

Women on the Move: The Great Suffrage Pilgrimage in Nottinghamshire

The Great Suffrage Pilgrimage of 1913 has largely been forgotten but it should be remembered and celebrated. It was a six-week protest march and one of the most successful and large-scale public demonstrations the country has ever known. It involved many thousands of people, mainly women, covering many miles, raising significant funds and brought the 'Votes for Women' message into many towns and villages across the country.

The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) organised the Great Pilgrimage to counter the violent militancy of the Women's Social Political Union (WSPU) which they feared was having a detrimental effect on public opinion. They wanted to demonstrate to Parliament and to the Country that the women's suffrage movement had a much larger law-abiding, constitutional, non-violent and non-militant following – the NUWSS in 1913 had almost 100,000 members.

The idea for a suffragist march was put forward at a NUWSS Executive meeting in London 17 April 1913 by Katherine Harley, President of the Shropshire Women's Suffrage Society, chair of the West Midlands Federation and a member of the national executive. Thereafter a Pilgrimage Committee was set up and meticulous plans were quickly drawn up over a 2-month period and publicised through the NUWSS newsletter *The Common Cause*.

Millicent Fawcett, the NUWSS President left the detailed organisation to Katherine Harley and the Pilgrimage Committee but later described the Pilgrimage as a 'joyful' event which showed great dedication to the great cause of women's suffrage. There were to be six routes from all parts of the country, which would converge on Hyde Park for a large rally scheduled for 26th July 1913 at 5pm.

This was not the first suffrage pilgrimage; in 1912, there had been a women's march from Edinburgh to London led by suffragettes, Florence Gertude de Fonblanque, Ada Wright, Ruth Cavendish Bentinck and the treasurer Margaret Elizabeth Bryan. This march set off in October 1912 aiming to reach London in November where they would present a petition to the Prime Minister at Downing Street. The marchers were dressed in brown, green and white and were dubbed the 'brown women' by the press.' As they marched they gathered signatures for a petition and gained national attention; though unfortunately for them the autumn weather was particularly wet. As that march past through Grantham, Helena Brownsword Dowson, the Nottingham NUWSS Secretary and the East Midlands Representative on the Executive, chaired a meeting at Westgate Hall.

The Great Pilgrimage of 1913 was closely organised by national and local NUWSS Federations working together to produce detailed village-by-village routes and itineraries, with suggesting stopping places - barns, camping grounds, supporter's houses. Societies along the way were encouraged to offer to feed or put up pilgrims, and to join in by wearing the NUWSS colours – red, green and white- and

canvassing support. Costs were to be kept to a minimum to encourage participation but also to raise money.

Pilgrims were expected to cover about 20 miles each day, with Sunday being a rest day; and most did this on foot though some rode horses or bicycles, and a few cars, caravans and traps helped with luggage. Individuals, men were welcome as well as women, were not necessarily expected to complete the whole route, though some did, rather Federations were to join in as the Pilgrimage passed through their area. An experienced public speaker was also attached to each route as a key aim was to gather support and take the message into the various communities on route.

Advice was given on what to wear- dark jackets and serviceable skirts with white blouses were advised and skirts to be four inches from the ground to help with mud splattering. Advice was also provided on what **not** to wear, particularly **not purple** which was associated with the WSPU suffragettes. Only a single suitcase was to be brought, along with the NUWSS knapsack which was to display the name of the particular route in green/white letters. Marchers were to wear NUWSS rosettes and sashes. Raffia cockle shells, supplied by the NUWSS HQ, were to be worn pinned to hats as a sign of the Pilgrimage, the hats were to be black, white or navy blue. A raincoat was advised and clothiers such as Burberry's advertised in the Common Cause that their raincoats were 'the ideal coat for the Pilgrimage.

Two marshals were to lead the pilgrims with banners making known the NUWSS's non-militant and law-abiding stance. Newspaper editors were alerted well in advance and asked to publish a NUWSS letter telling people all about the Pilgrimage and asked to report on the Pilgrimage as it passed through their area. Public meetings were organised along the routes, to inform and promote understanding as well as to raise money to support the campaign.

