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HALIFAX'S POLITICAL PIONEER: DAME SARA BARKER, 1904-1973

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Last year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Dame Sara Elizabeth Barker, the Halifax-born, and first female, National Organiser and then acting General Secretary of the Labour party during the 1960s. Barker appears to have been forgotten in the local history of Halifax. For example, she has no mentions in John Hargreaves excellent academic study, though this may more be linked to scope and range of the work rather than any intentional act.¹ Furthermore, she and has often been caricatured as a discipline-obsessed bogeywoman in more critical histories and memoirs of the post-war Labour Party.² For subsequently dominant socialist and so-called 'moderniser' factions, what Steven Fielding has described as her 'venerable Labour voluntarism' was considered unfashionable, ineffective, and worthy of little sympathy.³ Yet for many of her political generation, Barker was a highly regarded political operator, as evidenced by local and national obituaries.⁴ A significant Haligonian (if we adopt this somewhat awkward term) on the national political stage, Sara Barker deserves greater discussion and to be reintegrated into the history of the town, the Labour Party, and the mid-century political culture which she inhabited and in which she thrived.



Figure 1 Dame Sara Barker (1904-1973) (*Photograph: B. Worth, People's History Museum, Manchester*).

This article synthesises some older material, which has been published as a biographical entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, with much more new material.⁵ However, while the subject remains the same, the focus differs, as this article focuses more on Sara Barker's links with Halifax and how Halifax followed her career. It uses a broader source base, taking advantage of the online 'British Newspaper Archives' enormous database of local and national newspaper articles, to allow for a more systematic reading of localised primary sources like the *Halifax Evening Courier*. As historian Andrew Thorpe has argued, taking such an approach can transform their potential as historical sources, allowing more efficient use in specific research than is possible at the Library microfilm reader.⁶ It also allows us to look at concurrent events and concerns in the locality, helping us understand how Sara Barker's achievements were reported back home, and even pick up on expressions in community pride at a 'local girl done good'. This article explores Sara Barker's career in three stages, first examining her personal political roots in Halifax and then the Yorkshire-wide Labour Party, then moving on

to her London-based years based at Labour's Transport House headquarters, before exploring her final years after she retired back to Halifax and continued to engage with politics at the local level. Finally, it also looks at her legacy and what her biography tells us about the rise and development of the Labour party and its links with (and within) Calderdale.

Halifax Socialist, born and bred

Sara Barker was born and raised at 4-6 Jubilee Road in the Siddal area of Halifax in the West Riding. She was the eldest of the three daughters of George Barker, of Liversedge in West Yorkshire, and Ethel Brier.⁷ George Barker was an apprentice gardener before joining the family business as a licensed grocer in his family's business, later becoming a keen member, and later Chairman (1917-1940), of the Halifax and District Off-Licence Holders' Association. While such origins marked him out for Halifax's vibrant Liberal political scene, Barker had socialist convictions, joining both the more radical Independent Labour Party and the Labour party. He then became a Labour councillor for Southowram Ward in 1920, serving on the Improvements Committee at a time of major redevelopment in Halifax, before becoming an Alderman in 1932 and a Magistrate in 1933.⁸ As an article published to mark his 1939 elevation to Mayor, George Barker was described as a 'salt of the earth' local man who wanted to 'improve the lives of citizens...and succeeding generations'.⁹ Barely a year later he collapsed and died after presiding over an auction in support of the allied war effort at the Crossley & Porter Grammar School.¹⁰ In many ways, George Barker's political heir was to be his daughter, Sara. She was already Secretary-Agent of the Halifax Labour party at the time of his death in 1940.

