

'Sunderland Has Lost a Figure That Will Go Down in History': Marion Phillips in the North East of England, 1923–1932

Sarah Hellowell

University of Sunderland

Selected as the Labour Party's chief woman officer in 1918, Dr Marion Phillips played a prominent role in the British labour women's movement before, during and after the Great War. However, her brief stint as Labour MP for Sunderland between 1929 and 1931 has not attracted the same level of academic attention as the parliamentary careers of other early women MPs. Phillips's connection to the North East of England throughout the 1920s illuminates her work as chief woman officer, as well as the prominence of the labour women's movement in the region. This article focuses on Phillips's relationship with the labour movement in County Durham to understand how she was selected as a parliamentary candidate for Sunderland. The annual women's gala, first held in June 1923, and the Women's Committee for the Relief of Miners' Wives and Children formed in response to the 1926 General Strike, are crucial to understanding her early connections to the region. Phillips's sudden death in early 1932 led to a wave of local and national commemorations demonstrating the legacy of her political work.

KEYWORDS: twentieth century, Labour Party, popular politics

Describing her election victory in 1929, Dr Marion Phillips MP wrote, 'I never felt so wonder-struck, so utterly overcome, as when I faced that cheering crowd in Sunderland. It was not just the victory but it was far more what those delighted cheering people hoped from the victory that made it so difficult to keep back the tears'.¹ On 30 May 1929 Phillips was elected to represent the double-member borough of Sunderland with 31,794 votes – 19.5 per cent of the vote share – making her the town's first woman MP. The local Labour Party agent wrote to the Durham County Advisory

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¹ Marion Phillips, 'Bravo the women!', *Labour Woman*, 17 (July 1929), 98.

Council of Labour Women's Sections exclaiming, 'in Dr Marion Phillips we had one of the BEST candidates in the country, and it was very largely down to her Brilliance that we scored the remarkable Double Victory', referring to Sunderland's two-member status.² Despite her Australian upbringing and London residence, Phillips had a strong connection to the labour women's movement in the North East of England. While Marion Phillips played a prominent role in the post-1918 Labour Party as its first chief woman officer, less has been said about her work as a Member of Parliament (1929–31). This Australian-born academic does not seem an obvious choice for the seat in Sunderland.

This research is timely as it coincides with the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act – which extended the right to vote to some women over the age of thirty for the first time – and the forthcoming centenary of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act.³ In addition to suffrage legislation, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 permitted women to stand as candidates. In 1929 Marion Phillips joined the largest number of women members in the Commons since the Act was passed. Other leading female figures in the Labour Party also held seats in the North East of England: Margaret Bondfield represented Wallsend, Ellen Wilkinson was MP for Middlesbrough East, and Ruth Dalton briefly represented Bishop Auckland. In recent years, academics and community-history groups have shed light on the women who campaigned for the vote and stood as the first female parliamentary candidates and Members of Parliament. As Karen Hunt and June Hannam have articulated, local histories and commemorations have added colour and complexity to women's history.⁴ Existing regional histories of the women's movement tend to focus on nearby Newcastle upon Tyne, overlooking Sunderland. Nonetheless, local historians and community groups have started to recover the history of notable women in Wearside. As part of this recovery work, a blue heritage plaque for Marion Phillips was installed outside the former Labour Party headquarters in 2019.⁵

2 Labour candidate Alf Smith was also elected to represent Sunderland in 1929.

3 Mari Takayanagi, 'Women and the vote: the parliamentary path to equal franchise, 1918–28', *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), 168–85; Julie Gottlieb, 'Suffrage statutes and statues: reflections on commemorating milestones in the history of women's emancipation in Britain', *Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, 62 (2019), 159–80.

4 Karen Hunt and June Hannam, 'Towards an archaeology of interwar women's politics: the local and the everyday', in Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918–45* (Basingstoke, 2013), 124–41.

5 Rebel Women of Sunderland, Sunderland Culture, <https://sunderlandculture.org.uk/rebel-women/> (accessed 17 February 2023); Georgia Banks, 'Blue heritage plaque commemorates Sunderland MP Marion Phillips', *Northern Echo*, 17 September 2019; Sue Jones, 'An uneasy

This article will shed light on Phillips's connections to the North East of England, arguing that her earlier work – especially her attendance at the annual women's gala from 1923 onwards and her relief work for mining families during the 1926 General Strike – consolidated her connections and led to her selection as a parliamentary candidate in the region. Providing a brief overview of Marion Phillips's early career, the article will then highlight her work in the region at the annual Labour women's galas and during the miners' lockout, before examining her role as a champion for Sunderland in Parliament. Phillips used her position as an MP to campaign for the rights of working-class families, for unemployment insurance, and for housing, with particular reference to her Sunderland constituents. The final section of the article focuses on memorials to Phillips following her sudden death in 1932. These obituaries and commemorations indicate the strong support she garnered in Sunderland and County Durham, as well as nationally and internationally during her vibrant career. Inspired by recent work focusing on suffrage activists and female politicians, the theme of commemoration runs through this article as it helps us to understand the strength of the connection between Phillips and the labour movement in the North East of England.⁶

In their work on socialist women, Hannam and Hunt have demonstrated the value of a biographical approach to highlight the complexities of women's political identities. Various women in the British labour movement have been the subjects of such an approach.⁷ Most notably, recent biographies of Ellen Wilkinson have demonstrated the extent of her activism and politics.⁸ Marion Phillips, however, has not received the same level of attention as her contemporary. However, biographical work is complicated by a lack of personal archives relating to key Labour women such as Wilkinson, Margaret Macmillan, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, and Marion Phillips.⁹

relationship? Labour and the suffragettes in the North East', *North East Labour History Journal*, 44 (2013), 86–103.

- 6 Sharon Crozier De Rosa and Vera Mackie, *Remembering Women's Activism* (Milton, 2018).
- 7 June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: British Women 1880s to 1920s* (London, 2012), 31. For example, Cathy Hunt, 'Gertrude Tuckwell and the British labour movement, 1891–1921: a study in motives and influences', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), 478–96.
- 8 Matt Perry, *'Red Ellen' Wilkinson: Her Ideas, Movement and World* (Manchester, 2014); Laura Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (London, 2016); Lewis Young, 'The infant Hercules and the socialist missionary: Ellen Wilkinson in Middlesbrough East, 1924–1931', *Labour History Review*, 84 (2019), 21–45; Paula Bartley, *Ellen Wilkinson: From Red Suffragist to Government Minister* (London, 2014).
- 9 Carolyn Steedman writes about overcoming the lack of personal papers in *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret MacMillan, 1860–1931* (London, 1990), 6. See also Ruth Cohen, *Margaret Llewelyn Davies: With Women for a New World* (London, 2020).

