

Speech — Blue Plaque for Cllr Merivale

Cllr Katherine Miles

31 July 2026

Miss Mary Sophia Merivale lived at this house for 34 years before dying here in 1928. She was the first female councillor in Oxford and one of the first nationally, elected to represent North Ward on 1 November 1907.¹

Today we are not only celebrating Miss Merivale but increasing the visibility of women's contribution to Oxford and our country, valuing women's contributions to society and celebrating local democracy.

I have been asked to speak and will reflect on who was Miss Merivale.

There's a lot written about her male relatives, but to find out about her it's been necessary to piece together information from various archives.

She was born on 24 January 1853² in Lawford, Essex, the daughter of Charles Merivale and Judith Mary Sophia Frere.³ She had three brothers,³ and a sister Judith, who was eight years younger. Her family called her Sophy.

She came from a well-connected family. There are references that she went to school in Brighton but primarily lived in Ely.

A family history held in the Bodleian of her brother refers to the fact that she had alopecia from the age of 27 and had to wear a wig.⁴ She spoke some French and travelled to France with her father.

Civic engagement was clearly a part of life from a young age. Family letters refer to "Sophy's many volunteer activities". These included the Boys and Girls Service organization, and the Ely Home for Little Boys, mothers' meetings, and organizing bazaars.

Like many contemporary Oxford councillors, she liked to cycle. In the 1880s, when she was in her 30s, she learned to ride a tricycle with her mother.⁵ Her sister was shocked by it, but Miss Merivale wrote to her brother "I think it is absurd to object,

¹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal* - Tuesday 05 November 1907

² <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/238669178/mary-sophia-merivale> ³ *Oxford Journal* - Wednesday 06 October 1915.

³ Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers Volume 149, Issue 1902 – born 22nd of December, 1855.

⁴ Bunbury, J.S., 1990.

⁵ Bunbury, J.S., 1990.

the oddity is only because people are not used to ladies on them, and the sooner they get accustomed to the sight the better.” She also took a ten-day tricycle ride in Northamptonshire.⁶ When she was aged 38 in 1891, she was living back living at Ely College along with her parents, younger sister, and nieces and nephews, while one brother Walter was living overseas. It is apparent she took an active role in caring for the children in their parents’ absence.

Around this time, Miss Merivale took a course on woodcarving and continued this hobby throughout her life.⁷

In 1894 when she was around 41, after her father’s death, she moved with her mother and sister to Oxford.⁸ They lived in this house at the time of the 1901 census.

In Oxford prior to her election campaign, Miss Merivale worked on infant welfare, and with the poor law schools and the eye hospital.⁹

In 1907 debates around women’s suffrage were building. Miss Merivale attended a public meeting convened by the Oxford Women’s Suffrage Society, held in the assembly room of the town hall.¹⁰ The participants of the meeting passed a motion supporting the first parliamentary bill for women’s suffrage in 1907.¹¹

The Bill didn’t pass its second reading. But separately legislative progress was being made with the Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act which received Royal Assent on 28 August 1907.¹² The Act removed the disqualification of women from sitting on public bodies for which they were entitled to vote.^{14 15} It meant that women who were widows or spinsters could finally stand for election including in Oxford, however married women not on the local registers remained ineligible for election until the following year.¹³

⁶ Bunbury, J.S., 1990, p. 140.

⁷ Bunbury, J.S., 1990.

⁸ *Oxford Journal* - Wednesday 6 October 1915.

⁹ *The Oxford Magazine*, May 3rd 1928, pp. 453-4.

¹⁰ *Oxfordshire Weekly News* – Wednesday 13 March 1907; *Oxford Journal* - Saturday 9 March 1907.

¹¹ *Oxfordshire Weekly News* - Wednesday 13 March 1907; *Oxford Journal* - Saturday 9 March 1907.

¹² <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1907/aug/12/qualification-of-women-county-and> ¹⁴ <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1907/aug/12/qualification-of-women-county-and> ¹⁵ Hollis, P., 2007, p. 491.

¹³ *Daily Mirror* – Monday 21 October 1907

¹⁷ Hollis, P., 2007, p. 396.

On 1 November 1907 elections were scheduled three months after the Bill was passed.

