

Lady Arbuthnot

A centenarian who gave much service to Dover

Peter Sherred

Looking back over the Parliamentary representation of Dover since the Second World War, one is struck by the way the pendulum has swung between the two parties that have held the seat. In the 1945 landslide General Election, the Labour representative, John Richard Thomas, a chartered accountant, became the town's MP, but he did not contest the subsequent 1950 Election, so was a one-term MP. The subsequent successful candidates to become our Parliamentary representative were, in order of service, Major John Arbuthnot (Conservative), David Ennals (Labour), Peter Rees QC (Conservative), David Shaw (Conservative), Gwyn Prosser (Labour) and the present incumbent, Charlie Elphicke (Conservative though currently Independent).

The representative who fought the most General Elections for the Dover seat was John Arbuthnot, starting in 1945 and ending in 1964 with four successful outcomes and two unsuccessful outcomes (the first and the last). He had been adopted as Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Dover in 1945, and first won the seat in the 1950 election. He and his family moved from Deal to Ash in 1963, and, following defeat at the 1964 General Election, he continued living at the family home until his death in June 1992. He had been awarded an MBE for his scientific work with explosives in 1944, he was decorated with the Territorial Decoration in 1951 and in 1964, for his political work, he was created a hereditary Baronet.



Lady Arbuthnot 2019

Kittybrewster, 1st Baronet, MBE, TD, had been educated at Eton College, and Trinity College, Cambridge, and served in the Royal Artillery in World War II, rising to the rank of Major. In civilian life, he was Chairman of Estates and Agency, the family tea concern, as well as being a Director of Folkestone and Dover Water Company. He had many other interests. In his

parliamentary career, he was a member of the Public Accounts Committee from 1955 to 1964, served as Second Church Estates Commissioner, the spokesman for the Church of England in the House of Commons, and also as a Deputy Speaker.

Sir John's success was ably assisted and supported by the woman he married, and who on 29th September 2019 became a centenarian. "No man succeeds without a good woman behind him, wife or mother. If it is both, he is twice blessed indeed," are words attributed to Harold Macmillan, a Conservative Prime Minister under whom John Arbuthnot served. Those who had the privilege of knowing the Arbuthnots during their time in Dover will be able to attest to the truth of those sentiments. Jean Arbuthnot was a stalwart supporter and promoter of her husband. She was the very essence of politeness and charm, radiating an aura of courtesy and dignity to those who encountered her. As she attained her century it is appropriate to reflect on this remarkable woman and all she did for her husband and for the town and constituency, by her presence beside him. So, who was she?

Sir John Sinclair Wemyss Arbuthnot of (Margaret) Jean Duff was a Kentish lass,

having been born in Sevenoaks, the younger daughter of Gordon and Janet Duff. Her father was a solicitor, and a passionate musician. When the family moved to Switzerland for a period, he was able to indulge his passion with an ability to play no fewer than six instruments: the piano, organ, drums, violin, viola and oboe. He loved to sing, specialising in madrigals, and would conduct amateur choirs and orchestras, as well as composing madrigals based on Elizabethan poetry. Jean and her sister Molly were brought up to read music and, when their friends called by, there was always singing round the piano. Frequent madrigal parties while she was young led Jean to a lifelong enthusiasm for them, and she still hosts such events regularly in her London home.

After their school years in Switzerland, Jean and Molly attended the Royal College of Music. Being in London gave them the opportunity of enjoying what was then called 'The London Season'. Jean and Molly were very close. Molly died, aged 80, in May 1999. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Jean was called up to the First Aid Post in Chelsea as a VAD. Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses worked alongside military nurses during both World Wars. She became Founder President of the VAD Association and was its representative in 2008 when she laid a wreath on its behalf at The Cenotaph in Whitehall at the Association's final gathering. Her nursing career took her to a hospital in Hertfordshire before transfer to Haslar, the naval hospital near Portsmouth, for a two-year deployment, after which she returned to London to nurse some Wrens. She enjoyed nursing so much that she was accepted by St. Thomas's Hospital to train as a Nightingale Nurse, but her nursing ambitions were derailed by an important social event in the form of a Reel Party organised by her parents at their home in South Kensington, where they had been living since returning from Switzerland. One

of the girls brought, as her escort, a young man by the name of John Arbuthnot ... and within three weeks, Jean and John were engaged to be married! The marriage took place at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton on 3rd July 1943.

Jean and John were blessed with five children. Elizabeth, their eldest daughter, was born in 1947 and studied politics at the University of Kent at Canterbury in the 1960s, William, their elder son who has inherited the title, was born in 1950. James was born in 1952 and after a successful career as an MP now sits in the House of Lords as the Right Honourable The Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom. Louise was born in 1954 and Alison in 1957; both qualified as solicitors.

In addition to service as an MP, John Arbuthnot's family business necessitated his visiting tea plantations in India, Ceylon and the Cameroons. Sometimes Jean would go with him on the trips to India and Ceylon. She was not, however, permitted to go to the Cameroons, because John considered the small aeroplanes unsafe and he did not want his children to be deprived of both parents at the same time, in the event of an accident. Jean also accompanied John on Parliamentary delegations to several countries, which she much enjoyed. Elizabeth recalls her mother being a staunch supporter of her father. Jean worked hard on her speeches, in which she was expected to 'say something nice' without being political in any way. She modelled her speeches on those of Stanley Baldwin, whom she much admired, and, having written them she would learn them off by heart so she never spoke from notes.

Busy during the week in Parliament when it was in session, and busy with constituency work on Saturdays, John was also very often abroad during Parliamentary recesses, either on business or on Parliamentary delegations. When she did not accompany him, Jean had

her work cut out running the family home and being mother to their five children, as well as representing John at local events. She was very much involved with Dover Borstal for some years. After John lost his seat in Parliament, Jean used to go to fine art classes. She was an excellent hostess, with the highest standards, and taught all her children the techniques of silver service waiters and waitresses. For their Silver Wedding Anniversary in Ash in 1968, John had planned to give Jean a Georgian coffeepot, but Jean said she would prefer a bulldog instead, from whom she had several litters. The dog obviously had to be called Coffeepot. Jean was a Vice-President of the Guide Dogs for the Blind.

When Sir John died in 1992, Lady Arbuthnot sold the family home in Ash and moved to London, where she still lives in a small house bought by her husband's aunt in the 1950s.

When members of her family are not visiting her, she spends her time on music. Although few of her own generation remain, she has many friends of a younger generation who visit her regularly to play chamber music or sonatas, or to sing.

In addition to her five children, she often sees her ten grandchildren and her two great-grandchildren. In February 2018 she fell down the stairs in her home, breaking her collarbone and five ribs, since which time she has had a team of carers to ensure it does not happen again. She remains happy and fulfilled and well deserves the thanks and appreciation of Doverians for her sterling work and support over the many years she graced this town and constituency with her beauty, elegance and charm. Happy Birthday, Lady Arbuthnot, knowledgeable musician, supportive wife and devoted mother, grandmother and great-grandmother!

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