This article draws on correspondence with Sunderland-based Labour Party activists and the local press, as well as Phillips's editorial column in *Labour Woman* and her other publications held in local archives and at the Labour History Archive in Manchester. Marian Goronwy-Roberts's biography does cover the breadth of Phillips's career, Beverly Kingston highlights the theoretical contributions that Phillips made to the Labour Party and Matthew Worley sheds light on her commitment to the party's leadership.¹⁰ Moreover, the wider historiography on labour women pays little attention to Phillips's constituency work. For instance, Christine Collette argues that 'the effect of Marion Phillips's leadership was an illustration of how one uniting heroine can change the group about her', referring to her leadership of the Women's Labour League.¹¹ Likewise, Pamela Graves focuses on Phillips's central leadership role within the Labour Party after 1918, rather than on her regional work in the North East of England. In contrast, this article sheds light on Phillips's links to the North East of England in the 1920s. As Hester Barron notes, this was a crucial period for the Labour Party as it attempted to consolidate its support through the labour women's movement in County Durham and the Durham Miners' Association.¹² As such, this article contributes to the historiography on the early Labour Party by highlighting the chief woman officer's role in the region.

Marion Phillips was born in Melbourne, Australia, on 29 October 1881 into a well-connected Jewish family. Although she moved to London in 1904, her formative years – including her family connections and educational opportunities – undoubtedly shaped her interest in women's rights and politics.¹³ Marion graduated from Melbourne University with a degree in philosophy and history in 1904 before taking up her scholarship at the London School of Economics (LSE).¹⁴ This was a turning point for

10 Marian Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of Vision: A Life of Marion Phillips, MP* (Wrexham, 2000); Beverly Kingston, 'Yours very truly, Marion Phillips', *Labour History*, 29 (1975), 123–41; Matthew Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the Labour Party between the Wars* (London, 2008), 41.

11 Christine Collette, *For Labour and for Women: The Women's Labour League, 1906–18* (Manchester, 1989), 183; Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918–1939* (Cambridge, 1994).

12 Hester Barron, 'Women of the Durham coalfield and their reactions to the 1926 Miners' Lockout', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 22 (2006), 53–83.

13 Her grandfather, Solomon, was instrumental in the migrant Jewish networks in Melbourne and Sydney. Her cousins Constance Ellis and Isabella Phillips were pioneering women in the field of medicine. See Sue Silberberg, 'A networked community: Jewish immigration, colonial networks and the shaping of Melbourne 1835–1895', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2015, 234.

14 Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of Vision*, 22; Beverly Kingston, 'Phillips, Marion (1881–1932),

Marion's politics and career. While at the LSE, she became a researcher on the Royal Commission into the Poor Laws, which was a stepping stone to her involvement in the wider labour movement. She was a short-lived member of the Executive Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), resigning in 1911 to support the campaign for full adult suffrage through the People's Suffrage Federation. She urged labour women to work for suffrage 'from within our own ranks, under our own banner of freedom and hope, not scattered through other societies, but solidly organised as Labour women demanding economic and political equality for working women and working men'.¹⁵ Although Phillips's name does not appear among the fifty-nine activists named on the plinth of the Millicent Garrett Fawcett statue in Parliament Square, there are a number of labour women who do appear on the statue. It has long been recognized that labour women contributed to the suffrage campaign, but the centenary has sparked an interest among local communities in women's history beyond the suffragettes.¹⁶

Phillips played an instrumental role in women's participation in the Labour Party. Following the death of Margaret MacDonald, she became leader of the Women's Labour League (WLL) and editor of *League Leaflet*, renamed *Labour Woman* in 1913.¹⁷ Phillips aligned the WLL with the parliamentary Labour Party but valued the separate organization of women, describing the ideals of the league as 'a free and happy womanhood'.¹⁸ She was secretary of numerous committees and organizations, most notably the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations. During the Great War, she served on the War Emergency Workers' National Committee, the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment, the Consumer Council, and the Reconstruction

Australian Dictionary of Biography (ed. National Centre of Biography), Canberra, Australian National University, Vol. 11, 1988, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/phillips-marion-8036> (accessed 26 September 2023); Marion Phillips, 'A colonial autocracy: New South Wales under Governor MacQuarie, 1810–1821', PhD thesis, London, 1909.

- 15 Marion Phillips, 'The Labour Party and the suffrage', *League Leaflet*, 23 (November 1912), 5. Her collection of suffrage posters and ephemera was displayed as part of Cambridge University's suffrage centenary events in 2018. See Fred Lewsey, 'Our Weapon Is Public Opinion': Posters of the Women's Suffrage Movement at the University Library, University of Cambridge: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/suffrage> (accessed 17 February 2023).
- 16 Myriam Boussahba-Bravard, *Suffrage outside Suffragism: Women's Votes in Britain, 1880–1914* (Basingstoke, 2007). See Gottlieb, 'Statutes and statues'.
- 17 Stephanie Ward, 'Labour activism and the political self in inter-war working-class women's politics', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 38.
- 18 Marion Phillips, 'Eighth annual report of the Executive Committee of the Women's Labour League', *League Leaflet*, 26 (February 1913), 5.

Committee. As a councillor in the predominantly Conservative borough of Kensington between 1912 and 1919, she lobbied for baby clinics, meals in school holidays, and women's toilets. The scale of her committee work is somewhat typical of the leading women in the labour movement and has led Matthew Worley to describe her as 'ubiquitous' in the Labour Party and associated groups.¹⁹ Nonetheless, she did clash with some of her colleagues. For instance, Beatrice Webb described Marion Phillips as having 'a sharp satirical tongue'.²⁰ Webb's comments seem to have influenced the early historiography on the women's labour movement. Christine Collette suggests there was a 'poverty of sisterhood' at the leadership level of the WLL, highlighting the tension between Marion Phillips and Margaret Bondfield, who found her 'difficult' to work with.²¹ June Hannam agrees that Phillips was 'known for her abrasive manner' but suggests that these comments need to be approached with caution, as Webb was highly critical of many of her colleagues in her diary. Despite this reputation, she did work closely with other Labour women. For example, she lived with Ethel Bentham and Mary Longman.²² Eleanor Barton, general secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild, recalled, 'I have often had occasion to cross swords with her [Phillips] on matters of organization and such like, but they never made any difference to a deep personal friendship combined with admiration for her outstanding qualities.'²³ Many Labour Party organizers and rank-and-file members thought Phillips was 'understanding' and 'appreciative'.²⁴ However, traditional historiography on the labour women's movement overlooks the positive reputation Phillips had in the North East of England. Labour candidate Denis Pritt wrote that Phillips was 'idolised in Sunderland'.²⁵ These local

19 Brian Harrison, 'Marion Phillips', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37852>; Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London, 1948), 126; Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865–1914* (London, 1989), 413–14; Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 41.

20 Beatrice Webb, typescript diary, vols. 34–8, May 1918, 127, LSE Digital Library; June Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics', in Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities and Perspectives, 1900–39* (Farnham, 2009), 179.