Sara Barker was educated at Siddal Elementary School and then at Halifax Technical College. She had studied commerce, and then became an accounting clerk at a Halifax engineering firm, the Butler Machine Tool Co. for eleven years.¹¹ Night classes followed, with Sara studying English, economics and social sciences for many years and as often as three nights a week after work.¹² Such education had a greater purpose. While serving as a senior Labour Party official in London, Barker spoke of her longing for the days when 'socialism was a family affair', and where local party officials 'could be great visionaries'.¹³ Sara Barker herself was submerged in Labour politics from a young age. Among her earliest memories were 'going door to door, collecting subscriptions from members', while she became secretary of the Halifax Labour Party's women's section at sixteen.¹⁴ It was the practicalities of political organisation that had long preoccupied her and set her on the path to a career in political organisation. In the fifteen years between Sara Barker's first role and first paid party job, she served in a number of voluntary party roles, including President of the Halifax Labour Party, Secretary of the Women's Section and Secretary of the Halifax, Huddersfield and District Labour Women's Advisory Council.¹⁵ All of this experience led directly to Barker's 1935 appointment as Secretary-Agent, in her early thirties, as the Halifax Labour Party's only paid employee.¹⁶ She was the successful candidate out of 135 applicants.¹⁷ Her responsibilities included the co-ordination and utilisation of an annual registration of electors, the management of meticulous constituency canvasses, together with administrative duties.¹⁸ However, this role was far from that of a mere functionary.

Sara Barker came into a senior party role as campaigns began to encourage greater democratisation of party structures during the 1920s and 1930s. Not for the first time, activists and parliamentarians linked to the party's left wing argued for a greater role for activists in decision making. These demands would rise again during Barker's time at Labour's London headquarters, Transport House.¹⁹ Yet, within Yorkshire, Barker was active in the more moderate, trade union backed part of the party. This bloc created a regional committee representing local parties within Yorkshire, involving twenty-eight District Labour Parties and

ninety-three delegates. Barker served as secretary and leading activist Lady Mabel Smith was its Chairman.²⁰ They argued for protecting the role of trade unions, and their ‘bloc votes’, at the local level as local union members were often the most committed activists.²¹ Again, this was about the practicalities and realities of party organisation. For Sara Barker, facts and the strength of organisational unity prevailed over democratic theory or ideological purity. Yet, by the late 1930s, it was the spectre of war that took over popular imagination.

However, while Europe plunged into another great conflict in 1939, the Labour Party did not go into hibernation. It remained very active. At the height of the so-called ‘Phoney War’ period before 10 May 1940, Barker organised several recruitment drives and engaged 460 new party members. In fact, this helped increase income significantly and the Halifax Labour Party’s ‘socials committee’ even organised a members trip to Whitby and Scarborough.²² Her effectiveness led to further opportunities.²³ In January 1940, she had been elected a ‘Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire, Westmoreland and Cumberland’ representative on the ‘Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women’s Organisations’.²⁴ Furthermore, when the Labour Party created a more formalised regional organisation in 1941, to better coordinate local organisation and facilitate the sharing of best practice, Barker was appointed the new Yorkshire Regional Executive’s first Organiser for Women.²⁵ This also marked the first time she worked formally with Len Williams, who had been appointed as Secretary to the same body and would serve with her at Transport House in London.²⁶ Her friends and allies in the Halifax Labour Party were pleased and disappointed in equal measure.

Though they congratulated Barker on the promotion, the Party executive committee told her that they regretted that she was leaving.²⁷ As the *Halifax Evening Courier* observed, Barker had ‘filled office [of Secretary Agent] with conspicuous success’.²⁸ Their concerns proved prescient. Throughout the war years, and arguably beyond, Halifax Labour Party were unable to secure a permanent, experienced, and effective agent to replace Barker.²⁹ For the first time, Sara Barker had left the comforting environs of her local Labour Party. This was a great challenge, in a party dominated by men and a particular twentieth-century brand of masculinity. Yet this was the party of Barker as much as of Bevin and Bevan. How Barker was able to negotiate this complex political culture, with its often-Byzantine organisation structures, and climb to the top of Labour’s Transport House headquarters was nothing short of a major achievement.

