

Westminster College Unveils Cambridge Blue Plaque To Commemorate Intrepid Founding Sisters



A Cambridge College is celebrating the vision and generosity of twin sisters who were its founding benefactors, with the dedication of a Cambridge Blue Plaque.

Westminster College held a formal unveiling of the Blue Plaque at its Open Day on Saturday 1st June, in memory of Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson who not only donated the strategic site on which the College is located, but were also biblical scholars, linguists and intrepid explorers at a time when this was unusual for women.

The ceremony was carried out by Professor Janet Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology, Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University and an Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College. The Blue Plaque, awarded by Cambridge City Council, is only the seventh to be given to women.

The occasion also marked the launch of a new Association of Alumni and Friends of the College and was attended by more than 160 former students and friends.

The twin sisters Agnes and Margaret were brought up as Presbyterians in Irvine, Ayrshire, inherited a fortune and taught themselves 12 languages. Following the donation of the Cambridge site, Westminster College relocated from its original base in London in 1899.

They travelled widely across Europe and the Middle East at a time when such journeys by Victorian women were unheard of, making some remarkable discoveries along the way which have had profound significance for biblical scholarship. They were both awarded honorary doctorates by the major Universities of Scotland, Germany and Ireland for their work on ancient manuscripts.

Today Westminster College is a theological college, resource centre and research hub for the United Reformed Church (URC). Its principal purpose is training for the ordination of ministers, but is also used more widely for training within the denomination, including flexible learning in blocks of a week, which was introduced recently.

Speaking at the Open Day, Rev Neil Thorogood, Principal of Westminster College said: “This is an important day for our community as we recognise the contribution made by Agnes and Margaret not only in providing the site for our College, but also the incredible story of their achievements at a time when women were not considered pioneers in their field.

“It is very fitting that they can now be remembered in perpetuity with the Cambridge Blue Plaque so future generations will be able to view it and learn more about Westminster’s heritage.

“I am delighted that this occasion also marks the formal launch of our Alumni and Friends Association which we hope will bring our Westminster community closer together, encouraging former students and affiliates to be part of our life in College and to join us for future events.”

The Cambridge City Blue Plaque scheme was launched in 2001 to honour the most famous people or events associated with the city, whose contribution has made a significant impact on the area, the UK and the world. Currently 32 have been awarded, following stringent assessment, including for Dr John Addenbrooke, Sir Frank Whittle, Alan Turing and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford.

Only six of the Plaques have been given to women who include Gwen Raverat, artist, illustrator and wood engraver and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, leading suffragist and co-

founder of Newnham College. The Blue Plaque Scheme is run by the charity, Cambridge Past, Present & Future.

Notes for editors

Westminster College

As a resource to the national and local church and a full participant in the theological training of students within the Cambridge Theological Federation, Westminster College is a place where all those in ministry can study and deepen their faith. It is a place for refreshment and learning available to all of those involved in the life of the Church from many different traditions, people from other faiths and those with no faith commitment.

A long-term partner on the Westminster site, is the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide and the central offices of the Cambridge Theological Federation. The Woolf Institute, a centre for dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims of world renown, is based in a brand new building on the College site, as is the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion.

www.westminster.cam.ac.uk

Caption

At the Cambridge Blue Plaque unveiling, left to right: Robert Pope, Vice Principal, Westminster College; Peter Ball and Sam White, both Teaching Staff, Westminster College; Professor Janet Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology, Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University and an Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College; Magalie Cooper, Bursar, Westminster College; Jane McLarty, Teaching Staff, Westminster College; and Neil Thorogood, Principal, Westminster College.

June 2019

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