21 Collette, *For Labour and for Women*, 132–49, 181; Nan Sloane, *The Women in the Room: Labour's Forgotten History* (London, 2018), 185–87; Paula Bartley, *Labour Women in Power: Cabinet Ministers in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2019), 31.

22 Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics', 179; 'Marion Phillips' (1911) Census return for 74 Lansdowne Road, London, <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/> (accessed 11 November 2019).

23 Eleanor Barton, 'Tributes from colleagues', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 37.

24 Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics', 179; June Hannam, 'Women as paid organizers and propagandists for the British Labour Party between the wars', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77 (2010), 76.

25 D.N. Pritt, *The Autobiography of D.N. Pritt: From Left to Right* (London, 1965), 29.

relationships demonstrate Phillips's commitment to building the female base of the party and help to explain her selection as a prospective parliamentary candidate in the North East of England.

Following the restructure of the Labour Party in 1918, Marion Phillips was selected for the new post of chief woman officer. In this position she oversaw a significant expansion of the party's female membership. Some WLL members had reservations about the integration of women into the Labour Party under the revised constitution. There were concerns that women would be overshadowed by male-dominated trade unions on the National Executive Committee (NEC).²⁶ On the other hand, Phillips wrote that 'the Labour Party has recognised the importance of women's participation in its work' as it integrated the existing Women's Labour League as women's sections and ensured female representation on the NEC. Yet she did acknowledge that as 'women are so newly come into political life that their development will be hindered' if the WLL was completely subsumed by the Labour Party. In her edited collection titled *Women and the Labour Party*, she asserted that 'women must give their best thinking power to the solution of the problems which lie nearest to them, which grow out of the very centre of their existence in the family group', thus highlighting the role that women as mothers and wives could have in the party. Yet her vision for Labour women was not confined to traditional gendered roles. She argued that women 'must also play their part as human beings in the great task of democracy, that of making the life of the worker fruitful and happy, of developing a finer citizenship, and raising the level of national existence'.²⁷

Marion Phillips played a prominent role in the development of the Labour Party after the Great War and is therefore vital to the historiography of the party. Phillips was also involved in several international organizations and transnational networks, and attended congresses overseas. The international level of Phillips's activism is, however, beyond the scope of this article.²⁸ Instead a focus on her local efforts in the North East of England provides an innovative angle on the Labour Party's chief woman officer.

26 Graves, *Labour Women*, 23.

27 Marion Phillips (ed.), *Women and the Labour Party* (London, 1918), 11; see also Kingston, 'Yours very truly, Marion Phillips', 129; Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics', 175; Pat Thane, 'Labour and welfare', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), 93.

28 Neville Kirk, *Transnational Radicalism and the Connected Lives of Tom Mann and Robert Samuel Ross* (Liverpool, 2017), 99.

The 'growing strength of the Labour Movement among womenfolk'

Sunderland was a difficult seat for the Labour Party in the interwar years. Labour MPs Thomas Summerbell and Frank Goldstone had represented the industrial town between 1906 and 1918. County Durham's reliance on mining and shipping had led to a large working-class population in Sunderland, yet by the turn of the twentieth century there was an emerging middle-class base. Between the end of the Great War and 1929 the constituency was represented by Unionist and Liberal candidates.²⁹ However, at the 1929 general election almost all seats across County Durham swung to the Labour Party. Following the brief period of Labour representation by Marion Phillips and Alf Smith between 1929 and 1931, the constituency voted Conservative until 1945.³⁰ Therefore this study of Marion Phillips's tenure as Sunderland's MP highlights the fate of the Labour Party in this region. The local angle also helps to illuminate how women MPs balanced their national campaigns with local constituency work. Phillips was held in high regard by many in Sunderland. For instance, one of her former constituents described her 'efforts to help the poor and needy, both in the town [Sunderland] and distressed mining areas[,] as untiring'.³¹

As an Australian woman living and working in London, Phillips's selection as a parliamentary candidate for Sunderland does not seem an obvious choice. Thirteen WLL branches had been active in the area since 1911. On 8 May 1920, these regional women's sections formed the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council, recruiting Lilian Fenn as paid organizer for the region. Marion Phillips, as chief woman officer of the Labour Party, addressed the first meeting, which 200 women attended.³² Two years later, the council made plans to host a rally in Wharton Park, Durham, to coincide with the existing Miners' Gala.³³ Phillips attended every Durham women's gala until her death in 1932.

The 'Miners' Wives Gala of Durham' was a highlight in the calendar for Labour women between 1923 and 1977. Although *Labour Woman* described the demonstration as 'a genuine historical event' at the time, it is much less

29 Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of Vision*, 153.

30 Hester Barron, 'Labour identities of the coalfield: the general election of 1931 in County Durham', *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*, 97 (2012), 208.

31 E. Stewart, 'International and other tributes', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 39.

32 Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council, minute book, 1920–3, Durham Records Office, D/X 1048/1.

33 'A great day for Durham', *Labour Woman*, 11 (July 1923), 108.

well known than the Miners' Gala, which continues to be a popular annual event in Durham.³⁴ A one-off commemorative women's gala was held in 2018 to mark the centenary of women's suffrage. Despite the scale of this annual rally, existing historiography on women in the labour movement overlooks the mass demonstration and more work is required to understand the significance of the gala both regionally and nationally.³⁵ The 1924 rally attracted 10,000 women, which doubled to approximately 20,000 the following year.³⁶ June was known as 'Women's Month' in *Labour Woman*, which featured the Durham Gala as its headline event.³⁷ The mass meeting demonstrated the power of women's organization and provided opportunities for political education and fellowship. Moreover, Phillips's regular attendance in Durham pinpoints her early connections to the region. Phillips warmly described the 'dignity and beauty of this expression of women's solidarity and fellowship'.³⁸

In 1925, the Durham Women's Advisory Council agreed that there ought to be a woman candidate in one of the Durham parliamentary divisions, later deciding that Sunderland would make the ideal constituency.³⁹ At that time, the constituency still elected two members, which allowed the Labour Party to nominate a traditional (male) trade union candidate and take a chance on a woman candidate.⁴⁰ The Durham Women's Advisory Council approached the chief woman officer and created a parliamentary fund to support her campaign. The lack of personal papers or diaries makes it difficult to ascertain exactly why Phillips accepted this offer when she had previously declared that she did not seek a parliamentary seat. However, Phillips wrote in her *Labour Woman* column that she 'could not refuse such a request from such a magnificent body of women'.⁴¹ Thus it appears that the connection between Phillips and the Durham labour women was

34 'A great day for Durham'. Some 200,000 people attended the 2022 meeting; see Durham Miners' Association at <https://www.durhamminers.org/gala> (accessed 26 September 2023).

