a member.

She was deeply involved in the life of the town and was elected to the Dover Borough Council then Dover District Council serving on the latter from its inception in 1973, as a shadow local authority, to 1987. In 1979 she became the fourth woman Mayor of Dover serving with distinction. When she had first visited Dover she was struck by the cleanliness of the town but by the time she was elected Mayor things had clearly changed. At her mayor making she called on all Dovorians to polish up the town especially for the coming installation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. In photographs of the installation, in the marquee in the grounds of Dover College, Marie can be seen in her mayoral outfit sitting immediately behind the Queen Mother. When these two ladies of mature age conversed with each other Her Majesty was amused by Marie informing her that at the previous installation of the Lord Warden she was working as a domestic at Dover College. She had to peer round the corner to witness events while now she, a Yorkshire lass, was Dover's first citizen entertaining royalty and many

distinguished guests in her adopted hometown! So successful was her mayoral year that she was elected Mayor again in 1983-1984. The interesting feature about Marie's years of public service was her ability to keep her feet firmly on the ground. It mattered not to Marie whether the mayoral year coincided with some other high profile role, like Speaker of the Cinque Ports, it was simply an honour and a privilege to be chosen to represent the town as mayor or her constituents as a councillor. Her two mayoral years did not come around on the basis of "Buggin's Turn", as seems often to be the case, but because she had earned the right and privilege to be the town's first citizen.

That right had been earned through her dedication as a conscientious councillor. As a member of Dover District Council she demonstrated remarkable qualities of gentleness and firmness combined with fairness in judgements and consideration for officers of the Council and other councillors. This was particularly noticeable in the years immediately after the re-organisation of local government when the standard of behaviour of many of her elected colleagues took the Council through one of its less satisfactory periods. Marie focussed on what she saw as the important function of an elected servant - the representation of the people who had elected her and nowhere was this more evident than in her interest in housing issues. With her long-term friend and political colleague "Bobbie" Goodfellow she was part of a political 'dynamic duo'. Both were diminutive in stature being less than five feet tall, but they could, in a proverbial sense, punch above their weight (and height!). The experiences of her early life, her union involvement and membership of the Labour party combined to enable her to fight for what she believed was right and

she managed on occasions to ensure people were given decent accommodation where all others had failed. Together with Councillors Kath Goodfellow and Edith Hadden she was part of a very powerful force of socially aware councillors. The weight of their combined efforts forced others to succumb to what was equitable and good. Marie did an immense amount for the people of Dover and never compromised the principles and integrity she learned from the experiences of her early years in Leeds. Even after she stood down from council life it was not unusual for people to look her up and to knock on her door seeking advice on many aspects of life or on their problems and Marie turned no one away.

She was an enthusiastic supporter of many local organisations including Dover Operatic and Dramatic Society and a long-term member of the congregation of St Mary's in Church Cannon Street. Diagnosed with breast cancer before Fred died she confronted this challenge with her true Yorkshire grit. Although terminally ill, after Fred's death she decided to move back to Yorkshire to be near her surviving sister and other members of her family. Her determination to move was carried through and she left Dover for the last time in October 2007. Sadly, by then she was too poorly to move into the little house she had bought in Leeds. She stayed initially with her niece Margaret and her husband at Wombwell near Barnsley until the requirement for full time care necessitated her move to a care home where, though increasingly frail, she participated in the life of the home to the best of her ability. Following her death her body was cremated in Barnsley. She did not remain "up north" however as her ashes were brought back to Barham

crematorium to be scattered where those of her beloved Fred had been scattered some eighteen months previously.

Those Dovorianians who knew Marie and knew her well would have found their lives made richer by the experience. With her passing there is almost a sense of history passing. After all she lived through 4 reigns, 17 Prime Ministers (22 administrations) and 9 Archbishops of Canterbury! She was at the centre of our town's life for nearly 50 years and set standards in public life to be respected by others.

Marie lived life on the basis of looking forward but understood the value of looking back on her experiences. We can do no worse than look back over the life of this lady, twice first citizen of Dover as well as mayoress, to help us understand that she was, as her good friend and colleague "Bobbie" Goodfellow would have said, "a scarce good person." It was Dover's good fortune that this Yorkshire lass married a lad living in Dover and moved to the town to become an integral part of it. A memorial service for her life and work was held at St Mary the Virgin Dover on April 10th 2008 attended by the local MP, the current Mayor and Mayoress, many friends and former colleagues. She was deservedly a Mayor to remember who lived her life according to her autograph book quotation.



Marie Hart