Eleanor Rathbone and the National Council on Ageing
Miss Eleanor Florence Rathbone has been described as “the greatest backbencher of the 20th century”.

At Age Concern England we remember her primarily as our first Chairman, but her accomplishments were many and significant.

She was the pioneer of Child Benefit, a tireless campaigner for the rights of women both in the UK and abroad, an outspoken opponent of appeasement in the lead-up the World War II and a redoubtable champion of the refugees and displaced persons it produced.

Early years

Born in London on 13 May 1872, Eleanor was the second youngest of 10 children and had six older brothers. The Rathbone family had a tradition of political commitment and social responsibility. Her father was William Rathbone, a prosperous ship-owner, served as reformist Member of Parliament from 1869 to 1895. His many accomplishments included the establishment of a District Nurse system in Liverpool which was adopted across the country nationwide.

She was educated at home by a governess and private tutors before attending Kensington High School, London. She attended Somerville College, Oxford in 1893 where she studied humanities.

Liverpool

From the 1890s to World War I Rathbone helped to establish social services in Liverpool, especially for women and children. She was a leader in professionalising the work done by charitable organisations which laid the foundations for modern social work. She also campaigned over decades for more action by central and local government to meet the needs of the poorest. In 1909, she was the first woman to be elected to Liverpool City Council, one of only 14 women councillors in the whole country.

In 1918, Rathbone created the Liverpool Personal Services Society to develop advice and casework services. The Society had three offices and several hundred volunteers. Rathbone recruited Miss Dorothy Keeling, who was already running similar services in Bradford, to take charge of the new organisation. In 1927, Rathbone became the deputy chair of the Society's new sub-committee on “the care of the elderly.” This committee, one of the first recorded examples of a charitable organisation focussing on the specific needs of older people, evolved into what is now Age Concern Liverpool.

The rights of women

Rathbone was adamant that the interests of women should be directly addressed by someone of their own sex and was an enthusiastic campaigner for votes for women from her early twenties. She was a supporter of the “constitutionalist” wing of the movement which came together in the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). She disagreed with the tactics adopted by the suffragettes of the Women’s Social and Political Union founded by the Pankhursts, although she was influenced by their dynamic approach. She steered the Liverpool Women's Suffrage Society headquarters. Rathbone is pictured third from the left.
Society towards building a grassroots movement reaching out to working class women. On Millicent Fawcett’s resignation in 1919 Rathbone became the NUWSS President.

She was eager to demonstrate the vital role that women played in society, as workers, citizens as well as wives and mothers. While campaigning for women’s rights, she also carried out research, wrote books and pamphlets, developed services for women and families, and initiated activities to promote awareness of the contribution of women. Her detailed, practical knowledge of the life experience of women fuelled her conviction that the creation of income benefits payable to women was the best way to support families to overcome poverty.

**Fighting for Family Allowance**

During World War I she established the *Family Endowment Committee* to look into poverty in Britain. In 1917 it published *Equal Pay and the Family - A proposal for the National Endowment of Motherhood*, which argued for the introduction of family allowances. Her campaign for social reform continued and in 1925 she published a book, *The Disinherited Family*. In 1926 the Independent Labour Party adopted the introduction of family allowances as an official policy. The three major political parties rejected the idea.

Elected to Parliament as an Independent MP for the Universities in 1929 she continued this campaign and in 1940 published The Case for Family Allowances. This became the policy of the Labour Party and her family allowances system was introduced in 1945.

Being an independent MP meant that Rathbone was unlikely ever to be a member of any government. However, it did mean that she was not subject to any political party’s whip and therefore was able to act on her conscience. She was the first MP to unashamedly call herself a feminist.

**International work**

Rathbone’s work was not restricted to Britain. She campaigned against female circumcision in Africa, forced marriage in Palestine and child marriage in India.

Rathbone also took a keen interest in foreign policy and spoke out against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the British policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War. In April 1937, she travelled to Spain on a fact-finding mission, visiting and observed the destruction being caused by the Luftwaffe. She was a founder member of *Dependents Aid Committee*, which raised money for the families of members of the International Brigades. Later she helped establish the *National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief*. As the end of the Spanish Civil War drew near, she paid for a ship to evacuate Republicans.

**Fighting appeasement**

She grew increasingly concerned about Hitler and Nazi Germany. She was a vocal opponent of the British government’s policy of appeasement, calling for closer relations with the Soviet Union. Her book, *War Can Be Averted* expressed these sentiments and it and her views were publicly endorsed by Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee and David Lloyd.
George. Rathbone was, understandably, very unpopular with Neville Chamberlain during this time.

Growing concern about older people

In 1940 the pension age for women was lowered to 60 and poorer pensioners were able to apply for a new “supplementary pension”. The numbers eligible to receive benefits soared, and the officers of the government’s National Assistance Board (fore-runner to today’s Department for Work and Pensions) had to make thousands of home visits to assess the needs of claimants. These visits revealed the stark facts about the lives of older people, and created the feeling among officials, including Miss Dora Iberson, that something must be done.

