



Helen Kirkpatrick Watts 1881-1972

### Suffragette

Helen was born in Co Durham the eldest child of Rev Alan Hunter Watts who became the Vicar of Holy Trinity Lenton in 1893 and the family lived at Lenton Vicarage now Unity House, 35 Church Street .She had seven younger siblings and was particularly close to her brother Neville with whom she published 'Poems by a Brother and Sister' in 1906. As a girl she contributed to The Girl's Realm magazine an enlightened periodical supporting women's education and entry into the professions although we do not know where Helen herself was educated.

Her mother and father were known supporters of the East Midlands Federation of the NUWSS and some suffrage meetings were held in the church hall. Helen seems to have attended various suffrage meetings before joining the city branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1907 after hearing Christabel Pankhurst speak at a volatile meeting in Nottingham mechanics on 2nd December where the speakers were unable to make themselves heard and so a follow-up meeting was held a week later on 9th December and after this Helen joined the WSPU. On 24th February 1909 she joined a protest in London and was arrested for wilful obstruction and at her appearance at Bow Street Police Court she refused to be bound over and was sentenced to 1 month in jail. She wrote to her parent to tell them of her arrest and arranged that her sisters Alice and Ethel would receive weekly 'Votes for Women'. On release she was greeted at Nottingham station by many local suffragettes and a celebration supper was held at Morley's cafe on Wheeler Gate. On July 27th the WSPU attempted to disrupt a meeting at the Albert Hall in Nottingham and were ejected and so held a separate meeting in the Market Place where Helen and several others were arrested but they were released without charge. On 4th September along with Mary Rawson and Nelly Crocker - the local

WSPU paid organiser- she attended a meeting in Leicester where Winston Churchill was speaking. This time Helen was charged with 'disorderly conduct' and in Leicester jail she went on hunger strike for 90 hours and although she was threatened with force feeding this didn't happen. She did however smash 2 windowpanes in her cell to let in fresh air. She was released after 5 days and spoke about her experiences at Morley's cafe on 17th September.

Helen was awarded the Holloway prison medal and the Hunger strike medal and was in demand as a speaker and there are notes for a number of speeches in the Nottingham archives. Helen was arrested but it is thought that she left the WSPU about this time and joined the Women's Freedom League as she did not support the WSPU's arson campaign. She may have worked for the WFL in Poplar for a while but by March 1911 she is at Eagle House Batheaston where the Blathwayt family welcomed recovering suffragettes and on 17th March she planted a juniper tree in the Suffragettes wood there and there is a photograph of this. On April 2nd 1911 census night she complied and is at the home of her brother Nevile in Chilcompton Somerset. By 1912 she was training as a nurse at the Royal National Hospital in Bath and then worked as a Civil servant in the Ministry of Pensions. After her retirement she lived in Hassocks in Sussex where we know she was involved with the Unitarian church as a popular lay preacher and secretary to the Old Meeting House in Ditchling. She wrote at first anonymously 'By a Way I knew Not' in 1928 which tells of her move from the Anglicanism of her parents to Unitarianism in about 1903. In the 1950's the Misses watts – Helen and her sister Alice lived at Crosslands in Chilcompton. On 18th May 1962 she gave an interview in Bath where she had come to see the remains of the Suffragette's Wood. She said that she had carried a sprig of the juniper tree that she had planted in her purse from then onwards. In October 1965 she went to Canada to visit her sister Ethelinda but ill health forced her to return to live in Somerset where she died aged 91 at 36 York Avenue in Hove and is buried in St Vigor's churchyard at Stratton-on-the-Fosse. In the 1980's an unaccompanied trunk arrived from Canada at Bristol Docks and remained there unclaimed for several years Eventually a dock worker opened it and it was found to contain Helen's letters and suffragette memorabilia. Fortunately, this was shown to a local history teacher who made copies and sent these to Nottinghamshire archives - without which we would know a great deal less. Helen's hunger strike medal came up for sale at Christie's in 1999. NWHG planted a Juniper tree in 2017 and in 2019 installed a **commemorative plaque** to Helen in the Arboretum.

