

## **Anti-alien agitation in Richmond: Mrs. Norah Dacre Fox and the 1918 General Election**

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In November, 1918, Mrs. Norah Dacre Fox placed an announcement in the *Richmond Herald* in which she explained to potential voters in the Borough the reason why she had chosen to enter the General Election as an Independent Parliamentary Candidate. Her decision, Dacre Fox revealed, was made so that she might, if returned to Westminster, voice 'the national demand' for a settlement of the question of the 'astounding situation' concerning 'persons of enemy blood' being allowed to remain free in the country and in the Empire. In particular, Dacre Fox blamed the Home Secretary, Sir George Cave (who had been appointed in 1916, and also served as the Member of Parliament for Kingston and Richmond), for not removing 'the danger' of this alien situation during the War. Dacre Fox concluded her announcement by proclaiming that she was confident that 'every man and woman of British blood' would be behind her in the fight and their votes would register a determination 'to regain, at whatever cost, Britain for the British'.<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, Dacre Fox was merely tapping into a more general xenophobic anxiety that had emerged in parts of Britain during the closing stages of the First World War, including disquiet about the wartime Coalition Government's alleged 'softness' towards 'aliens' and those of German descent who had remained in the country during the conflict. Germans still resident here tended to be viewed with utmost suspicion and sometimes outright hostility. Such unease had been further whipped up by the national press and by various anti-alien pressure groups. As historians have noted, there had also been a continuous, if rather peripheral, tradition of popular anti-alienism in Britain since the first mass immigration into the

country of the 1880s.<sup>2</sup>

### **Passion and drive**

What was especially notable about Dacre Fox and her entry into the 1918 Election contest in Richmond was the passion, drive and sheer verve that she put into her campaign, with a relentless focus on the question of the 'alien' as the subversive enemy 'within', a topic she pursued to a much further degree than the other candidates. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that anti-alienism became central to her whole Election campaign. Whereas the other Richmond candidates also adopted a firm line on so-called untrustworthy Germans, 'Teutons' and other 'foreigners', at the same time they sought to raise other issues as of equal importance to the Borough's electors, especially bread-and-butter economic issues such as jobs and housing.

Dacre Fox, on the other hand, injected anti-alienism into the local campaign with an intensity never really seen before in Richmond's politics. Moreover, much to the surprise of commentators at the time, although the Coalition Unionist candidate, Clifford Blackburn Edgar, achieved a very comfortable victory in the General Election with 47.4 per cent of the votes cast in Richmond, Dacre Fox managed to achieve second place, with 20.4 per cent, beating the Liberal candidate, R.J. Morrison, and another Independent candidate, Walter Crotch. Described by one observer as 'This splendid patriot', Dacre Fox had managed to attract and enthuse local audiences in Richmond despite her notoriously lengthy campaign meetings, and arguably exerted a significant, if ultimately unsuccessful, impact on the Election campaign.<sup>3</sup> She was conspicuously adept at generating publicity through outspoken comments and a repetitive message.

### **Early years**

Frustratingly, there has been very little written on the campaign in Richmond in 1918 and Dacre Fox's role in its electoral outcome. The most detailed biography of Dacre Fox, for example, devotes just one page to her electioneering in the Borough.<sup>4</sup>

The following discussion will help to rectify this. First of all, though, what was her background?

Norah Dacre Fox (1878-1961), later known as Norah Elam, was born in Dublin, Ireland, and was the daughter of John and Charlotte Doherty. In 1888, Mr. Doherty moved his family to London, where he pursued some printing business activities in the Kingston and Twickenham areas, residing first of all in Teddington and then at Longford lodge, Hampton. A staunch Liberal, Doherty served on Teddington District Council and also as a highly respected JP. His daughter Norah, educated at a private school in Richmond, did not marry until she was aged 31. In a ceremony held at Hampton Parish Church in 1909, she became the wife of Charles Richard Dacre Fox, a 32-year old stationary clerk.<sup>5</sup> The newlyweds set up home in Claygate, but it would appear that the marriage was not a happy one.

### **Women's suffrage**

Significantly, Norah Dacre Fox developed a deep interest in the cause of women's suffrage, and appears to have joined the WSPU (the Women's Social and Political Union) in 1912, an organisation which had been founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, and which called for 'Votes for Women' and 'Deeds not Words'. Norah became Hon. Secretary of the Kingston and District Division of the WSPU, and rose rapidly to become one of the leading activists in the national movement, with her name regularly appearing in the Suffragette press. By March, 1913, she had become General Secretary of the WSPU, and was especially prominent in what would now be termed 'direct action' activities on behalf of the campaign for a woman's right to vote. From May-July, 1914, for example, she was imprisoned three times in Holloway Prison for what the authorities classed as acts designed to incite 'militancy and violence'.