Local lass done good: Sara Barker’s career away from Halifax

Between 1942 and 1968, Sara Barker’s focus of operations was away from Halifax itself. Yet she continued to engage in Labour party political activity across the County Borough, variously speaking at meetings introducing candidates, opening bazaars, and giving speeches at meetings on topics like ‘international reconstruction’.³⁰ In the later war years, she also authored a seminal Labour Party pamphlet. Published in 1945, *How the Labour Party works* was a comprehensive tract that outlined the Labour Party’s structure at both the national and local levels, detailed candidates selection processes, and clarified the ‘rights and duties of local representatives’.³¹ It was a shrewd move and made her a standout candidate for a role at Transport House. It was in this context that Barker was appointed Assistant National Agent in January 1952, charged with supporting the work of National Agent Len Williams, who coordinated the work of constituency-level agents (the role that Sara Barker had held in Halifax between 1935 and 1942). She was the first women in the party’s history to hold the post.³² The high regard in which the Yorkshire party held her can be understood by the generous gifts of a ‘watercolour of Malham Cove and a cheque’ which they presented to her ‘at a rally of Yorkshire Labour Women in Leeds’.³³ Barker had lived in Halifax until this appointment, with one *Courier* article

showing she had been caught up in a 1949 bus crash in the Town.³⁴ However, the new role would require a move away from Halifax.

Sara Barker's appointment as Assistant National Agent was in the aftermath of Labour's loss of the 1951 election. Its return to opposition caused a great debate to begin over the party's direction, in which Barker and the rest of the Transport House staff acted as both bystanders and active participants. Left wing MP Ian Mikardo described Barker, right wing scions Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton, and Party Secretary Morgan Phillips, together with Union leaders Walter Citrine and Arthur Deakin, as 'fixers' and 'power brokers', rather than 'great ideas-men...and policy formers'.³⁵ Together with Leeds Labour MP Alice Bacon, who chaired the party's organisation sub-committee during the mid-1950s, Barker was central to vetting of candidates and often the maintenance of discipline within the party.³⁶ Bacon and Barker were the Yorkshire contingent of a 'group of formidable and right wing women in and around the NEC', along with Dr Edith Summerskill, Bessie Braddock and Alice Horan.³⁷ These determined, hardworking socialist women gained positions of significant influence within a party that, if one examines memoirs like that of Morgan Phillips, appears to the historian like a veritable boys club. Noticeably, Barker and other comparably similar officials receive no mention, while often peripheral and venal squabbles involving men like Hugh Gaitskell, Aneurin Bevan, and Herbert Morrison receive a great deal of coverage.³⁸

Furthermore, their more discipline-heavy, traditional approach was not unusual. As 1960s Regional Organiser Jim Cattermole once observed, 'any organiser' would consider allowing anti-leadership candidates to succeed as 'not doing the job properly'.³⁹ Through bureaucratic or (in Ian Mikardo's words) 'McCarthyite' methods, Transport House maintained strict control of who was allowed to become a Labour MP, keeping records on potential candidates and their political views.⁴⁰ The extent of these cannot be verified as, again according to Mikardo, when Barker's more liberal successor, Ron Hayward, became national agent in 1969 his first act was to 'tip out all of Sara's secret service dossiers and make a fire of them'.⁴¹ To some extent, there is a sense of a rather gendered description of her, as if a glorified secretary. That she was described in *Queen* magazine as 'quiet, calm, efficient and (important in the Labour Party) soothing' does little to disprove that reading.⁴² Within Labour's rather masculine culture, the effectiveness and influence of people like Sara Barker cannot be underestimated. Yet, as Labour politician Gerald Kaufman later explained, Barker was a 'tough cookie, then again, to get that job she had to be'.⁴³ In many ways, the way Barker was spoken and written about tells us a great deal about how women in politics were discussed and evaluated in post-war British politics. Yet they were significant in allowing the party to operate, whether their methods were supported or despised.

