
THE LONDON ASSEMBLY: NOMINATE 100 WOMEN FOR BLUE PLAQUES CONSULTATION

Response from Humanists UK, March 2019

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by over 85,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

INTRODUCTION

We are pleased to respond to the London Assembly's important consultation and share our recommendations of London's great humanist women who should be recognised with Blue Plaques.

We support the London Assembly's position that English Heritage should widen its criteria for awarding Blue Plaques to individuals where buildings no longer exist. A particularly compelling reason to do so would be to memorialise the notable feminist campaigner and author Mary Wollstonecraft with an English Heritage Blue Plaque.

We recommend four women for blue plaques, namely Aphra Behn, Barbara Wootton, Dora Russell, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

CONSULTATION RESPONSE: OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Aphra Behn – playwright, poet, and novelist

Aphra Behn (1640–1689) was a renowned playwright, poet, novelist, and early feminist. According to Virginia Woolf, she was the first English woman to earn her living as a writer and was famous for her concern for gender equality.¹ She expressed broadly humanist ideas² by making clear distinctions between morality and religion, and was critical of the slave trade and of Christianity. Her novel *Orinoco* is a strong example of her work highlighting the wrongs of slavery, and is often viewed as an early anti-slavery novel. Several sources state that she lived on Dorset Street, nearby the Dorset Garden Theatre (also known as the Duke's Theatre) in London which performed some of the plays she wrote³, and she is buried in Westminster Abbey.

¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/behn_aphra.shtml

² <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/the-humanist-tradition/renaissance/aphra-behn/>

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<https://www.ssplprints.com/image/113566/page-r-the-dukes-theatre-in-dorset-gardens-london-c-1820> and

<https://chawtonhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/A-Tour-of-Aphra-Behn-London.pdf>

CRITERIA:

- Lived, worked, and is buried in London
- More than 20 years has passed since her death
- She does not already have a Blue Plaque

Barbara Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger – sociologist, criminologist, and first female life peer

Barbara Wootton, Baroness Wootton of Abinger (1897–1988) was a famous British expert on sociology, criminology and penal reform.⁴ She was a Vice President of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK) and one of the founding members of both the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the British Sociological Association. She was a pioneering woman who broke through a number of ‘firsts’ for women, including being the first woman to give university lectures in Cambridge (in 1921), the first female delegate to a League of Nations conference (in 1927), the first female life peer in the House of Lords (in 1958), and its first woman Deputy Speaker (in 1965).⁵ One of her notable parliamentary successes was that she successfully sponsored the Bill to abolish capital punishment in 1965. She published many books, including an autobiography *In a World I Never Made*. She lived and worked in London over several periods of her life, including when she studied at the London School of Economics and worked for the Trades Union Congress.⁶

CRITERIA:

- Lived in London
- More than 20 years has passed since her death.
- She does not already have a Blue Plaque

Dora Russell – feminist, humanist, campaigner, and author

Dora Russell (1894–1986) was a campaigner for women’s rights. Born Dora Black in London⁷, she was educated at Cambridge University where she became a humanist and feminist. After graduating, she fought for the rights of women to have greater access to contraception and to abortion, and saw her efforts pay off in 1967 with the landmark passing of the Abortion Act. Other notable successes include helping to form the National Council for Civil Liberties (now known as Liberty), and she was involved in Labour Party politics, as well as the Conservation Society and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). She was involved with a number of women’s groups, including the Married Women’s Association and the International Women’s Day Association and had an impact on millions of women. She married renowned philosopher and mathematician, Bertrand Russell, and together they co-operated in writing a number of books.

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<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseoflords/house-of-lords-reform/overview/first-life-peers/barbara-frances-wootton/>

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<https://www.britisoc.co.uk/about/latest-news/2018/july/barbara-wootton-eminant-influential-and-almost-forgotten-social-scientist/>

⁶ <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1395>

⁷ <https://spartacus-educational.com/TUrusellID.htm>

CRITERIA:

- Born in London, in Thornton Heath in a house called Berwick Lodge which still exists today⁸
- More than 20 years has passed since her death
- She does not already have a Blue Plaque

Mary Wollstonecraft – feminist, writer, and philosopher

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is a remarkable Londoner who advocated feminist ideas and championed education for girls as well as boys. Her most famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was published in 1792. It is now honoured as the first serious book to put forward feminist arguments. She married William Goodwin, an atheist and freethinker who shared her beliefs. Their daughter was Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

To date, she has not been recognised with a Blue Plaque from English Heritage; however has a brown plaque from the London Borough of Hackney⁹, a blue plaque from the London Borough of Southwark¹⁰, and there are plans for a statue to memorialise her at Newington Green¹¹. The house she was born in on Primrose Street, Spitalfields has been demolished, but subsequent addresses include Somers Town, Epping, and Hoxton.¹²

CRITERIA:

- Lived in London although her house has since been rebuilt and was buried at St Pancras Churchyard¹³
- More than 20 years has passed since her death
- She does not already have a Blue Plaque (from English Heritage)

For more details, information and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

Richy Thompson
Director of Public Affairs and Policy
0781 5589 636
020 7324 3072
richy@humanists.uk
humanists.uk

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<https://www.thorntonheathchronicle.co.uk/feminist-and-socialist-grew-up-in-thornton-heath/>

⁹ <https://www.londonremembers.com/memorials/mary-wollstonecraft-e8>

¹⁰ <https://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/1084>

¹¹ <http://www.maryonthegreen.org/>

¹² https://eastlondon.humanist.org.uk/?page_id=1216

¹³ <https://www.londonremembers.com/subjects/mary-wollstonecraft>