The longest route was that of the Great North Road, some two hundred and seventy-five miles and it is this route from Newcastle to London led by Miss Ida Beaver, which passed through the Nottinghamshire area arriving from Chesterfield on the 7th July 1913 to be welcomed by both the Mansfield and Nottingham local NUWSS branches.

The Suffrage Pilgrimage in Mansfield and Nottingham

Both Nottingham and Mansfield had long established suffrage societies dating back to the 1880s. The inaugural meeting of the Mansfield NUWSS had been addressed by Millicent Fawcett and she would return to the town many times and this area was the only part of the country where she would participate in the Pilgrimage.

The Mansfield society was led by women who were Quakers; its President, the veteran campaigner Louisa Wright (1849-1916) and the Honorary secretary, Emily Manners nee Barringer (1857-1934) who also represented Mansfield on the National Executive of the NUWSS. The friendship that had evolved with the leaders of the Mansfield suffrage society and Millicent Fawcett is evidenced in letters held in the Nottinghamshire archives and suggests that part of the reason for this special relationship was due to the Mansfield's society adherence to peaceful means of

protest and constitutional methods, as documented in their minute books also in the local archives. The Mansfield society embraced wider sections of the local community including working class women and the minute books reveal the names of nearly eighty local women who were involved over the years; including a junior suffrage society which was formed in 1911 to educate the younger generation on the suffrage question.

As well as the Mansfield branch, key women from the Nottingham branch joined the East Midlands stage of the Great North Road Pilgrimage route. Helena Brownsword Dowson, Nottingham's NUWSS leader together with her sister-in-law Maud Dowson joined the pilgrims at Pleasley just outside Mansfield and accompanied the pilgrims as they went from Mansfield to Southwell. The Dowson's then returned home, re-joining with other suffragists from Nottingham who went by train to join in the Hyde Park final event on 26th July when over 30,000 attended with over 20 speaker's platforms.



The local newspapers reported on the progress of the Pilgrimage as it came through the East Midlands. The Derby Courier for example carried a photograph of the suffragists outside Chesterfield Market Hall, captioned "Group of Suffragettes (sic) members of the anti-militant section", which suggests that the women had their work cut out to persuade the towns and villages along the way of the differences between themselves and Mrs Pankhurst's suffragettes. However, it seems that the women were well received in Chesterfield and held a meeting in the Market Place on 8 July 1913 which was attended by several thousand people. They then moved on to Mansfield on the same evening.

Local press reported that the 13mile journey to Mansfield was accompanied by three decorated cars, two of which were driven by women (this was thought worthy of comment), and meetings were held at the 5 villages between Chesterfield and Pleasley where Millicent Fawcett, President of the NUWSS, joined the marchers. The Nottinghamshire leg of the Pilgrimage was the only one she spoke at. In a letter to Emily Manners, her host, dated the 30th of June 1913 she had said: "I would quite like to do some walking but at 66 one cannot do as much as one could do at 26".

At the invitation of the Rev. E Arthur Berry of St Barnabas Church, Pleasley, a meeting was held in the Vicarage Field, and in addition to Millicent Fawcett, the Mansfield suffragists Emily Manners and Louisa Wright, and Lady Madeline Onslow also spoke. Following tea in the Friends' Adult School, the party set off from Pleasley in a colourful procession, accompanied by the Pleasley Colliery Band. The suffragists' colours of red, white and green were very evident in sashes, banners, hat favours and their canvas bags containing literature to hand out to the hundreds of spectators and well-wishers who were generally friendly and supportive.

There were several simultaneous meetings in Mansfield – in the Market Place, which was crowded with spectators of all ages, and both inside and outside of the Town Hall. It seems the majority of the crowd was eager to hear the women's speeches although, inevitably, there was also an unruly element and an egg was thrown, but Emily Manners was able to begin her speech, declaring that the NUWSS was completely non-militant and against all violence. She said 'we desire to improve the conditions of women socially, industrially..... and we do not think this great object can be attained by smashing windows, blowing up houses, and actions of that kind'.

Millicent Fawcett spoke to the pilgrims in the East Midlands, the only area where she did so describing the Pilgrimage as 'joyful'. She spoke in Chesterfield on 7th July, in Mansfield on 8th July, where there was quite a hostile reception, and in Southwell on 9th July. There is a letter from Millicent Fawcett to Helena Brownsword Dowson thanking her for 'what you kindly said about meeting me with your motor car' and that while she 'would quite like to do some walking, at 66 one cannot do as much as at 26.'