### **First World War**

When War broke out in 1914, serious tensions emerged within the WSPU between those members who wished to suspend campaigning activities for the duration and

espouse a 'patriotic' stance, and those women who disagreed with this strategy and viewed the War as a typical product of militarism and male behaviour. Importantly, the pro-war wing of the WSPU moved more and more to the right of the political spectrum during the course of the War, and Norah Dacre Fox, who was a very effective public speaker, became part of an uncompromising campaign designed to mobilise pro-war and patriotic sentiment across the whole nation, increasingly targeting 'pacifists' and anti-War agitators, and blaming 'Bolsheviks' and non-British 'aliens' for plotting to undermine the war effort and British morale. Taking part-time paid work for a Government Commission, Dacre Fox became regularly involved in public meetings which emphasised the 'peril' of enemy aliens still present within the country.<sup>6</sup>

In Richmond, growing local awareness of Dacre-Fox's anti-alien views seems to have emerged in mid-July, 1918, when it was reported in both the national and local press that a meeting on 'Enemy Aliens' had been held on 13 July in Trafalgar Square, London, where Mrs. Dacre Fox, 'who is the daughter of Mr. J. Doherty, of Teddington', had demanded the internment of aliens.<sup>7</sup> There were numerous other meetings of this kind during the course of the summer and autumn of 1918, supported by organisations such as the British Empire Union (which had originally been created in 1915 as the Anti-German Union), and the like-minded National Party, which had been created in 1917 as a rightwing breakaway from the Conservative Party. A key theme was a demand for internment or deportation of all those deemed to be of German origin, whether naturalized or not.<sup>8</sup>

In late October, 1918, speaking at one such meeting in Hyde Park, Dacre Fox said that she hoped to 'have the pleasure' of opposing Sir George Cave for the Richmond Parliamentary Division, due to the way the Home Office under Cave had, she claimed, placed 'every obstacle' in the way of internment of aliens.<sup>9</sup> This allegation made national news. Shortly after, when the Armistice was announced on 11 November, the Coalition Government stated that a General Election would be held on Saturday, 14 December, which was plainly the opportunity for which Dacre Fox had been eagerly waiting.

## 1918 General Election

Interestingly, even though there had been British Empire Union and National Party activities in the Richmond area and surrounding districts, Mrs. Dacre Fox did not seek official backing from the two organisations, preferring instead to pursue her anti-alien campaign as a fully 'Independent' candidate. Speaking even before the official calling of the General Election, Dacre Fox had commented to the local press: 'I shall be an entirely independent candidate – free of politics and party'. She added: 'My election cry will be a national one, and my election colours the national colours – red, white and blue'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, after setting up Election offices at nos. 75 and 77, Kew Road, Richmond, Dacre Fox also became her own election agent, and appears to have run her campaign almost single-handedly and on a shoe-string budget, relying on financial donations from individuals at public meetings and on printing help from her father (who seems to have been ambivalent about his daughter's 'alien' obsessions).

Just a week after her Hyde Park announcement that she would challenge Cave in Richmond, and even before the Armistice was declared, Dacre Fox inserted a notice in the local press (headed 'Down with German Influence!') which announced that her first public meeting of the campaign would be held on 10 November, at 7.30pm.<sup>11</sup> As the *Herald* observed, 'Mrs. Dacre Fox is evidently not going to allow the grass to grow under her feet, and announces that she will open her election campaign at the Richmond Hippodrome on Sunday (tomorrow) evening at 7.30'.<sup>12</sup>

A report from Dacre Fox's campaign launch meeting at the Hippodrome noted that she was 'an effective speaker' and gave a speech 'of considerable length', almost the whole of which was devoted to the question of German influence in the country. Conspiracy theory was seemingly a key component of the speech (and would remain so for the rest of her campaign). She asked her audience 'whether it was not true that our Government offices swarmed with men of enemy blood. Did anyone deny it?' She continued on this theme by alleging that the British Foreign Office was 'riddled through and through with enemy blood' or persons with enemy connections.<sup>13</sup>

This set the tone for many of her subsequent campaign meetings, even though there was an early setback to Dacre Fox's ambitions when it was announced by the Government that Sir George Cave had been appointed to succeed Lord Parker as Lord of Appeal, and thus could not now be Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Richmond Conservative Party in the General Election.<sup>14</sup> Cave was replaced by Clifford Blackburn Edgar, but this did not deter Dacre Fox, who continued with her anti-alien campaign with the same zeal and energy. Indeed, over the course of the four week campaign, despite her lack of a party machine to support her, Dacre Fox appears to have easily kept up with all the activities of the other rival candidates, relying on a small number of volunteers to aid her but holding numerous public meetings across the Borough, both indoor and outdoor. At one point in late November, the *Richmond Herald* observed that 'Mrs Dacre Fox, whose energy in prosecuting her candidature for the Parliamentary Borough of Richmond is gaining her a considerable following', was determined to fight on every occasion 'to bring about drastic alterations in the laws dealing with aliens', so that never again would we be faced with such a situation.<sup>15</sup> Even in the final week of the campaign, Dacre Fox showed little sign of election fatigue and, as well as outdoor meetings, still managed to hold two indoor meetings per day, including at Ham Church School, the Queen's Cinema in Sheen Road, the Richmond Hippodrome, the Castle Theatre in Richmond, and in various other locations.<sup>16</sup>

