

Your Virtual Museum (hgsheritage.org.uk) is planning two major new Collections this year. One will be on Suburb Creatives – those wonderful writers, musicians, actors, architects and innovators who made the Suburb their home. The second will be on Suburb Women Who Changed the World – way beyond our little neighbourhood. So, enjoy reading about one personality who will feature in both Collections:



twenty-six years older than West, they started a 10-year affair in 1913 – producing a son (Anthony West) in August 1914. Unfortunately, her relationship with Anthony was strained and when he published Heritage (1955), he depicted her as a deceitful, unloving actress.

Rebecca West

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Hampstead Garden Suburb has been home to countless artists, writers and activists. Of these figures, whose stories we will be sharing in our exciting new Collections, none could be a more fitting example than the activist and journalist Dame Rebecca West (previously of 5 Chatham Close).

Cicily Isabel Fairfield (later known as Rebecca West) was born in 1892 in London. Having been abandoned by her father at the age of eight, Cicily was raised by her mother along with her two sisters. However, Charles Fairfield, her father, would still end up inspiring her later political views.



Through his work as a journalist and his involvement in the American Civil War, he brought back controversial political opinions which led to him often inviting Russian revolutionaries and other radicals home to have debates – allowing Cicily to listen in and learn about socialist journalism. Her family moved to Edinburgh around the time of her father's death and she attended school until 14, when she decided not to return after surviving a bout of tuberculosis. She would later comment that her educational experience had been like a 'prison', instead preferring the Fabian Socialist summer schools she enrolled in. Cicily moved to London to train as an actress, taking the name Rebecca West from a play by Henrik Ibsen. West and her eldest sister Lettie became involved in the women's suffrage movement, attending street protests together. Abandoning her acting career in 1911 to become a journalist, she began writing for feminist newspapers The Freewoman and The Clarion. It was through these articles that she established herself as a left-wing women's rights activist.

Throughout Rebecca's life she would be very open about her opinions on critical events of the 20th century. Often she was criticised as a radical due to her status as an outspoken figure – yet she continued to write controversial articles and books well into her old age. Living through the Dreyfus affair as a child, she saw how unreasonable and powerful the will of the public

could be and so she often held a sceptical viewpoint as an adult. This attitude often isolated her within political circles, leaving her with few friends. Although she greatly admired Emmeline Pankhurst as a militant feminist, she criticised her daughter Christabel and the WSPU. She found the organisation to have doctrinaire aspects, and as an independent-minded activist she found this ideological inflexibility to be detrimental. Her stance on the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 also alienated her from the left, who welcomed it as the creation of a utopian society. She doubted that the Revolution would result in such a perfect world, instead noticing early signs of the bloody tyranny that would later characterise socialist Russia. She openly critiqued the American Government and even traditional Christianity, yet despite this remained successful – writing for newspapers such as The New Republic, New York Herald Tribune, New York American, New Statesman and The Daily Telegraph. Her most notable works were her reports on the Nuremberg Trials in 1955 and Apartheid in 1960 due to her interest in the human willingness to commit atrocities.

In 1912, West accused HG Wells of being "the Old Maid among novelists," leading to an invitation to lunch at his home. Despite Wells being married and

West's visits to the US since the 20s made her very popular there and led to her receiving the Women's Press Club Award for Journalism (1948) – President Truman calling her "the world's best reporter."

Despite her various relationships, even having one with Charlie Chaplin, in 1930 she married a banker, Henry Maxwell Andrews, remaining with him until his death in 1968. Her success as a writer led to her ownership of the grand country estate, Ibstone House in which she housed Yugoslav refugees during WWII – having made three trips to Yugoslavia during the 30s and falling in love with the country. West moved to an apartment in Hyde Park after Henry Andrews' death but during the Iranian Embassy Siege (1980), had to be evacuated. Towards the end of her life she enjoyed a full social life with friends such as Warren Beatty and Martha Gellhorn. Today she is remembered as one of the world's best writers, living on through the productions of her works and the posthumous publications that make up one third of her total writings.

If West interests you – feel free to explore our new Collections: 'Suburb Creatives' and 'Suburb Women Who Changed the World', which will be available from late spring onwards and feature West's story.



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