Ida Beaver, the nationally appointed leader of this Pilgrimage route also spoke and according to several press reports along the route, she demonstrated "superb self-possession" despite the constant threat of disruption and violent disorder from the crowd. She was evidently an accomplished speaker and dealt coolly and adroitly with the heckling and rowdyism, remarking "boys will be boys, but I think it is a great pity they are not girls, for they would have more sense". However, in Mansfield market place the unruly element in the crowd caused it to surge, moving the dray and injuring a spectator. A dead rat was thrown, hitting one of the speakers, but the police were swift to intervene, and Ida Beaver was able to resume her speech berating the crowd for the disgraceful and potentially dangerous consequences of their unruly behaviour, and pointing out that they condemn similar violence perpetrated by the suffragettes. She further reminded the crowd that women want the vote to protect themselves, for the same reasons that their forefathers fought for the vote, and that it was deplorable to treat Mrs Fawcett in such a way. Ida

Beaver's eloquence and justifiable indignation won the crowd over, they cheered her pluck, and, as the women moved from the dray platform to the Town Hall for a further meeting, a way was respectfully cleared for them.

At the same time there was a meeting on a second dray near the Town Hall, presided over by Nottingham's NUWSS leader, Helena Brownsword Dowson (Nellie). The speakers here were Wilma Meikle and Nora Smith the NUWSS organiser for the North West region. Inside the Town Hall, Millicent Fawcett took to the stage, affirming that women were marching from north, south, east and west to demonstrate that they were determined to obtain the vote, and determined to do it by "orderly, lawful and law-abiding means". She said that the NUWSS deplored the use of militancy and had sought time and again to separate themselves from it. "We think (militancy) is morally wrong and politically mischievous" she said, and that violence does not advance the cause. However, she also pointed out that "riot, revolution and disorder" had accompanied men's efforts to obtain the vote. She also made the point that while she did not agree with it, the suffragettes' militancy was understandable in the face of the Government's broken promises and prevarication. Emily Manners echoed these observations and proposed a resolution demanding the 'vote for women' which, when seconded by Ida Beaver, was carried unanimously.

As expected, the newspapers reported on the rowdyism of the Mansfield meeting. Maud Dowson (sister-in-law of Helena Dowson) in her capacity as the Honorary Secretary of the East Midlands NUWSS Federation, wrote to the Nottingham Journal and her letter was published on the 10th July 1913 under the heading *Scenes at Mansfield; Suffrage Pilgrims* in which she concedes that 'attempts at horseplay did occur but this was dealt with promptly and efficiently by the police' going on to say that 'the ladies departed amid considerable cheering in a perfectly orderly way. The meeting was in no way broken up'. Norma Smith recalled that "there was a certain amount of hooliganism for about half an hour, and a rotten egg or two, and a dead rat added to the excitement for a short time". Redoubtable women indeed.

Despite the rowdyism, £22 was raised for the Pilgrimage, £20 of which was to be earmarked for the East Midlands Federation, and over 120 people signed Friends of Women's Suffrage cards. This was a new initiative of the NUWSS offering opportunities for non-paying individuals to become associates of the local society and sign up to give general support without undertaking specific responsibilities.

The local press reported the Pilgrims' departure from Mansfield for Newark the following morning when a small crowd turned out to watch them leave for Southwell at approximately 10.30 am on Wednesday 9 July. The colours of red, white and green were again much in evidence as 21 pilgrims set out on foot, including Miss Wright and Miss Barringer, with Mrs Fawcett and Mrs Manners in one of the 4 cars. This route, 15 miles in length, passed through Rainworth, Kirklington and Hockerton.

There seem to be no reports of the meeting at Southwell – perhaps it passed off without incident, and on leaving the town, the Pilgrims' 8 mile route passed through Upton, Eversham and Kelham before arriving in Newark on 10 July.