Outside London seventeen candidates stood for election including Miss Merivale in Oxford.¹⁷ The *Daily Mirror* reported this as important event in the history of women's progress but remarked that the number of lady candidates was small.¹⁴

We can deduce that women's political participation on local government was seen as a separate from calls for women's parliamentary suffrage. The leader of the suffragette movement Miss Pankhurst was quoted on "Why Suffragettes are inactive there were not more women candidates. She said "We take no part in municipal politics and only concern ourselves with agitating for the vote."¹⁵ Nevertheless, Merivale's candidacy had the support of The Oxford Women's Suffrage Society. At their October meeting it was reported that "women's suffragists and all those interested in women's wellbeing are actively forwarding the candidature of Miss Merivale for a seat on Oxford City Council."¹⁶

Miss Merivale held a campaign meeting at Phil and Jim's infant schools shortly before the election. There she reflected on the campaign and work of a councillor if elected. She said should would find being a councillor more educative than the process of standing, as "she perceived that a city councillor was required to know a great deal on an infinite variety of subjects, and not only to possess this store of knowledge but to be able to have on the tip of the tongue clear and definite answers to all sorts on conundrums". She spoke in favour of allotments, grounds for recreation, and the supply of a public bath. She also referred to wanting to improve how rubbish was collected.¹⁷

On her candidacy she said she was standing because "quite simply a woman was wanted, and other better qualified women were not able to come forward and so she had accepted the invitation". She added that "... there were among the business of the city council ... matters more intimately connected with women and children which had to be dealt with, and a woman's knowledge and practical detail ought to be helpful in dealing with them". She stressed that she "had come forward as a representative of no political party" and noted that she "had never taken part in the agitation for women's suffrage and always had consistently denied to sign any petition either for or against it".¹⁸

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror* - Monday 21 October 1907

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror* - Monday 21 October 1907

¹⁶ *Women's Franchise* - Thursday 17 October 1907

¹⁷ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 1 November 1907, p 9.

¹⁸ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 1 November 1907, p. 9.

Standing as an independent was seen as an advantage. Speakers at the event supported Miss Merivale's bid for election although they described Merivale's candidacy as "a new experiment" and she was "a most excellent and competent candidate". Another said, while she was the "women's candidate" he preferred to think of her as the "children's candidate" because if children's interests were to be represented, they must be represented by people who cared for them".¹⁹

Just as today, when tactical voting is used to address inadequacies of our political system. Tactical voting was promoted by one of the speakers who argued that supporters wishing to plump for Miss Merivale should not also vote for one of the male candidates with their second cross as it was "wiping out the effect of the first one" by making it more possible the other candidate would be elected in Miss Merivale's place.²⁰

Elsewhere it was reported that "her candidature enjoyed the support of many leading members of the university".²¹

On the 1 November 1907 Merivale was elected as a councillor with an "unexpectedly large majority".^{22 23 24} and as a result the conservatives lost a seat in the North Ward.²⁵ Nationally out of the eighteen women that stood for election, six were returned.²⁶ Notably the press emphasised the social status of these women and their family connections.^{27 32 33} and the more activist suffragette candidates were not elected.²⁸

There was national media reporting on Miss Merivale's Victory. For example, the *Daily Telegraph & Courier (London)* reported: "Ladies as councillors. The beginning has been made, and future elections will probably show more returns. Much in this

¹⁹ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 1 November 1907, p. 9.

²⁰ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 1 November 1907, p. 9.

²¹ *Daily Telegraph & Courier* (London) - Saturday 09 November 1907

²² *Oxford Chronicle*, November 8, 1907, p. 190.

²³ *Women's Franchise* - Thursday 07 November 1907

²⁴ *Nursing Times* - Saturday 09 November 1907

²⁵ *Oxford Journal* - Saturday 28 December 1907

²⁶ *Women's Franchise* - Thursday 07 November 1907

²⁷ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, Tuesday 5 November 1907, p. 6.

³² *Nursing Times* - Saturday 09 November 1907 ³³ *Tablet*, 20 January 1900 p. 14.

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_Tax_Resistance_League

direction will depend naturally upon the work done by the ladies who are pioneers in this direction, and all women will watch with interest the part they play in public affairs".²⁹

After the election victory Cllr Merivale wrote from this house:

"To the Burgesses of the North Ward, Ladies and Gentlemen, I beg to thank you all most sincerely for the generous ardour with which you worked to secure my election, and for the victory you achieved on Friday last.... My earnest desire is now to prove myself worthy of your confidence."³⁶

Immediately after her election, Cllr Merivale was interviewed and was asked whether her election was due to "a desire to have a lady representative on the Council". She said "No doubt" and that "undoubtedly a large number of lady voters did wish to have a woman representative, and a far larger number of these lady voters attended the poll than ever before". She also reflected on the "large amount of work for women" to do on the council. Moreover, there was work "particularly related to women and children, in which women's knowledge ought to be helpful".³⁷