35 Bruce Unwin, 'Revived Durham women's gala celebrated at its original home, Wharton Park, in the city', *Northern Echo*, 30 June 2018; Nazia Parveen, 'Durham brings back women's gala for suffrage centenary', *Guardian*, 26 June 2018. The exception is in local and regional histories; see Margaret Gibb, 'Memories from the past: the first Durham Labour woman's gala', *North East Labour History*, 17 (1998), 40–2.

36 'Women rally to Labour', *Daily Herald*, 16 June 1924; 'A record of Women's Day celebrations', *Labour Woman*, 12 (July 1924), 114; 'Women's Week', *Labour Woman*, 13 (August 1925), 138.

37 'North, South, East, West! Where shall you go for Women's Month?', *Labour Woman*, 16 (June 1928), 93.

38 Marion Phillips, 'Editor's monthly letter', *Labour Woman*, 15 (July 1927), 104.

39 Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council, minute book, 1923–9, D/X 1048/2.

40 Marion Phillips, 'Two more women candidates', *Labour Woman*, 15 (August 1927), 115.

41 'Durham women and the House of Commons', *Labour Woman*, 14 (October 1926), 157.

particularly strong. Margaret Gibb, a paid organizer for the Labour Party in the North East of England, wrote that ‘without a doubt she [Phillips] had a warm spot for our part of the country’.⁴² The growing strength of the labour women’s movement in the region, as demonstrated by the success of the annual gala, allowed Phillips to forge connections in the North East of England and indicates how Phillips came to be a Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Sunderland. However, an annual trip to the region was not the only experience Phillips had working with the Durham labour women.

The ‘industrial Red Cross’

Phillips’s work during the General Strike in 1926 consolidated her connections and networks in the North East of England. As Hester Barron has demonstrated, women in mining villages constructed a sense of community and solidarity during the lockout.⁴³ Phillips’s role providing relief to the families of miners brought her into close contact with these female networks. On the invitation of the Miners’ Federation, she established a committee to provide relief to the wives and children of locked-out miners. She wrote that ‘the woman at home, facing as she always must, the worst end of the struggle – the empty cupboards and bare table, the hungry children in their shabby clothes and worn-out boots, the daily realities of poverty – has shown herself a heroine in the finest sense of that much-used word’.⁴⁴ Ellen Wilkinson and Marion Phillips oversaw the collection and distribution of approximately £350,000 worth of aid to mining families, including supplies of cocoa, baby food, condensed milk, biscuits, clothing, and boots.⁴⁵ Fundraising efforts crossed political divides and portrayed miners’ wives and children as innocent victims of the dispute.⁴⁶ In *Women and the Miners’ Lockout: The Story of the Women’s Committee for the Relief of Miners’ Wives and Children*, Phillips described the committee as an

42 Gibb, ‘Memories from the past’, 41.

43 Barron, ‘Women of the Durham coalfield’, 57.

44 Marion Phillips, ‘The General Strike and after’, *Labour Woman*, 14 (June 1926), 88.

45 Marion Phillips, *Women and the Miners’ Lockout: The Story of the Women’s Committee for the Relief of Miners’ Wives and Children* (London, 1927), 71; Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of Vision*, 142. In 1926 £350,000 was worth approximately £21,610,000 in 2021; see *Measuring Worth*, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php> (accessed 17 February 2023).

46 Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners’ Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield* (Oxford, 2010), 40; Sue Bruley, *The Women and Men of 1926: A Gender and Social History of the General Strike and Miners’ Lockout in South Wales* (Cardiff, 2010), 43.

‘industrial Red Cross’ that drew on the organizational infrastructure of the WLL, the Women’s Co-operative Guild, League of Nations Union branches, the Women’s International League, and the Workers’ Educational Association for support.⁴⁷

Inspired by the WLL’s work in 1912 to establish the League for the Strikers’ Children during the London Dock Strike, this impressive campaign attracted national and international support.⁴⁸ Ellen Wilkinson travelled to the United States of America, while five representatives of the committee visited the Soviet Union to raise funds. Encouragement also came from supporters in Australia, Canada, China, Japan, India, Kenya, and Norway.⁴⁹ The committee organized fundraising activities such as whist drives, concerts, collections at cinemas, lamp day celebrations, and performances by Welsh Miners’ Choirs, which were advertised in *Labour Woman*, the *League Leaflet*, the *Daily Herald*, and *Lansbury’s Weekly*. For instance, pit ponies were brought to the Lamp Day events in Sunderland in July 1926. Mining families in County Durham were particularly affected by the problems in the mining industry after the Great War, as it was a vital occupation and there was a lack of alternative employment in the area. Phillips remembered the impact this had on women in the region, when she noted ‘how poorly-clad many of the women were’ at the gala.⁵⁰

In particular, the women’s committee recognized that urgent assistance was required for new mothers and infants. It was estimated that up to 1,200 babies were born in mining communities during the lockout. In her editor’s letter titled ‘The call of sisterhood’, Phillips reported on the ‘stories of pregnant women facing with terror the birth of yet another child, who they have neither clothes to cover nor strength to suckle’.⁵¹ Building on her previous experience with working-class mothers in London, Phillips steered the committee to support families in County Durham. Phillips donated a christening shawl to the Barnes family, whose daughter had been born on 3 July 1926 in Ryhope, a village not far from Sunderland. Demonstrating their gratitude for the gesture, the family christened their daughter Marion Phillips Barnes at St Paul’s Church, Ryhope on 28 July

47 Phillips, *Women and the Miners’ Lockout*, ix.

48 ‘London dock strikers’ children’, *League Leaflet*, 26 (February 1913), 4.

49 Phillips, *Women and the Miners’ Lockout*, 90–3.

50 Phillips, *Women and the Miners’ Lockout*, 77; ‘The Women’s Committee and its work’, *Labour Woman*, 14 (July 1926), 105.

51 Marion Phillips, ‘The call of sisterhood’, *Labour Woman*, 14 (July 1926), 104.

1926.⁵² This example demonstrates the intimate connections Phillips forged with women and families in the region. Phillips's relief work demonstrates how her politics was motivated by a concern for the lives of working families and highlights the connections she forged in the North East of England in the 1920s, which ultimately led to her selection as a Labour candidate.⁵³

For Phillips, the solidarity of workers and the women's committee was a positive outcome of the lockout. This is depicted in J.F. Horrabin's striking image on the *Labour Woman* cover in June 1926, which showed a miner and woman shaking hands under the heading 'Comrades' and 'There SHALL be a next time!'⁵⁴ Phillips called on the 'sisterhood' throughout the miners' lockout, which continued into the autumn.⁵⁵ Although the 1926 Durham women's gala was postponed until the following year, when it was held at Roker Park in Sunderland, Marion Phillips described the 'deep joy and fellowship' felt at this post-lockout event. She explained that the gala 'gave to us all a strength and happiness that I cannot put into words. I do not know what it is; I only know we felt it. It was a kind of love of all humanity that you can express better in laughter or tears than in solemnity and severity.'⁵⁶ The emotional description suggests the level of empathy Phillips had for the mining families and communities in the North East of England. The relationships she forged during the gala and the lockout led to her selection as a parliamentary candidate in the region. At a conference in June 1927, 'great appreciation was shown of the work of Dr. Phillips and her staff during the lock-out and pledges were given to help secure her return as Labour M.P. for Sunderland', indicating that her reputation as a champion of working-class families had been firmly established amongst Labour women in the North East of England.⁵⁷ Phillips's contributions to both the Durham Gala and the women's relief committee are crucial in explaining Marion Phillips's connection to the region and her successful election in 1929.