This bureaucratic approach also extended to well-founded criticisms of the 'management' of the Labour Party conference. From 1956 until 1960, in her capacity as Assistant National Agent, Sara Barker acted as its secretary to the Party's Conference Arrangements Committee, which organised the conference agenda and merged comparable resolutions from local parties and union branches to create 'composite' resolutions.⁴⁴ Barker held this role at a difficult time of intra-party debate, with issues of nationalisation, nuclear disarmament, and the party's very leadership being in question. It was at this time that she also had to deal with issues where both members, such as philosopher Bertrand Russell, and just committed pacifists, like Mytholmroyd-based County Councillor Fred Barker (no apparent relation), who had joined peace organisations that as Labour members they were proscribed from joining.⁴⁵ Yet the role was about more than managing agendas and dealing with problematic party members. It also involved dealing with party members across the nation and supporting their initiatives, be that opening the Halifax Labour Party's 1953 bazaar or attending a one-day conference held by the Halifax Labour party to support its activities.⁴⁶ As Barker told a *Guardian* journalist in a 1961 interview, her belief was that 'An organisation like ours is

more than just a machine. It represents the fundamental belief of individuals in a cause'.⁴⁷ The role involved working with and encouraging those individuals, not just punishing them for occasional disagreements and contrary views. What was clear was that Sara Barker was quite good at it.

Sara Barker's ascent through the Labour Party continued at a sustained pace. Having already been promoted to Senior Assistant National Agent, second only to National Agent Len Williams, in 1960, Halifax's newspaper was able to report a recent promotion to Chief Women's Officer of the Labour Party.⁴⁸ Sara Barker was now the senior female figure and representative of Labour women within the party. However, due to the Party's long-time General Secretary Morgan Phillips' health, this would be a more temporary stint. After Phillips had a stroke, other officials had to cover for him and this led, among other things, to Barker having to miss the opening of the Halifax Labour Party's fundraising bazaar due to be held at Socialist House, St James Street.⁴⁹ Eventually, Morgan Phillips retired from the job he had held since 1944 and died in January 1963 aged just 60.⁵⁰ Len Williams was then appointed to replace him, creating a vacancy for the office of National Agent. Barker applied and was one of several strong candidates. Rivals included the then Regional Organisers and future National Agents Reg Underhill and Ron Hayward, and the then West Midlands Organiser Jim Cattermole.⁵¹ In effect, Barker was the internal candidate and had a long working relationship with the new General Secretary going back at least twenty years. Yet this was not an unmerited, insignificant, or safe appointment.

When Sara Barker's appointment was announced, most of the press picked up on the significance of her appointment. The Labour-supporting *Daily Herald* newspaper emphasised how this was the most senior appointment of a woman in any British political party, while one letter writer argued that this must lead to 'more women candidates at the next General Election'.⁵² Liverpool's *Daily Post*, the *Birmingham Daily Post*, and the *Aberdeen Evening Express* made similar observations about the appointment's significance.⁵³ Again, however, an interesting image of Barker emerges from the coverage. One often premised on how she 'lives alone, surrounded by party reports and documents, in a converted alms-house in London's East End'.⁵⁴ A picture of Sara Barker that appeared in *Tatler* at the 1962 Labour Party Conference reinforced the rather homespun schoolmistress image often attached to her.⁵⁵ For example, the *Observer*'s political commentator Norma Beloff likened her style to a 'Governess'.⁵⁶ Much of this tied in with wider assumptions, especially among left-wing activists, that Barker and Len Williams were 'authoritarian and intolerant of dissent'.⁵⁷ Perhaps fairer was Wilson-era Cabinet Minister Richard Crossman's description of them as 'splendid old war horses' with 'incredibly reactionary, views on finance and party organization'.⁵⁸ The extent to which Barker's school mistress persona was curated is unclear, but it sat awkwardly with Labour's attempt to promote itself as one of modernisation, presenting a radical alternative to the status quo.⁵⁹ Before any general election however, Barker's main focus was overseeing by-election campaigns.

Sara Barker threw herself into the role and showed herself to be 'almost frighteningly efficient' in contests across the country.⁶⁰ This efficiency brought her some disdain, for example from MP Anthony Wedgwood-Benn, who felt that Barker was not sufficiently supportive of his attempt to oppose his forced removal to the House of Lords due to the death of his father and his succession to the title of Viscount Stansgate.⁶¹ However, Barker was operating on instructions from Labour's National Executive Committee.⁶² The significance of these comments is more that it shapes the often-negative view held by many about Barker and her role. She had difficult relationships with many, like Benn, on the left, but also had a difficult relationship with revisionist supporters of party leader Hugh Gaitskell.⁶³ Membership of seemingly acceptable groups, like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) also had to

be policed as they had been proscribed by the party executive.⁶⁴ This created a difficult atmosphere within the party.