She said "I have had an interview with one of the members of the Council this morning, and he is very anxious that I should do all sorts of things which it is utterly impossible for one woman to do...." "I do not see how one woman could do all that. It would certainly want more than seven days a week, and I do hope and trust that more ladies will come forward in time to join in the work."³⁰

Merivale received a letter of congratulations from her nephew Philip who wrote "My dear Aunt Sophy, a thousand congratulations on your election. What will your duties be now? Heavier than before I suppose. Do you think of being mayor eventually?"³¹

The Council archives for this period are still in the process of being digitalised and so insights during her period in office are drawn from the council minute book and newspaper reports at the time.

Cllr Merivale had an excellent council attendance rate at full council meetings at the town hall throughout her time in office. Traffic speeds, trams, Broad Street meadow

²⁹ *Daily Telegraph & Courier (London)* - Saturday 09 November 1907³⁶
Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette - Friday 08 November 1907³⁷
Oxford Chronicle, 8 November 1907, p. 190.

³⁰ *Oxford Chronicle*, 8 November 1907, p. 190.

³¹ ADD REFERENCE.

were all topics of discussion in the full council meetings – topics that still resonate to voter today.

While she was initially independent, in 1910 at a North Ward Conservative association special meeting for selecting the candidates it was reported Miss Merivale had decided to join the Conservative party.”³²

On her committee work, all councillors served on the General Purposes Committee, and the Sanitary Committee. She specifically was appointed to and served on the Playgrounds Committee; the Midwives Act Committee; the Unemployed Workmen Act Committee; the Education Committee; the Local Pension Committee; the Housing and Town Planning Committee; the Public Library Committee; the Committee to consider the celebration of the millenary of the year 912; and the Building by Laws Committee.

She also did shorter stints on other committees (the Mental Deficiency Act Committee; Local Tribunal (under the provision of the military service (regulations) Order 1916); and at the end of her term in office, the Local War Museum Committee; the Watch Committee, and the Cemeteries and Open Spaces Committee).

Throughout her period of office, she was appointed to Council manager of non-provided schools at St Barnabas School. She also served as the vice chairman of the unemployed workman act and four years as vice chair of the local pension committee. She was a Guardian of the Poor between 1910–21.

Infant mortality and maternal health were key issues of focus for the first women councillors in England including Cllr Merivale.⁴¹ A key reported achievement attributed to Cllr Merivale is that she persuaded the Oxford dairy company to provide modified milk for over 100 of their most sickly infants in the city at cost. When infant mortality rates reduced from 94 per thousand in 1908 to 69 per thousand in 1912, Miss Merivale’s health and housing association was given credit for it.³³

In November 1908 Merivale was joined by a second female councillor, Mrs Lizzie Hughes, who was elected for the West Ward.³⁴

Cllr Merivale’s achievements were recognised locally at a time when the debate around women’s participation in local government was on the political agenda.

³² *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 7 September 1910.⁴¹ Hollis, P., p. 433.

³³ Hollis, P., pp. 438–9.

³⁴ City of Oxford Council Minute Book, 1906, p. 416.

In 1909 she spoke at the local branch of the Women in Local Government Society and a motion was unanimously carried that the meeting was “in favour of extending the qualification for election to county and borough councils by making a residential qualification as alternative for the electoral qualification for eligibility”. The male chairman spoke on the value of women in local government, and the anomalies in the law respecting the eligibility of women to local bodies.

At the meeting Mrs Hughes expressed their ‘indebtedness to Miss Merivale as the pioneer lady councillor in Oxford. And that “Miss Merivale had broken down prejudice in the council.”³⁵³⁶

The chair Mr H. A. L. Fisher from New College, stated “whatever view might be held as to the value and the expediency of granting the Parliamentary suffrage to women, there was, he thought, no division of opinion whatever among rationale mortals as to the extreme value of the services which women were rendering and were capable of rendering in local government. The experiment had already been tried, and with success”.³⁷

Miss Merivale “remarked that she wished they had a larger number of ladies eligible for elections. There was a great deal more to be done on the city council than Mrs Hughes and she could do”, and “she regretted that neither of them was on the Hospital or Asylum committees. They felt that the women there ought to have a lady to whom they could bring their grievances.”

Women’s parliamentary suffrage was a wider raging political debate which seeped into the business of the council.