Invariably, the core theme at each public meeting she addressed centred on the 'alien' question. At one such meeting, for example, held at in mid-November at Mortlake, Dacre Fox proclaimed that the fact that Sir George Cave had retired from the contest 'had not altered the situation so far as the position of enemy aliens was concerned'. She argued: 'If the system of allowing persons of alien blood or connection was permitted to continue it would be the first sign of decadence in the nation, and they would not be able to help themselves by and by unless it was arrested now'.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, at another meeting, held towards the end of the campaign in the Queen's Cinema in Richmond, which was described as 'crowded to the doors on Saturday

night', Mrs. Dacre Fox delivered 'a rousing address', where she made it plain that winning or losing did not really matter. Referring to a claim by Mr. Walter Crotch, one of her rivals in the Election, to the effect that Dacre Fox had 'no mandate' from the electors, Dacre Fox responded defiantly that she did not require any mandate: 'I came forward to do my duty, and I will do it whether I win or lose'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Dacre Fox had stood in Richmond in 1918 solely to generate publicity and enthusiasm for her anti-alien obsessions, and she believed it was her 'duty' to raise both local and national awareness of what she considered was the most important issue facing the British nation.

As noted at the outset, while the electorate in Richmond followed national trends and gave a large majority to the Coalition Government candidate in 1918, it is evident that there were sufficient numbers of people in the Borough who were in sympathy with Dacre Fox and her outspoken views on 'aliens'. Achieving second place out of four in the General Election was quite an achievement for an Independent candidate who had seemingly built up political momentum using one single campaign theme only, and with just a skeleton body of volunteers to help her. It is difficult to know whether those in the electorate who packed out her meetings in Richmond did so for the 'novelty' and entertainment value of her defiant and conspiratorial speeches, or whether it was because she was a woman making the most of being newly enfranchised (ironically, this was something Sir George Cave, as Home Secretary, had been instrumental in bringing about), or whether she was merely the beneficiary of a form of protest voting in Richmond. More research is required.

### **Change of name – and political allegiance**

There was further brief local coverage of Mrs. Dacre Fox in February, 1919, when she successfully lodged an appeal in the High Court for relief from some penalties she had incurred during her General Election campaign in Richmond.<sup>19</sup> However, she appears to have quickly lost interest in the area. Moreover, in 1922 she gave birth to an illegitimate child, a son, whose father was Mr. Dudley Elam. Norah and

her new partner then moved to Sussex. With her marriage to Charles Dacre Fox effectively over, she changed her name to Norah Elam in 1928.

Interestingly, both Norah and Dudley Elam then embarked on a new political path, joining the West Sussex branch of the Conservative Party. More dramatically, after Sir Oswald Mosley launched the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1932, Norah Elam appears to have persuaded Dudley that fascism was the now future, and they were both members of the BUF by 1934. Indeed, as 'Norah Elam', the former Mrs. Dacre Fox rose high in Mosley's organisation, ending up as a leading propagandist for the movement, often speaking on women's issues, or sharing platforms with notorious anti-Semites such as William Joyce. Evidently, the xenophobia she had pursued in Richmond in 1918 had found a new racist outlet in the Blackshirts of the 1930s.

On 23 May, 1940, along with other key members of the BUF, the Elams were arrested and interned under Defence Regulation 18b.<sup>20</sup> The round-up had been implemented because the British government feared BUF leaders might collaborate with the Germans in the event of an invasion of the British Isles. Norah Dacre Fox/Elam found herself back in Holloway Prison, where she had first been imprisoned in 1914. But this time it was not for her feminism, but for her fascism. After their release the Elams did return back to the local area, taking residence in a cottage in Twickenham, which they named Gothic Cottage.

## Notes

1. *Richmond Herald*, 23 November, 1918, p.4.
2. A useful collection of essays on this topic is David Cesarani and Tony Kushner (eds.), *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain* (1993).
3. *Richmond Herald*, 14 December, 1918, p.7.
4. See Susan and Angela McPherson, *Mosley's Old Suffragette: A Biography of Norah Dacre Fox* (Rev. ed., 2011), p.105.



5. Some useful biographical details on Dacre Fox and her husband can be found in the *Surrey Comet*, 23 November, 1918, pp.3-4, and in the *Richmond Herald*, 30 November, 1918, p.8.
6. *Mosley's Old Suffragette*, pp.93-102.
7. *Richmond Herald*, 20 July, 1918, p.5.
8. *Mosley's Old Suffragette*, p.97.
9. *Surrey Comet*, 30 October, 1918, p.5, and *Richmond Herald*, 2 November, 1918, p.9.
10. *Richmond Herald*, 2 November, p.9.
11. *Richmond Herald*, 9 November, 1918, p.6.
12. *Richmond Herald*, 9 November, p.8.
13. *Richmond Herald*, 16 November, 1918, p.7.
14. *Richmond Herald*, 16 November, p.6.
15. *Richmond Herald*, 30 November, 1918, p.8.
16. *Richmond Herald*, 7 December, 1918, p.6.
17. *Richmond Herald*, 16 November, 1918, p.7.
18. *Richmond Herald*, 7 December, 1918, p.5.
19. *Richmond Herald*, 22 February, 1919, p.4.
20. *The Times*, 24 May, 1940, p.6.