Results at the 1964 election were far from encouraging. Underfunded and badly organised local parties were failing to contest elections effectively in constituencies that they had a chance of succeeding in.⁶⁵ Changing social habits and political realities also had the potential to weaken party effectiveness. For example, many of Labour's supposedly committed working-class voters were actually as inclined to vote Conservative. Social change and demographic shifts meant that Labour needed to move with the times and engage with new mediums, like television, and offer voters reasons to vote for them other than class loyalty.⁶⁶ A great deal of effort was therefore expended to address these issues.⁶⁷ Furthermore, new issues such as migration gained traction in the press and among voters, an issue that had long been the domain of Barker's Organisation Committee, and had even caused concern during the 1964 election due to events at Smethwick in the West Midlands.^{68 69} As Sara Barker acknowledged, migration 'was a much deeper current than some people think'.⁷⁰ Barker then had to arrange for a new seat to be found at Leyton, which led to a further failed contest, which left Barker in tears in the Prime Minister's office.⁷¹ This was high stakes politics and it was difficult. Party organisers were trying to sustain a Government in office with a small majority. It would remain difficult until the 1966 election, and she worked with Chief Whip Edward Short to maintain Labour's majority by dealing with problems ranging from stopping an MP becoming Mayor of Hartlepool to helping a Labour MP who had been caught up in an assassination attempt on the Shah of Iran.⁷² Hers was a complicated and unusual job, but the focus of Sara Barker's role remained party discipline.

With the Labour Party back in Government with a small majority the party maintained what Eric Shaw called a 'Social Democratic centralist regime' that was 'characterised by a high degree of centralisation and strict discipline' and where terms like 'witch hunts, bans and expulsions' were often used in descriptions of how the party engaged with dissent.⁷³ As the *Observer's* Alan Watkins described this in a sardonic, if overdramatic, way:

A hint of heresy, a whiff of recalcitrance, and Sara's tanks would emerge at the dead of night from the concrete garages deep under Transport House (the party's then headquarters) and move unstoppably towards the offending part of the country.⁷⁴

This period in the 1960s marked the start of greater left-wing activism within the Labour party, which would lead to its so-called 'shift to the left' throughout the 1970s. In one such incident, President of the Nottingham Labour Party (and socialist academic) Ken Coates was expelled from the party and afterwards took aim at Barker, calling her the 'National Agent and the thought controller of the party' and mocking the 'grey, implacable little lady, who looked as though she ought to be selling toffees in a village shop'.⁷⁵ Perhaps these events showed more how the Labour Party had changed than anything else.

No longer was centralisation and discipline seen as acceptable in the changing culture of the Labour Party. The final years of Barker's service showed more signs of this transformation. A report by Richard Crossman, written between 1966 and 1968, suggested a large number of changes to Party structures.⁷⁶ Attempts were also made to make the NEC more representative, by getting more women on the body.⁷⁷ The reports publication dovetailed with Sara Barker reaching the official retirement age. For the final few months of service, from April-September 1968, she combined it with acting as Labour's acting General Secretary. Her long-time ally, Len Williams, had been appointed as Governor General of Mauritius in April 1968.⁷⁸ She held both roles through a difficult few months, which included the fallout from devaluation, Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, and terrible local election results.⁷⁹ Still, this brief tenure meant that, as well as retiring as

Labour's first female National Organiser (the next would be Joyce Gould as Director of Organisation from 1985-1993), she also retired as its first female General Secretary (the next would not be until Margaret McDonagh from 1998-2001). Sara Barker therefore stands out from an otherwise male-dominated list of postholders.