The Newark Advertiser reported that two drays were again utilised as platforms in the Market Place for the speakers: Helena Brownsword Dowson, Louisa Wright, Miss Garlick, Nora Smith, Ida Beaver, Emily Manners and Wilma Meikle. Unfortunately, a rowdy element was deaf to the speakers' declarations of non-militancy, constantly interrupting them and attempting to move one of the drays. It was suspected that the disruptive element was organised opposition as the comments came from only one section of the crowd, and the individuals were unknown to the local police. Indeed, the Advertiser reported that generally the speakers were given a fair hearing, presenting their objections rationally via questions after the speeches, but the experiences of the speakers on the two drays were very different. One group found their audience orderly and appreciative, and Nora Smith's speech was especially well received, further demonstrated by the generous contributions to the collection boxes.

The speakers on the other dray however, had far less pleasant treatment. One of the women speakers faced continual interruptions such as "When are you going to burn the old Castle down" and so on, which must have been exasperating, given the efforts all the speakers and their supporters were going to dissociate themselves from the suffragettes' methods. The Newark Advertiser reports that the speaker pressed on despite the heckling, and the meeting continued until after 9pm, although apparently all the speakers had to admit defeat on two occasions when a car with a strident horn pulled in to the nearby Clinton Arms.

Additionally, following the meetings, there were two extremely unpleasant incidents: one elderly female sympathiser was struck by a stone, and a particularly unpleasant individual spat in Ida Beaver's face, illustrating the animosity and very real risks these women were facing, simply for demanding the right to vote.

On the whole, however, the police arrangements in Nottinghamshire contrasted favourably with those on the earlier stages in Yorkshire, where the police totally underestimated the numbers that would be attending, despite warnings from the local Suffrage Societies. On 11th July 1913 the Common Cause reported audience members at Wakefield being injured and bruised, with one Pilgrim having to return home due to the severity of their injuries. The same report mentioned that anti-suffragist meetings were frequently held before the Pilgrims arrived, during which individuals and groups were actively encouraged to disrupt the Pilgrimage speakers.

We do know that correspondence had taken place with the Home Office regarding the violence that the pilgrims had faced during the Pilgrimage, especially the fracas at Newark, and a letter appeared in the Nottingham Daily Express 8th August 1913 from Catherine Marshall, the NUWSS lead on parliamentary matters.

On 27th September 1913, The Grantham Journal related the response of Newark Town Council to the letter from the Home Office regarding the NUWSS complaint that it had been impossible for the women speakers to make speeches due to the presence of drunken men and the use of bad language in the market place. The statement that the force of the police was inadequate was not upheld, the whole of the police force had been on duty and the Watch committee thought that they had behaved with tact and judgement. Interestingly, the Common Cause of 18th July

drew attention to the fact that, on each occasion when speakers' platforms had been 'rushed', the disruption seemed to be centred around just one platform, although there were always several at each event. They concluded that this perhaps indicated that there were insufficient troublemakers to launch more than one attack. From Newark the Pilgrimage wound its way through Long Bennington to Grantham and Stamford where they were met by marchers from the Eastern Counties Federation.

Nora Smith speaking at the meeting to greet the pilgrims as they arrived in Cambridge, said that the Pilgrimage had been met with enthusiasm and success at every stage, citing the crowd of 10,000-12,000 at Mansfield, and that they had been delighted to have Millicent Fawcett with them for 3 days. She maintained that one of the Pilgrimage's most important achievements was that it had brought the message to rural villages as well as towns and, despite some disruption and hooliganism, they had largely been met with friendly hospitality. Nora Smith said that the East Midland Federation Pilgrimage had never numbered fewer than 14, sometimes increasing to 50, and that the event had helped people to identify the differences between the law-abiding campaigners and the militant activists, which helped to break down prejudice. As this was an objective of the Pilgrimage, it could be deemed a success.

The Final Event – 26th July 1913 Hyde Park.

The culmination of the constitutional suffragists' Pilgrimage was an assembly in Hyde Park on Saturday 26th July where the Federations from all the regions would come together to celebrate the great undertaking. On Monday 28th July a railway carriage was provided on the 8.25 am train from Nottingham for pilgrims from Nottingham, Mansfield, Leicester, Grantham, Ilkeston, Derby and other neighbouring towns. On arrival in London, the Great North Road contingent assembled at Montagu Place and, at 3 pm, the bands struck up a march and the pilgrims duly set off to complete their monumental journey. Banners and pennants streamed in the sunshine and the East Midland Federation banner attracted admiration for its message of enduring hope; while Nottingham's banner, depicting the Castle, elicited comments such as "Good old lace curtains".