On 14 August 1940 the Standing Conference of Voluntary Organisations in Time of War met. It was reported that since its last meeting a number of discussions with a number of people, including Iberson, had highlighted the advisability of setting up a National Committee for the care and general welfare of the aged. It was suggested that such a committee should have terms of reference such as:

- To act as a centre of information regarding the provision, both statutory and voluntary for old people in respect of pensions, housing and homes, general welfare
- To advise on specialist societies, particularly as to the giving of pensions to old people, having regard to the present provisions under the Assistance Board
- To approach Government Departments and Local Authorities in respect of any additional provision which may seem necessary.
- To promote schemes throughout the country for the general welfare of the aged.

It was agreed to recommend to the Executive Committee that a small group should be convened to discuss the advisability of setting up such a committee and the best means of doing so.

Formation of the NOPWC

By 1940, Dorothy Keeling, now one of Rathbone’s long-term collaborators, had been seconded from the Liverpool Personal Services to the National Council of Social Services (fore-runner to today’s National Council of Voluntary Organisations) to head the department charged with developing Citizens Advice Bureaux on a national basis. One of her early concerns was to ensure that CABx had information about the rights and needs of older people.

On Friday 13 September 1940, two days before the climax of the Battle of Britain, a meeting was held at 26 Bedford Square. Present were Eleanor Rathbone,
Dora Ibberson, Dorothy Keeling and Mr E Hermon. Others were meant to be there but were prevented from attending because of the continual air raids. Despite the falling bombs they decided the meeting should still proceed and moved to the basement where it commenced.

The key issues discussed were, in the language of today:
- Institutional Care
- Accessibility
- Loneliness
- Income assistance for poorer pensioners

Rathbone stated that it was clear that despite “the peculiar difficulties of the times”, something needed to be done. It was agreed to hold a conference on 7 October to bring together interested bodies. (See the box to the right for the list of invitees to the Conference. Many are still members of the National Council on Ageing today though some have different names.)

At the Conference, after Rathbone’s opening remarks and an introductory statement from Keeling, Ibberson summarised the current issues concerning the welfare of the aged:
- Loneliness
- Housing
- Home help
- Access to Healthcare
- Institutional Care
- Care homes - quantity and quality
- Local amenities and services
- Occupation for the aged
- Exploitation of the aged

A general conversation followed. The Conference agreed:
- That provision of welfare for older people needed more co-ordination and extension
- That those present at the conference would be asked to send a representative to serve on a committee to consider how this coordination and extension should be brought about
- That the Committee would have the power to add to its number
- That the National Council of Social Service

Invitees/Attendees
First meeting of the NOPWC

British Association of Residential Settlements*
(now British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres)

Charity Organisation Society*
(now the Family Welfare Association)

Church Army*

Churches Group

Co-operative Men’s Association

Freedom Association

Friends of the Poor
(now Friends of the Elderly)

Goldsmiths Benevolent Institute

Institute of Hospital Almoners*
(now British Association of Social Workers)

London Council of Social Service
(now London Voluntary Service Council)

Ministry of Health

NALGO*
(now UNISON)

National Conference of Friendly Societies

National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds
(now Townswomen)

National Women’s Citizens’ Association
(dispanded 1974)

Queen’s District Nursing Association*
(now Queen’s Nursing Institute)

Rotary International*

Royal Masonic Benevolent Institute

Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association*
(now IndependentAge)

Salvation Army*

Scottish Corporation
(now Royal Scottish Corporation)

Women’s Co-operative Guilds

Women’s Public Health Officers’ Association*
(now Community Practitioners’ and Health Visitors’ Association)

Working Men’s Club and Institute Union
(now CIU)

* Current members of the National Council on Ageing
would act as the convener of the Committee. The terms of reference originally suggested in August by the Standing Conference of Voluntary Organisations in Time of War were adopted and the Older People’s Welfare Committee was born*. It was agreed that Dorothy Keeling would take on the role of Secretary, the role today designated Director General.

**Influencing legislation**

The NOPWC quickly established contact with Sir William Beveridge, who had begun work on his project to build a new society after the war. Members of the NOPWC met Beveridge, submitted written reports to him, and also gave evidence in public to the relevant Parliamentary committees.

In 1944 the NOPWC prepared a report called *Old Age in the New World*, which was published in a series connected to Beveridge’s work called *Targets for Tomorrow*. The report, written by Emily Samson, the second Secretary of the NOPWC, commented, “Probably never before has there been such a stirring of the social conscience and determination that in the post-war world every citizen should have a fair deal. Obviously, this includes the old people, who will themselves in the near future form a growing proportion of the electorate.” The report called for practical targets in the areas of “economic security, housing and home helps, health, the care of the chronic and infirm sick, and general welfare.”

The NOPWC’s impact continued to grow. It directly influenced what was, from the point of view of older people and of Age Concern, one of the crucial pieces of legislation establishing the modern welfare state -- the 1948 National Assistance Act, which gave duties and powers to local governments to fund services to older people.