In February 1911 a motion was adopted by council that “there should be passed into law a measure for the enfranchisement of women upon the lines of the conciliation Bill of 1910”.³⁸ At this time the discussions about suffrage at the municipal level were perceived to be separate from those at the national level.

The first world war was during Cllr Merivale’s time in office. There was a period of no elections due to that war and women’s political participation was raised in this context.

³⁵ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* – Friday 30 April 1909. Also see *Oxford Review*, Thursday

³⁶ April 1909; *Oxford Journal* - Saturday 01 May 1909

³⁷ *Oxford Review* - Thursday 29 April 1909

³⁸ City Council Meeting Minute Book, 1909.

In 1916 a petition with 48 signatures from the Oxford branch of the Women's Local Government Society was presented to council, calling for casual vacancies in the Council to be filled by co-option to be filled by women.³⁹

Council resolved that the consideration of the matter stand over until a vacancy occurred. In March 1918 Miss Lily Sophia Tawney was chosen as councillor in place of a councillor who was elected as alderman. She later went on to be the first female mayor of Oxford.⁴⁸

Miss Merivale championed women's participation in municipal matters. In 1918 Miss Merivale put forward a motion that a female councillor Mrs Mable Grundy be elected a Guardian of the Poor in place of councillor that had resigned.⁴⁰

In terms of Cllr Merivale's personal life during this period:

Aged 58, in 1911 she lived here with her sister and continued to play a role caring for her nephews and nieces.⁴¹ She wrote extensively to her nephew Philip, and his letters are held in the Bodleian. She hosted her niece's wedding reception here in 1913.⁴²

Tying to Cllr Merivale's retirement from politics, it was announced in September 1920 that she would be retiring and not seeking re-election.⁴³ From November 1920 she stopped attending full council meetings, and was also not assigned any committee positions, apart from being Guardian of the Poor.

The official resignation letter held in the archives addressed 4 Park Town and dated December 17, 1920 reads:⁴⁴

Dear Mr Town Clerk,

Will you be good enough to inform the city Council that I must ask them to accept my resignation. I very much regret the necessity for this step but I find myself no longer strong enough for public work and must therefore make way for younger and abler people.

I have very much enjoyed my experience of the last 13 years during which I have been a member of this council, and I should take this opportunity to

³⁹ Council Minute book, 1st March 1916

⁴⁸ Council minute book, 6/3/1918.

⁴⁰ Council minute book, 2/1/1918.

⁴¹ The Oxford Magazine May 3rd 1928 pp. 453–4.

⁴² *Northampton Mercury*, Friday August 22, 1913.

⁴³ *Oxford Journal* - – Wednesday 15 September 1920

⁴⁴ OCA5/1/C4/132. Town Clerks correspondence 1870-1921. Letters in [M] 1920.

⁵⁴ City of Oxford Council Minute Book – 1919 – 1921, p. 422.

thank those of my fellow members who welcomed & befriended me so kindly when I entered their ranks alone one woman among 59 men. I believe a fine of £2 is due from me for resigning, I therefore enclose a cheque for this amount.

The letter was read out on 5 January 1921 at the council meeting. It was reported, “It was resolved that the cheque should be returned to her, and that the Town Clerk express the profound appreciation of the council of all the public work done by her during her career as a councillor”.⁵⁴

Miss Merivale died here on 11 March 1928 aged 75 after a long illness.⁴⁵

Her funeral took place at St Giles’ Church and she was interred at Wolvercote Cemetery.⁵⁶ Her obituary stated she was a “tall figure with the quick, unconventional speech and the humorous smile that won instant confidence” and those that knew her “will feel that with her a rare spirit has passed away”. The obituary reflected on her election as the first woman councillor in the city and noted “she won by her strength of character, her modesty and her utter singleness of purposes made the presence of women on the Council acceptable even to those who had most strongly opposed the innovation.”⁴⁶

After Cllr Merivale’s sister died in 1944 relatives continued to own this house until 1978, first passing to Phoebe and then Stephen. It was finally sold by Norah Merivale when Stephen Merivale died. It is written “For over 80 years number 4 (later renumbered number 7) Park Town remained a home where any member of the much-extended family ... was assured of a welcome and a bed.”⁵⁸

I would like to thank Susan and her family for agreeing to have the blue plaque and Stefan for and Liz Woolley for connecting me to Susan.

⁴⁵ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* – Friday 16 March 1928, p. 12

⁵⁶ *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* – Friday 16 March 1928, p. 12.

⁴⁶ *The Oxford Magazine*, May 3rd 1928 pp. 453–454.

⁵⁸ Bunbury, J.S., 1990.