52 Marion Phillips Barnes's christening certificate, St Peter's Church, Ryhope, 28 July 1926 (family collection).

53 Goronwy-Roberts, *A Woman of Vision*, 156.

54 Phillips, 'The General Strike and after'; J.F. Horrabin, 'Comrades', *Labour Woman*, 14 (June 1926), front cover.

55 Phillips, 'The call of sisterhood'; Marion Phillips, 'What women's sections can do', *Labour Woman*, 14 (September 1926), 135.

56 Phillips, 'Editor's monthly letter' (July 1927).

57 'Women in the Labour Party: North-Eastern District', *Labour Woman*, 15 (June 1927), 44.

Sunderland's first woman MP

Despite her prominent role in the Labour Party as chief woman officer, she was frustrated by the lack of financial support for her election campaign. Her fellow Labour candidate, Alf Smith, had the financial support of the unions, while she had the limited financial support of the Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council, which donated £70 per year towards her expenses.⁵⁸ Correspondence with election agent Harry Leedale indicates ongoing tensions within the Sunderland Labour Party, whom she felt were not fully supportive of her campaign.⁵⁹ These internal tensions led members of the Independent Labour Party to secede from the local party, which 'deprived the [Labour] Party of some of its best workers'. Despite these hurdles during her campaign, it was noted that she had a 'great capacity for organization'.⁶⁰ She often covered her own expenses and saved money by combining her trips to Sunderland with her travels as chief woman officer. Phillips held meetings across the constituency and the wider region, often in cooperation with other high-profile Labour candidates. For example, attempts were made to hold a rally at Roker Park Stadium to be addressed by both Phillips and Ramsay MacDonald, whose Seaham constituency was just a few miles down the coast.⁶¹

Phillips also faced challenges from her political rivals. A Liberal memorandum titled 'Is Dr Phillips a personal friend of Dr Stopes, and if so, a supporter of Birth Control?' implied that she was connected to the controversial debates surrounding birth control.⁶² The National Conference of Labour Women had resolved that birth control information should be provided to married women to improve women's health and to reduce the financial impact on working-class families. However, several leading Labour Party women did not publicly advocate access to birth control. The issue was debated fiercely in the pages of *Labour Woman*. Writing on behalf of the Workers' Birth Control Group, Dora Russell protested that the female delegates on the Labour Party's NEC – including Marion Phillips – did not represent the views of the rank-and-file membership.⁶³

58 'Durham women and the House of Commons'; Marion Phillips to M. Hoy, 13 February 1929, Labour History Archive (LHA), Manchester, Marion Phillips Collection, MP/12/1.

59 Marion Phillips to H. Leedale, 28 February 1929, LHA, MP/1/21.

60 Pritt, *The Autobiography of D.N. Pritt*, 30.

61 Leedale to Arthur Henderson, 8 April 1929, LHA, MP/1/41.

62 Liberal memorandum (1929), LHA, MP/4/8i.

63 Dora Russell, 'Birth control and Labour Party conference', *Labour Woman*, 13 (December 1925), 206. See also Perry, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, 92–5.

Like many Labour women, Phillips had long been concerned with issues relating to maternity and infant welfare. As part of a deputation to the minister for health to present the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's resolution on the care of maternity in 1924, she did not publicly support the use of birth control but mentioned that more scientific evidence was needed on its use.⁶⁴ Her position on the issue of birth control represents Phillips's negotiation of her woman-centred politics and party loyalty. As Matthew Worley argues, 'she maintained a staunch loyalty to the party leadership' on this question and aimed to avoid alienating the large number of Catholic voters in Sunderland. Similarly, Ellen Wilkinson supported the party line, despite her earlier backing for birth control as a feminist issue.⁶⁵ While Phillips distanced herself from the birth control debate, she continued to advocate for other key campaigns of the post-1918 women's movement, namely equal suffrage, which was secured in 1928.

Phillips's election as Sunderland's first woman MP was timely. The election called for 30 May 1929 was the first general election held after the Equal Franchise Act 1928, which allowed men and women over the age of twenty-one the vote on equal terms. For this reason, the election has been dubbed the 'flapper election'.⁶⁶ At the age of forty-eight, Phillips was by no means a flapper, but she recognized the significance of the momentous election. At the 1928 women's gala, she spoke of the 'thousands of young women voters who would swell the Labour vote because they were young and still had hope'.⁶⁷ She also dismissed negative attitudes towards the 'flapper vote and the frivolity of girls'; instead she wrote that 'young people make a bigger demand on life and expect more from it than their elders. They have not suffered so much delusion and they have more confidence in the right of the human being to happiness.'⁶⁸ In July 1928 she sent a letter to women in the Sunderland constituency, stating that 'FOR WOMEN ESPECIALLY, THIS NEXT ELECTION WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN 1929 IS VERY IMPORTANT.' Referring to post-war unemployment, Phillips addressed the issue from the perspective of young women in Sunderland, calling on them to join and vote for the Labour

64 'Care of mothers and babies', *Labour Woman*, 12 (September 1924), 145.

65 Perry, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, 94.

66 Adrian Bingham, 'Enfranchisement, feminism and the modern woman: debates in the British popular press, 1918–1939', in Gottlieb and Toye, *The Aftermath of Suffrage*, 81–105.

67 'Labour women's great demonstration', *Daily Herald*, 11 June 1928.

68 Marion Phillips, 'Labour men and women on the "flapper" vote', *Labour Woman*, 15 (August 1927), 115.

Party.⁶⁹ A leaflet titled *Ten Reasons Why Women Should Join the Labour Party* also stressed Labour's credentials on issues of interest to mothers, children, housewives, and working women.⁷⁰

Although she continued to live in London, Phillips regularly visited Sunderland. As the election drew closer, Phillips rented a room in the coastal suburb of Roker.⁷¹ Once elected and back in London, she wrote to a colleague in Sunderland, claiming, 'I shall have my hands very full with Parliament added to my ordinary work ... I went straight back to work on Tuesday and have been very hard at it ever since though it seems flat after the excitement of Sunderland. I do want to see you all again so much and to feel the Roker breezes too.' Her letter evokes a fondness for the North East coastline.⁷² Much like her contributions to the women's galas and relief work during the 1926 lockout, her election campaign suggests an emotional connection to Sunderland and the wider North East of England.