**Outcomes of the first few years**

During Rathbone’s time as Chairman, the Committee marked out for itself a field of work which, outside the difficulties peculiar to the state of war, remains valid today: homes and housing, the adequacy of pensions, loneliness, the care of the chronic sick and infirm and the provision of proper medical treatment.

In that time, as well as becoming a major campaigning force, the NOPWC undertook a number of activities which are reflected in Age Concern England’s work today.

- Information, in the form of a pamphlet called “Notes For Old Age Pensioners” was published to help pensioners navigate their way through the benefits system.
- Money was raised and put into a fund to provide grants to support the development of local Older People’s Welfare Committees.
- Different models of local services, particularly lunch clubs, were developed and piloted.
- A model constitution for local Older People’s Welfare Committees was developed and published, designating their function to be the co-ordination and facilitation of local action.

Rathbone chaired the NOPWC until her death from a stroke on 2 January 1946. On her death, The Guardian wrote, “No parliamentary career has been more useful and fruitful.”

Dorothy Keeling went on to run the Citizens Advice Bureau. Her autobiography, *The crowded stairs: Recollections of social work in Liverpool*, was published in 1961. She died in 1967.

Dora Ibberson, whose concern about the plight of the poorest older people and her determination to do something about it led directly to the founding of the NOPWC, resigned from the Committee in November 1941 after a restructuring at the Assistance Board. She went on to work for the Comptroller for Development and Welfare in the West Indies and became known across the Caribbean as “the Ibb”. She died in 1962.

* In 1944, it adopted the title National Old People’s Welfare Committee (NOPWC) to distinguish it from the growing number of local committees.
Rathbone on campaigning

“There is a school of reformers which despises compromise. Suppose they set their affections on the moon. Their way is to go on chanting, ‘We want the moon, we want the moon, we want the moon.’ The plan which experience taught us was to begin by declaring, ‘We want the moon,’ but when certain that was unobtainable, to say firmly, ‘If you can’t give us the moon, give us that particular star, that big one’; if that failed, ‘At least let us have that little star, just near the horizon. You know you can reach that one.’ And when we got it, from the vantage ground of that little star, we proceeded to grasp at those nearest it.

Or, to change the metaphor, there are reformers whose idea of taking a citadel is to march round it blowing trumpets, and when that fails, to batter it with rams, if necessary with their own heads. We sometimes used the battering ram, but if the wall proved too strong for us we withdrew a little and investigated every possible method of overcoming that wall, by climbing over it, or tunnelling under it or perhaps labouring to dislodge a stone at a time, so that just a few invaders could creep through. And we acquired by experience a certain flair which told us when a charge of dynamite would come in useful and when it was better to rely on the methods of the skilled engineer.

Another lesson we learned was the importance of being early in the field. If some legislative change is known to be projected which one wants to influence, it does not do to wait until the authorities have definitely made up their minds as to the form of the change; much less until the Bill is actually drafted and may be difficult to amend without upsetting the balance of its parts. Get at the people responsible, the Minister or, better still, the officials or officials.

Above left: Eleanor Rathbone in her later years.
Above right: This portrait of Eleanor Rathbone was painted by Sir James Gunn in 1933. It was paid for with funds raised by her friends. She is said to have posed with some reluctance, fearing that it would end up forgotten in “some dark passage or unfrequented chamber”. In fact, it hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, London, in the same room as the portraits of Churchill, Attlee and Bevan.
committees which advise him, while they are still in the stage of welcoming evidence and suggestions rather than of resenting criticism."

_Speech at Bedford College 29 November 1935_

“No most of our reforms today require difficult readjustments of a complicated, antiquated structure of case law and statute law. We were backwoodsman in pre-war days; now we need to be skilled artisans. If we go to the Government saying merely, this or that is wrong, put it right for us, they can bluff us as a lazy builder bluffs an ignorant housewife who asks him to cure her smoky chimney, saying, ‘Madam, what you want is impossible; if we did it the house would tumble down.’

Our method is to study the faulty structure for ourselves and make our plans, though they may not be exactly the plans which the builder carries out, yet he sees we know too much to be pacified with bluff.”

_Presidential Address to the NUWSS 1926_

_Others on Rathbone_

“Again and again have I observed Ministers or Under-Secretaries wince in terror when they observed that familiar figure advancing towards them along the corridors; they would make sudden gestures indicating that they had left some vital document behind them, swing round on their feet, and scurry back to their rooms... Benign and yet menacing, she would stalk through the lobby, recalcitrant Ministers would quail before the fire of her magnificent eyes.

_Harold Nicholson, The Spectator January 1946_

“Although she is remembered chiefly as a Member of Parliament, and for her advocacy of family allowances, those who knew her realized her interest in all aspects of social welfare. This was why she responded so readily to the request that she should become our first chairman. She had tireless energy and sensitivity to human suffering, and, throughout her life, acted on the axiom that ‘whatever ought to be done can be done’.”

_John Moss, Chairman NOPWC 1951-1963_