Twenty platforms had been set up in Hyde Park to cater for the audience of 30,000-40,000 people, and on the East Midlands Federation platform Miss Nora Smith chaired while Mrs Stanbury and Helena Brownsword Dowson spoke. Also present were Lady Yoxall the wife of one of the local Nottingham MP's with her daughter and Emily Manners.

The meetings at all the platforms were orderly and the audiences attentive and, at 6 pm, all the platforms simultaneously put the resolution "that this meeting demands a government measure for the enfranchisement of women". This was almost unanimously carried at the East Midland Platform, only 15 dissenters being counted.

The Hyde Park gathering marked the end of weeks of organisation, dedication and self-sacrifice. It had raised not only nearly £8,000 for campaign funds but had also

raised support for the women's suffrage cause in cities, towns and villages throughout England and Wales.

The suffragists are often overshadowed by the more dramatic actions of the suffragettes, but although they didn't resort to violence, they were still 100% committed to securing suffrage. They put themselves through much discomfort and danger on the Pilgrimage facing real risks from the violence and animosity they encountered. The Great Suffrage Pilgrimage should never be forgotten and should be celebrated.

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Summer 2018

NWHG organised a re-enactment walking part of the route taken by the Great North Road Pilgrims skirting the edge of the County of Nottinghamshire and organised two public events – one at Pleasley, just outside Mansfield, and one at Southwell

Clearly the passage of time has wrought many changes to the landscape and the route. A dual carriageway now dominates the route from Chesterfield to Mansfield crossing the busy M1 and the Great North road which winds its way through the Nottinghamshire countryside and the small towns and villages where the pilgrims were met and provided with hospitality. The main roads are now busy with local traffic providing access to a network of motorways via the A1 on the east of the county and the M1 to the west. The demise of the coal industry in the UK is much marked in Nottinghamshire and the sites of some of the former pits are now heritage sites.

The village of Pleasley is one of these, chopped in half by a major road. NWHG made contact with Rev. Caroline Phillips, the current vicar of St Barnabas Church, Pleasley Hill, and told her of the pilgrims' visit there in the summer of 1913. She was very enthusiastic and keen that the church and the local community should reclaim this small piece of history for themselves. The teachers at the local primary school also seized the opportunity to get involved and engage the children in an event at the end of term; they were already aware of the significance of Vote 100 and were soon busy making regalia and posters for the march.

On 17th July the Church railings were festooned with bunting and parents and local residents pitching in preparing refreshments. Members of the Women's History Group, in costume, and two local women councillors, met the children as they marched the half mile down Chesterfield Road, and led them to the church. Sadly, no members of the Pleasley Colliery Band were available on the day but we marched in to one of their recordings. Speeches and specially prepared poems and songs by the children followed, then a picnic on the grass. Cllr Sonya Ward reminded the children that the ultimate success of the suffrage campaign enabled women like her to stand as parliamentary candidates and that they must all make sure to vote when they were old enough.

All told there were about 200 people present, 150 being children. Enormous interest and enthusiasm was displayed and the event is likely to remain a source of pride in the village, the church and the school.

Our other re-enactment event, at Southwell on 9th August, was very different. It was organised in partnership with the National Trust at Southwell Workhouse who had been doing research work on the suffrage locally, with creative art and textile groups and an exhibition. NWHG decided to walk from Kirklington to Southwell – about three and a half miles. The road used by the women in 1913 is now far too dangerous, so we opted for the Southwell Trail, the old railway line, which runs roughly parallel with it. About 30 people turned up, many wearing sashes in the colours and some of us in full costume. At the last minute we came up on the radar of the BBC and East Midlands Today interviewed us *in situ* before we set off and filmed us at various stages along the route, assembling a really good item for the local news programme later that day. At Southwell we met our hosts from the Workhouse and marched through the town to the surprise and interest of shoppers and tourists before returning to the Workhouse for speeches and refreshments.