As one of the first generation of female MPs, Marion Phillips faced some of the same difficulties that other women MPs were challenged with, especially the hostility of the press. Phillips argued that the press held female representatives to an unrealistic standard, when leading newspapers complained that women had 'introduced no new political quality into Parliament' only six months after the election.⁷³ As Krista Cowman has shown, the appearance of women MPs was seen as a matter of public interest.⁷⁴ Yet Cowman does not mention that Phillips opted to design her own 'uniform' to avoid scrutiny, protect her clothes from dust and keep her warm when sitting in the chamber of the House of Commons. Nonetheless, her black crêpe de Chine overall was still reported on in the Australian press.⁷⁵ Phillips stood in stark contrast to Ellen Wilkinson, who was known for wearing bold colours and courting press attention.⁷⁶ Phillips's uniform indicates an alternative method that this MP used in an attempt to deal with public critique.

69 Marion Phillips, letter to Sunderland women, July 1928, LHA, MP/4/82.

70 Labour Party, *Ten Reasons Why Women Should Join the Labour Party* (1929), LHA, MP/1/26/2.

71 H. Leedale to Marion Phillips, 20 April 1929, LHA, MP/1/51.

72 Marion Phillips to Mr McKellar, 10 June 1929, LHA, MP/1/75.

73 Marion Phillips, 'What will they say of us next?', *Labour Woman*, 17 (December 1929), 178.

74 Krista Cowman, 'A matter of public interest: press coverage of the outfits of women MPs 1918–1930', *Open Library of Humanities*, 6 (2020), 1–28. On debates around the representation of women in Parliament, see Lisa Berry-Waite, "'A rancour and a passion would be introduced into politics': perceptions of the woman MP in late 19th and early 20th century Britain", *Parliamentary History*, 42 (2023), 148–67.

75 'Women in Parliament: what should they wear?', *Western Mail*, 27 January 1930, 35.

76 Laura Beers, 'A model MP? Ellen Wilkinson, gender, politics and celebrity culture in interwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 233.

Correspondence regarding a victory celebration reveals her busy diary as she balanced her work in Westminster and Sunderland with ongoing work for the party as well as attending international events of the Labour and Socialist International.⁷⁷ Her new position inside the corridors of power also facilitated her role on the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women, as she was able to lobby government departments and ministers on behalf of working women.⁷⁸ Her contributions in Parliament often drew on the lives of her constituents, including the combined effects of class and sex upon working women. For instance, in the debate on the Annual Holiday Bill, 15 November 1929, she highlighted that for many of her constituents an annual holiday was unpaid. This had a particular impact on the 'vast army of women who manage the homes of the workers. To the housewife there is always something calamitous in the approach of holidays, because for a very large number of people that means the automatic stopping of wages.'⁷⁹ Speaking in favour of the 1929 Annual Holiday Bill, Phillips claimed that 'nothing would give more satisfaction and relief to people in many of our industrial areas, and especially to women than the knowledge that they would have the right after 12 months work to a holiday with money to pay their way during that holiday'.⁸⁰ Her contributions to the Holidays with Pay campaign demonstrates Phillips's participation in an international campaign at the national level, whilst engaging with the specific interests of her local constituents.

One of the biggest concerns of her constituency was the effects of poverty and unemployment. At a meeting organized by the National Union of Women Teachers at Sunderland Subscription Library, Phillips described the 1929 poll as a 'bread and butter election', referring to the poverty rife in Sunderland.⁸¹ Once elected, Phillips corresponded with Susan Lawrence, parliamentary secretary to the Health Secretary, about the problems her constituents faced when claiming unemployment insurance.⁸² One incident involved Phillips acting on behalf of a married woman who was legally separated from her husband due to domestic violence and

77 Phillips to Leedale, 13 June 1929, LHA, MP/1/80.

78 Phillips, 'Bravo the women!', 98.

79 Marion Phillips, 'Annual Holiday Bill', HC Deb 15 November 1929, vol. 231, cc. 2478–9; see Sandra Dawson, 'Working-class consumers and the campaign for holidays with pay', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18 (2007), 279.

80 'A week's holiday for every worker', *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 15 November 1929, 18.

81 'Politics and teachers: women's status and opportunities as seen by all candidates', *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 23 May 1929.

82 Susan Lawrence to Marion Phillips, 13 October 1930, LHA, MP/8/4.

cruelty. The Public Assistance Committee had judged that Mrs Balls would only receive assistance if she remained with her husband. Phillips deemed this ‘so utterly inhuman that I cannot believe it can be legal’ and sought legal advice for her constituent.⁸³ This example demonstrates Phillips’s commitment to speaking out on behalf of local vulnerable women.

During her election campaign Phillips wrote about the housing situation in Sunderland, arguing that ‘slum clearance was one [problem] that every good citizen could help to solve’ by voting Labour.⁸⁴ Phillips compared the failures of Sunderland’s Conservative-led council to the success of the Labour-led council in Sheffield. She credited Sheffield’s lower infant mortality rate with Labour’s house-building schemes and welfare programmes.⁸⁵ She identified that ‘in the North East of England we have a more severe problem of housing than perhaps in any other quarter’.⁸⁶ In a letter to the minister for health, Phillips outlined that 3,500 houses were ‘unfit for habitation’ in Sunderland and there was serious overcrowding.⁸⁷ Housing was a vital concern for working women, particularly in her constituency of Sunderland. The campaign for better housing and slum clearance addressed post-war concerns and engaged working-class women as citizens.

Housing was a campaign that Phillips had long been involved with. With Averil Sanderson Furniss, Phillips published *The Working Woman’s House* in 1919, which aimed to provide ‘a feminine perspective on contemporary debates about the physical form of post-war reconstruction’.⁸⁸ Furniss was secretary of the Women’s Housing Committee of the Labour Party and active in the Workers’ Educational Association.⁸⁹ The document was based on an extensive survey of working women to ascertain their ideas about improvements to housing. Furniss and Phillips argued that working women have a ‘right to have that home built according to their own desires’.⁹⁰ Both

83 Marion Phillips to Arthur Greenwood, 29 May 1931, LHA, MP/8/9; D.N. Pritt to Marion Phillips, 12 June 1931, LHA, MP/8/11.

84 ‘Congested towns: Dr M. Phillips advocates more space’, *Sunderland Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 13 May 1929, 4.

85 Marion Phillips, ‘The editor’s monthly letter’, *Labour Woman*, 15 (August 1927), 120.

86 Marion Phillips, Housing (no. 2) Bill, HC Deb 8 April 1930, vol. 237, c. 2043.

87 Marion Phillips to Arthur Greenwood, 17 September 1931, LHA, MP/13/1.

88 Krista Cowman, ‘“From the housewife’s point of view”: female citizenship and the gendered domestic interior in post-First World War Britain, 1918–1928’, *English Historical Review*, 130 (2015), 352.

