

Blue Plaque Nomination

The Kingsley Hall Heritage Committee, representing Kingsley Hall in Bromley by Bow and Kingsley Hall in Dagenham, would like to nominate our Founders, sisters Muriel and Doris Lester, to be included in the '100 Women Worthy of Blue Plaques' for their services to Londoners.

Muriel (1883-1968) and Doris (1886-1965) Lester

Philanthropists, Educationalists, Internationalists, Social Reformers

Muriel and Doris Lester were born in Leytonstone into a wealthy family. But in 1902, an invitation to a dance at a club in Bow Road set up by Annie Besant for women workers at the Bryant & May match factory in 1902 changed the course of their lives. The teenage sisters had a wonderful time, became regular visitors to Bow and a few years later decided to move to Bromley by Bow, which became their home for more than forty years.

In the first few years, the sisters built up a range of regular activities in various parts of Bow, as well as in their own small home in Bruce Road. Among these were a Men's Adult School, Sunday School classes, Women's Meetings at a local church and a Nursery School. In 1915 most of them were brought under one roof in the first Kingsley Hall, a dilapidated old chapel, named as a memorial to Muriel and Doris's younger brother, who died in 1914 while living and working with his sisters in Bow. It was intended to be a place for people to meet, socialise and learn, a 'People's House', or 'Teetotal Pub'.

'Kingsley Hall' was from the start an ambitious community project, not a building. Muriel and Doris did not see their work as charity but as an "overdue act of justice". They encouraged local people in this poor, overcrowded and polluted area of East London to believe that they deserved as much and had the potential to achieve as much in life as the rich and powerful. They saw education, healthcare, clean air, nutritious food and access to nature, music and the arts as rights of which Bow people were being unjustly deprived. They aimed to prove that "ordinary men and women were quite capable of running their own affairs". The Kingsley Hall buildings were to be owned and run democratically by the community. The hope was that the experience of co-operation and self-government, especially if it began in early childhood, would produce citizens capable of bringing peace and social equality to the nation and the world.

This was a utopian vision, but Muriel and Doris were also eminently practical. Kingsley Hall had a policy of direct action, of which Muriel wrote: "If you feel strongly enough about anything to grumble about it, then you must feel strongly enough to set to work to alter it." In 1922, Muriel was invited to become an alderman in George Lansbury's radical Poplar council. As Chairman of the Maternity and Child Welfare Committee she successfully defied the government by refusing to cut expenditure on children's milk. During her four-and-a-half-year period of service, infant mortality rates in the borough fell from being one of the highest to being one of the lowest in London.

The Lester sisters founded two buildings in Bromley by Bow: Children's House, opened in 1923, and a new Kingsley Hall in 1928. It was Doris who persuaded her sister that new buildings were needed. She saw them as the beginning of a physical and psychological transformation of the people and their environment. The buildings would be beautiful, spacious and clean, owned and run by the local community.

Children's House Nursery School (1923)

Part of the cost of building Children's House was raised by public subscription, using Doris's slogan: "Nothing is too good for the children of Bow!" The building was designed by architect Charles Cowles-Voysey, instructed by Doris Lester to follow Maria Montessori's descriptions of the ideal learning environment for nursery school children. Doris was a trained teacher and drawn to the ideas of modern educational reformers. She wrote: "The natural inclination of the teacher to dominate must be overcome, and the boys and girls set free to develop the gifts that are in them".

The building was designed to be full of light. On its flat roof the children could learn, play and have their daily nap above the polluted air of the streets and enjoy sunshine, which prevented rickets. Furniture and fittings were child-sized. The children had a hot meal every day. Doctors and other experts regularly visited to care for the physical and mental health of the children and their mothers, and to give advice on nutrition and parenting.

