

# and an iron constitution: that is Mrs T as I remember her

Alistair Cooke, Lord Lexden, has been a Conservative member of the House of Lords since 2011. Here, writing exclusively for the County Standard, he remembers former PM Lady Thatcher and their mutual connection – Colchester.

**DID** Margaret Roberts ever need to consult a doctor when she lived in Lexden in the late 1940s, some years before she met and married Denis Thatcher?

She may not, since until her latter years the iron lady had an iron constitution.

But if a need for medical advice had arisen she would surely have turned to my father, Dr Basil Cooke, the best GP in Lexden, beloved by his patients.

My father, who had little interest in politics or politicians, died before Mrs T became a famous household name and I never asked him whether she had sought him out. Nor, stupidly, did I raise the question with the lady herself when I got to know her as a result of working in the Conservative Party's Research Department.

Between August 1947 and June 1949, the young Oxford graduate was employed as a research chemist at BX Plastics in Manningtree, commuting daily from Lexden by means of a company bus.

She was paid an annual salary of £350; men doing the same job got £400.

**Fond memories:** Alistair Cooke, Lord Lexden, retraces the steps of the Iron Lady during her two-year stay in Colchester in the late 1940s

She found herself "digs" at 168 Maldon Road, a small Victorian house owned by Enid Macaulay, a young widow who took in lodgers to help meet the costs of raising two children, one of whom, Libby, was a friend of my brother, Roderick.

Mrs Macaulay, of whom I was always rather in awe, also ran a modest Kindergarten which, in a small way, may have helped to equip the future Secretary of State for Education for her duties in the early 1970s.

In the summer of 1948, however, the lodger fell out with her landlady, as Charles Moore reveals in his official life of Margaret Thatcher.

He quotes a letter from Margaret to her elder sister, Muriel: "The children have been getting very cheeky lately", she wrote. "If ever we dared to speak sharply to them, she ticked us off and not the children".

So Margaret and one of her fellow lodgers moved to new digs at 19 Lexden Road, a substantial early 19th-century "gentleman's residence" with large sash windows. It stands directly opposite the town's famous 16th-century grammar school, which then, as now, had an outstanding academic reputation.

She told me years later how much she admired it and yet, ironically, as Education Secretary she was to approve more conversions of grammar schools to comprehensives than any other holder of that office.

She moved again at the end of 1948 to a flat which she shared with a female friend at 42 Cambridge Road, a house that formed part of Lexden's impressive growth in the Edwardian period.

She painted and decorated thoroughly to make it a fine home, but in February 1949, her world changed dramatically with her adoption at the age of 23 as the Conservative candidate for Dartford, in Kent. By July she had left Lexden for lodgings in Dartford.

Throughout her two years in Lexden she attended Colchester's Methodist church in Culver Street with unflinching regularity and joined other young members of the congregation on Methodist missions to various Essex villages, keeping up a habit begun in her native Grantham and continued at Oxford.

In a fine biography published in

2000, historian John Campbell notes "she may have preached; she is certainly remembered reading the lesson, with her too-perfect elocution".

In her Lexden years, as in all other phases of her career, she was never idle.

In September 1947, she wrote to her sister Muriel: "I still don't like the work [in Manningtree] very much, but the politics and social life are beginning to go with a swing which compensates for a lot."

She immersed herself in the activities of Colchester's thriving branch of the Young Conservatives, whose 350 members kept up a vigorous programme of social and political activities, planned at their club in Museum Street.

She developed the habit of dressing smartly on all political occasions, which was to be such a marked feature of her years at the top in politics.

After a weekend political conference in May 1948, she wrote to tell her sister: "I was wearing



**Smart:** Margaret Roberts and Bill Jolliffe, another Young Conservative, dancing at a ball in 1949.

my blue frock and hat and wine coat and accessories. I think I won the day."

She sought to impress good-looking young men. As Charles Moore reveals, she was much attracted by the young heir of Lexden Manor, David Papillon, one of whose forbears had been Tory MP for Colchester from 1859 to 1865.

Tall and debonair, he regularly occupied the family pew at St Leonard's Church when I was a child. Like her, he was heavily involved in the Young Conservatives. A man of great charm, he was also prominent for a time in her social life.

She told her sister she was "rather cross" when a friend arrived at his New Year party in 1949 wearing a "chiffon blouse exactly the same colour as my turquoise one".



**Colchester Connection:** Margaret Thatcher, who lived in Colchester for two years and was part of Colchester's Young Conservatives.

But the friendship did not prosper. Papillon was, in the euphemism favoured by my parents, "a confirmed bachelor". The Lexden social scene did not deflect her for one moment from her principal objective, which was to lay the foundations of her political career.

Colchester in the late 1940s was what is now called a target seat. After years with a Tory MP, the constituency changed hands in the Labour landslide of 1945.

Margaret Roberts and her fellow Young Conservatives were the vanguard of a Tory counter-attack which, the year after she had left, overturned a Labour majority of nearly 2,500.

Moore writes she quickly became "one of their regular speakers, warming up the soapbox at St Botolph's Corner every Saturday night for 'Cub' Alport, the Tory candidate", even though she disliked him personally. (For my part, I became very fond of him when I got to know him in the 1990s.)

"I shall be awfully sorry when the time comes to leave Colchester", she wrote to her sister in 1948. She never forgot the friends she made during this important formative period of her political career.

In his biography of her, John Campbell stresses her lasting affection for them: "Whenever she came to Colchester, even as Prime Minister, she still knew all the older members by name, asked after others and seemed to them quite unaffected."

I am proud to have as my title the place where she began the political journey that was to take her to lasting fame in our country and throughout the world.

168 Maldon Road – her first home, top right, when she moved to Colchester in 1947.

Having fallen out with the landlady over her 'cheeky' children, she and a fellow lodger moved to 19 Lexden Road, centre right, a 19th-century "gentleman's residence" opposite the grammar school, which she admired.

Then, in 1948, she moved again to 42 Cambridge Road, right, where she shared a flat with a friend. She decorated it and made it a fine home, but had to leave for Dartford in July 1949, having been chosen as Conservative candidate there.



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