89 For more on Averil Sanderson Furniss, see Jude Murphy and Nigel Todd, ‘Educating the peace: adult education responses to 1919’, in Matt Perry (ed.), *The Global Challenge of Peace: 1919 as a Contested Threshold to a New World Order* (Liverpool, 2021), 217–32.

90 A.D. Sanderson Furniss and Marion Phillips, *The Working Woman’s House* (London, 1919), 9.

Krista Cowman and Karen Hunt have shown how the politics of the home became an issue that engaged women voters and drew on the tradition of women's domestic knowledge.⁹¹ Phillips and Furniss did not challenge the idea of women's place being in the home; rather they argued that a woman 'wants her house to be fit for a hero to live in, but she also wants to free herself from some of the continuous toil which is the result of the bad housing conditions of the past, and has prevented her from taking her full share of work as citizen, wife and mother'.⁹² This important text represents a woman-centred focus on housing design, especially from the perspective of working-class women. The authors advocated for women's organizations to lobby local authorities, for local housing committees to include advisory committees of working women, and for women to be present on local councils.⁹³ Thus, for Marion Phillips, the issue of housing was intricately linked to women's citizenship. *Labour Woman* also appealed to the working-class housewife. As Karen Hunt notes, the journal considered the home and domesticity from the perspective of 'everyday drudgery', rather than idealistic visions of middle-class domesticity with new labour-saving appliances. As editor, Phillips sought to create a space for working-class housewives to engage with the politics of the everyday in the journal.⁹⁴ Phillips's long-standing concern with the quality of housing and women's role in determining housing policy was directly linked to her work as a champion for Sunderland.

'Marion's last message'

A Sunderland by-election was triggered by the death of Phillips's Labour colleague, Alf Smith, in March 1931. Although the Labour Party managed to maintain its share of the vote, the Conservative candidate benefited from

91 Cowman, 'From the housewife's point of view', 352; Karen Hunt, 'Gendering the politics of the working woman's home', in Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (eds), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870–1950* (Routledge, 2007), 121; see also Caitriona Beaumont, "'Where to park the pram"? Voluntary women's organisations, citizenship and the campaign for better housing in England, 1928–1945', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), 76–96; Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes, 1918–39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (Manchester, 2018).

92 Sanderson Furniss and Phillips, *The Working Woman's House*, 9.

93 Sanderson Furniss and Phillips, *The Working Woman's House*, 74.

94 Karen Hunt, 'Labour woman and the housewife', in Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green, and Fiona Hackney (eds), *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918–1939* (Edinburgh, 2018), 238–51. Also see Judy Giles, 'A home of one's own: women and domesticity in England, 1918–1950', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16 (1993), 239–53.

the shift in Liberal voters.⁹⁵ Just seven months later, Phillips defended her seat at the general election. She opposed Ramsay MacDonald's National Government, which she argued was 'formed to carry out a Tory policy of reactionary economics'.⁹⁶ On the face of it, Phillips's election defeat questions the support she had in Sunderland. However, the 1931 election was a wipeout for Labour, including all nine Labour women MPs, who also lost their seats at this poll. The complete disintegration of the Liberal Party and the swing of Liberal votes to the Conservative candidates contributed to Phillips's defeat in Sunderland.⁹⁷ Moreover, the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party opposed Ramsay Macdonald's plans to cut the unemployment benefit. The splits in the party were laid bare at the election, leading Matthew Worley to describe it as a 'massacre' for the party.⁹⁸ Phillips's defeat was part of the significant political swing across County Durham, leading Hester Barron to suggest that 'Labour's progress in the inter-war years was conditional and erratic' despite instructions from the Durham Miners' Association to vote Labour.⁹⁹ Therefore, Phillips's election defeat is an important feature of the party's trajectory in the region.

No longer Sunderland's MP, Phillips focussed on her work for the party as chief woman officer. Labour's defeat fuelled her work to strengthen the party's electoral base nationwide. She urged working women to study and understand the economic problems that had dominated the October election.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, she continued to speak out on issues relating to poverty and unemployment in Sunderland. For instance, three days after losing her seat in the 1931 general election, she declined an invitation to a luncheon at the Palatine Hotel as part of the Wearside Industries Exhibition hosted by Sunderland's new Conservative MP Samuel Storey on the grounds that 'the continuance of excessive privation for the unemployed makes it impossible for me to be the guest at anything in the nature of a public banquet in Sunderland'.¹⁰¹

Despite being bed-bound following surgery for stomach cancer in December 1931, Phillips continued to write her column for *Labour Woman*.¹⁰² Unfortunately, she did not recover and she died on 23 January

95 Marion Phillips, 'Editor's letter', *Labour Woman*, 19 (May 1931), 66.

96 Marion Phillips, 'Labour in opposition', *Labour Woman*, 19 (September 1931), 130.

97 Pritt, *The Autobiography of D.N. Pritt*, 31.

98 Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 121.

99 Barron, 'Labour identities of the coalfield', 210.

100 Marion Phillips, 'Be ready! Stand steady!', *Labour Woman*, 19 (October 1931), 146.

101 Marion Phillips to Peter Batten, 30 October 1931, LHA, MP/12/55.

102 Marion Phillips, 'Happy New Years', *Labour Woman*, 20 (January 1932), 2.

1932. The March 1932 issue of *Labour Woman* was dedicated to its former editor. It included 'Marion's last message', as told to Barbara Ayrton Gould: 'tell them to carry on and consolidate the Movement; the future of Socialism depends on the work of these next few years'.¹⁰³ Tributes poured in from members of the labour and women's movements, including Arthur Henderson, who described her death as a 'cruel blow' to the women's sections of the Labour Party. Ellen Wilkinson wrote that Phillips was 'one of the best all-round women M.P.s we have yet had'. Alluding to the sudden nature of her death during the ascendancy of her political career, Wilkinson suggested that 'she would have made a magnificent Minister'.¹⁰⁴ Susan Lawrence was effusive in her praise of Phillips's 'enthusiasm for the oppressed' and 'dauntless courage'.¹⁰⁵ The obituaries were not confined to the Labour press. For example, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency's *Daily News Bulletin* paid tribute to her, explaining that 'even those who disagreed with her views ... realise that she is a conspicuous loss to her Party'.¹⁰⁶ The Australian press also printed obituaries to Melbourne-born Phillips.¹⁰⁷

Local tributes to Phillips testify to her constituency work and indicate her legacy in the North East of England. For instance, a Sunderland resident related that 'by her death, Sunderland has lost a figure that will go down in history as its first woman member of Parliament. Her human qualities and warm heart, and her faith, work and perseverance will be an inspiration to us all'.¹⁰⁸ In particular, her work during the 1926 lockout was remembered and she was known as the 'miners' friend'.¹⁰⁹ Her regional work as chief woman officer was recognized in the messages from district organizers across the country, who described her as a 'considerate "Chief"'.¹¹⁰ Eulogies are a useful source when assessing the legacy of Marion Phillips as they demonstrate the collective memory of a politician, yet it is important to be aware of the norms that constrain this form of writing as they usually paint a positive portrait of an individual.¹¹¹ Such memorials therefore should

103 Barbara Ayrton Gould, 'Marion's last message', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 34.

104 Ellen Wilkinson, 'Tributes from colleagues', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 37.

105 Susan Lawrence, 'Tributes from colleagues', 36.

106 Jewish Telegraphic Agency, *Daily News Bulletin*, 13 (26 January 1932), 2.

107 For example, 'Dr. Marion Phillips', *Australasian*, 30 January 1932, 12; 'Tributes by Labour leaders', *Argus*, 26 January 1932, 7.