Kingsley Hall, Powis Road, Bromley by Bow (1928)

The new Kingsley Hall, designed by the same architect, stood high above the rows of low houses in the narrow streets that surrounded it. The main hall was a multipurpose space suitable for performances, lectures and social gatherings. It was also a place of worship, with Muriel as vicar - she wrote a pamphlet, *Why Forbid Us?*, questioning the view that women could not be priests. The front door was open for twelve hours every day. Upstairs, a smaller hall catered for club meetings and discussion groups, many of them for young people. Like Children's House, there was a flat roof, with two rows of small 'cells' where the Kingsley Hall 'household' and volunteers slept. Members of the household were drawn from all walks of life; as well as running the building's activities they were expected to clean the building themselves. Gandhi stayed in one of these cells in 1931. He met children from Children's House and visited local families in their homes; he also visited Kingsley Hall in Dagenham.

Kingsley Hall Dagenham

The 'Homes Fit for Heroes' building programme after World War 1 established the Becontree Housing Estate in Dagenham in the 1920s for people 'removed' from the slums of the East End. People living on the Estate had no communal facilities such as churches, nurseries and libraries, and petitioned Muriel and Doris Lester to start another Kingsley Hall in Dagenham. Kingsley Hall Dagenham started in a caravan and marquee in 1929 and became "the powerhouse of the community" providing local people with all their social, educational and spiritual needs. 2019 is Kingsley Hall Dagenham's 90th Anniversary year.

Kingsley Hall Dagenham's members reflected the pacifist internationalist outlook of the Lesters; consequently German prisoners of war were entertained in Members' homes on Sundays from 1944 onwards (ie. before the end of the War) and after the War, the Dagenham-Witten Youth Exchange was started (the forerunner of town-twinning?) to bring together English and German youth, to end past recrimination and to engender peace for the future.

We are asking for Muriel and Doris to share one Blue Plaque, but hoping that it may be possible for a Plaque to be placed at Kingsley Hall in Bromley by Bow (LB Tower Hamlets) and at Kingsley Hall in Dagenham (LB Barking and Dagenham).

The sisters were a perfect team. Because they worked together, they were able, from their twenties, to choose to live as single women in a working-class neighbourhood in a way that would have been frowned upon by many of their middle-class peers. At Kingsley Hall Muriel preferred to work with adults. She was charismatic, well able to stand up to authority. As Travelling Secretary of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation she travelled the world over three decades campaigning for peace, recording her experiences in voluminous diaries and letters. She was a friend of Gandhi, who stayed at Kingsley Hall during his visit to England to attend the Round Table Conference on Indian independence in 1931. Muriel is probably still better-known abroad than in her home country, especially in India and the United States. In Japan she was given the title, 'Mother of World Peace'.

At Kingsley Hall and Children's House Doris was responsible for everything to do with children and teenagers from their birth until they were eighteen. She was a dedicated teacher and wrote articles on modern teaching methods and lively descriptions of children's lives in the East End. When Muriel gave up the leadership of Kingsley Hall in 1934, to concentrate on her IFOR work, Doris took over, in spite of her dislike of being in the spotlight. She was in charge during the Blitz, when Kingsley Hall volunteers went out every day to give help for families whose houses had been bombed, and all the Kingsley Hall buildings were opened to assist the community: the Kingsley Hall basement, Doris wrote in her war diary, "has become a real "shelter de luxe", with electric kettle and crocks, wireless, gramophone, children's books and games, a few chairs and many mattresses and blankets, for an average of forty people would generally spend the nights there, apart from plenty of day-time use".

Muriel and Doris Lester retired to Loughton in the 1950s, naming the small home they shared 'Kingsley Cottage'. Muriel continued to take an active interest in East London and the peace movement, while caring for Doris, who was suffering from dementia. Doris died in 1965, her sister three years later. Children's House in Bromley by Bow is still a nursery school, and both Kingsley Halls are community centres, valuing and celebrating the work of their Founders.

I entreat your earnest support for this nomination.

Anthony Lucas
Chairman, Kingsley Hall Heritage Committee