Back to her roots: Sara Barker's return to Halifax, 1969-1973

At Labour's 1968 Conference, the party celebrated Sara Barker's progress from local organiser to party manager. Significantly, she received the party's formal thanks, and a bouquet of flowers, from that year's outgoing party chairman, Jennie Lee.⁸⁰ She later received a Damehood in Harold Wilson's 1970 Resignation Honours.⁸¹ Barker was succeeded as National Agent by left-leaning Regional Organiser Ron Hayward, who did much to liberalise the party's disciplinary processes.⁸² The extent to which these changes later created a lot of Labour's problems about entryism by the political left in the 1970s and 1980s. Notably, however, Barker did not really retire. Rather, she returned to her beloved Halifax Labour Party where, as the *Times* noted, 'she had begun her unique career'.⁸³ Finding the party in a state of neglect she offered her services, which was accepted 'with acclamation'.⁸⁴ Through hard work and energetic campaigning alongside candidate Shirley Summerskill, it seems likely that her intervention helped the party hold the Halifax seat at the 1970 election by 198 votes.⁸⁵ It was a narrow victory and a relief to local activists.

In later life, away from the pressures of national politics, Sara Barker mellowed – certainly in the eyes of those who had previously feared her reputation! Joyce Gould, now Labour's Regional Organiser for Yorkshire, discovered that 'friendlier than...expected' with a 'wicked sense of humour'.⁸⁶ Yet her traditional approach still had the effect on instilling fear. Gould later recalled how addressing meetings in an old fashioned Halifax school room, filled with seasoned veterans, and chaired by Barker herself could cause nerves even among an experienced party organiser.⁸⁷ Despite all this effort, and a narrow victory, such anachronistic approaches to election organising were out of place. They had eked out a slight survival, rather than proved the validity of what Fielding called 'venerable Labour voluntarism'.⁸⁸ This proved to be Sarah Barker's last general election campaign. As an activist, she had been involved in elections since the First World War. Her career had spanned Labour's rise from a third party to Britain's alternative party of government. Much can be learned from her achievements and the lost Labour world she represented. Many of her contemporaries felt the same.

Following her death on a holiday in Scotland on 19 September 1973, a Sara Barker Memorial Lecture was organised every year after her death during the 1970s by Labour's Yorkshire Regional Office.⁸⁹ The inaugural lecture happened to also be the first post-resignation speech by Sir Harold Wilson, the recently retired Prime Minister.⁹⁰ In a fair-minded speech, Wilson spoke highly of Barker's national commitment to the Labour Party and passion for the politics of her hometown. While they were not always in agreement, Wilson explained how both he and Sara Barker shared the belief that without social democracy, there could not be real democracy.⁹¹ Subsequent speeches, by leading politicians and Cabinet Ministers like John Silkin, Roy Hattersley, and Denis Healey used the lecture as a national platform to elaborate on the culture and achievements of the Labour Party and labour movement.⁹² Perhaps it was the Yorkshireman Denis Healey, who explored ideas that he would later discuss in greater depth in his memoir, that best advocated the traditional approach of socialists of Barker's generation. This favoured 'basic values, hard knowledge and calculation' and an 'obstinate will to erode by inches the conditions which produce avoidable suffering', as opposed to 'cloudy rhetoric' or 'tidy blueprints of academic theories'.⁹³

A Halifax pioneer

Sara Barker was an unusual political figure. She never stood for public election herself and was more comfortable (and perhaps effective) behind the scenes. Yet it is activists like Barker, usually forgotten, often misunderstood, and occasionally maligned, that help us understand the ethos and culture of the political movements that shaped our past. They also make clear the changing conceptions and understandings of gender within workplaces and representative politics. This article has not sought to lionise Barker, her approach, or her politics, many of which belong to her own times. Rather it demonstrates that through understanding her career and experiences, we can understand important aspects of our local past. The political history of Halifax was as important, interesting, and significant as its often more popular social and cultural history. The town's role in the rise of the Labour party should not be forgotten, and was inseparable from its complicated industrial experience, geographical location, demography, and religious and educational cultures. All of these issues interacted to create a specific local society. Halifax's Labour Party, together with people like Sara Barker, played an important role in linking them. These were practical people, seeking to make life better for those in their community, at a difficult time in a changing, deindustrialising society. It was for that reason that they remain an important part of this area's story.

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