108 E. Stewart, 'International and other tributes', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 39.

109 Ebby Edwards, "'Marion" the miners' friend', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 37.

110 Mary E. Sutherland, 'Messages from the women district organisers', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 42.

111 Kristen Adams, '(Re)writing history: examining the cultural work of the obituary and journalists' construction of a former president's legacy', *Journalism*, 23 (2022), 1029; Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (Routledge, 2007).

be read in the context and circumstances in which they were written. That said, the volume of messages printed in *Labour Woman* highlight the local, regional, national, and transnational impact that Marion Phillips had during her career. Tangible tributes to her work were also initiated by local and national networks. *Labour Woman* encouraged readers to recruit members through the 'Marion Phillips Memorial Campaign'. This membership drive had been instigated by Phillips during her illness. She used the phrase 'a member a day keeps the Tories away' to encourage new membership of the Labour Party.¹¹² The Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations produced a bronze plaque as a tribute to Phillips to be placed at Transport House, the Labour Party's headquarters.¹¹³ In Sunderland, the local party initiated a fundraising scheme to erect a new hall in Phillips's name, with support from the local Socialist Party, trade unions and Women's Co-operative Guilds.¹¹⁴ The fund was still being collected in 1940. Mentions of the memorial fund in the local press disappeared as the human loss of the Second World War preoccupied local committees.¹¹⁵ Ninety years after Phillips's election a blue heritage plaque was unveiled at the Labour Party's former offices, funded by the University of Sunderland and Sunderland City Council. The plaque has piqued interest among the local community and the regional press, leading to a community art project, an exhibition, and public talks, demonstrating how commemorations provide a timely starting point for the recovery of women's history.¹¹⁶ The plaque has provided a permanent reminder of the legacy of Sunderland's first woman MP, whose 'efforts to help the poor and needy, both in the town [Sunderland] and distressed mining areas were untiring'.¹¹⁷ As this contemporary commemoration demonstrates, the local dimension of Labour women's activism is crucial to understanding the legacy of women's politics.

Conclusion

Although Phillips's tenure as Sunderland's first female MP was short, her legacy continued to be felt through the 1930s as discussions about an

112 'Women honour late Dr. Marion Phillips', *Daily Standard Brisbane*, 4 March 1932, 13.

113 'Thoughts of Marion at Brighton', *Labour Woman*, 20 (June 1932), 84.

114 'Dr Marion Phillips Hall', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 8 March 1932, 3.

115 'New head-quarters', *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 20 March 1940, 2.

116 Crozier and Mackie, *Remembering Women's Activism*.

117 E. Stewart, 'International and other tributes', *Labour Woman*, 20 (March 1932), 39.

appropriate memorial were held at local and national levels. Not all of these memorials materialized, but the Ryhope Labour Women's Section used Phillips's image on their banner and the Barnes family continue to treasure their personal connection to Phillips.¹¹⁸ These local and personal memorials demonstrate the impact that Marion Phillips had at the regional level. This article has shed light on the constituency work of one of the first female MPs and therefore adds to the growing historiography that considers the diversity of women's politics in the 1920s and 1930s. Notably, Sunderland did not elect another Labour MP until 1945 and elected its next female MPs in 2010.¹¹⁹ Labour MP for Houghton and Sunderland South Bridget Phillipson wrote, 'Marion's legacy is testimony to the importance of ensuring women are engaged in politics'.¹²⁰ The centenary of partial women's suffrage in 2018 – and equal suffrage in 2028 – provides a timely moment to re-examine the regional histories of the first women MPs.¹²¹ This article has provided an in-depth investigation into Marion Phillips's work in the North East of England and highlighted the strength of regional networks of labour women as demonstrated by their efforts for the annual women's gala and relief work during the 1926 lockout. These local connections provide a valuable example of the depth and breadth of work carried out by one of the first female MPs.

The local and regional dimension of Marion Phillips's career not only is a vital element of the history of the Labour Party's first chief woman officer but also has wider ramifications for the history of the Labour Party itself. The article has established that Phillips – regardless of her Australian heritage and London residence – cultivated networks and connections with the labour women's movement across County Durham, which led to her selection as a parliamentary candidate in Sunderland. Phillips's role in supporting mining families during the General Strike and her regular attendance at the Durham women's gala in the 1920s are key to identifying how these connections were made. These relationships with the local women's labour movement in the 1920s seemingly had an emotional

118 Ryhope Labour Women's Section banner, stored by Ryhope Heritage Group; discussion between the author, Marion Phillips Barnes, and her daughter Judith Brown (May 2019).

119 Sunderland Central, Houghton and Sunderland South, and Washington and Sunderland West have been represented in Parliament by female Labour MPs since 2010.

120 Bridget Phillipson, 'We need to eliminate the barriers that hold women and men back', *Sunderland Echo*, 1 February 2018.

121 English Heritage, 'Six new blue plaques to women in 2020' (March 2020), <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/about-us/search-news/six-new-blue-plaques-for-women/> (accessed 17 February 2023); Sue Donnelly, '24 LSE women in 1918', *LSE Blog*, 28 March 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsehistory/2018/03/28/lse-women-1918/> (accessed 17 February 2023).

impact on the chief woman officer. As one of the most prominent female figures in the early Labour Party and part of the generation of first women MPs, Marion Phillips's constituency work sheds light on her politics. This article has illuminated how local-level politics influenced a leading figure within the Labour Party. As such, this article has contributed to the shift from national histories of the Labour Party and the women's movement to consider the complexities of the local dimensions of Labour women's politics.

Notes on contributor

Dr Sarah Hellowell is a historian of modern Britain, with a particular interest in women's transnational activism. She is currently employed at the University of Sunderland. She is writing a monograph titled *British Women and Internationalism: Peace, Women's Rights and Transnational Organisation, 1915–1939*, which will be published in the New Historical Perspectives series for the Royal Historical Society, in association with the University of London Press and the Institute for Historical Research. Her research has been published in *BBC History* magazine, *Twentieth Century British History*, *History*, *Women's History Review*, and a number of edited collections. Correspondence to sarah.hellowell@sunderland.ac.uk.