

Nottingham Women's History Group Newsletter

Issue 6 Spring/Summer 2019



A Plaque for Helen Kirkpatrick Watts



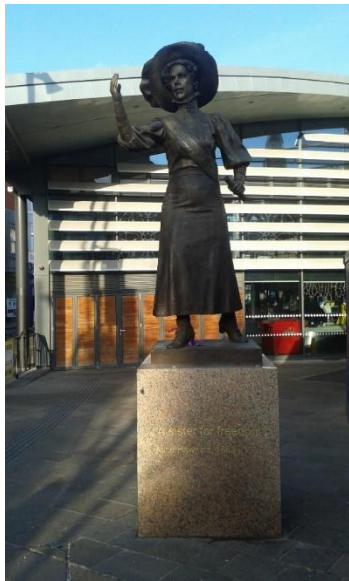
Welcome to the Spring 2019 edition of our newsletter. We were delighted to see this springtime display of suffragette colours in February! However, this year we will be looking at the impact the Representation of the People Act 1918 and ensuing legislation, such as The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, had on women, opening up unprecedented opportunities for employment and civil engagement. We have already had a talk about Minnie Lansbury, the Poplar rebel councillor, by Janine Booth, writer, socialist and trade unionist, and a book group which met in Bromley House Library to discuss Dorothy Whipple's novel '*They Were Sisters*', and there's lots more to come before our AGM in October: check out the Diary Dates at the end of the newsletter, but read on first to find out what we've been up to over the winter.

On 14 December 2018 – exactly 100 years since (some) women cast their first vote in a general election – a handsome plaque celebrating suffragette Helen Watts was unveiled in the Arboretum, to accompany the juniper tree we planted for her in March 2016.

Helen's great-nephew Richard Watts and his daughter Judith kindly did the honours. Cat Arnold the Sheriff of Nottingham, Lilian Greenwood MP and Councillor Linda Woodings were present, as well as other members of the Watts family, members of Nottingham Women's History Group (in costume, of course!) and other supporters. Hot drinks and cake were served in the bandstand afterwards and East Midlands Today and ITV covered the event. All in all, this achievement made for a very satisfying end to Vote 100 for the group.

The plaque, which is grey marble set in a stone base, was funded by Nottingham Women's History Group in partnership with the Centenary Fund from the Government Office for Equalities, Castle Rock Brewery and the Goose Fair Dinner Nottingham Awards for which we are most grateful. Rowena Edlin-White

**Alice Hawkins:
Leicester Suffragette**



To mark the 100th anniversary of The Representation of the People Act 1918, Leicester celebrated their suffragette Alice Hawkins with a range of events. As well as the installation of a statue of Alice in the Market Square (pictured), the celebrations included an exhibition entitled *Alice Hawkins and Votes For Women* in the New Walk Museum, two different theatrical performances and a talk by Alice's great grandson, Peter Barratt in the (rather confusingly named) Newarke Houses Museum in Leicester, so on Friday 1 February three members of NWHG set off by train to take a look.

The exhibition at New Walk museum was very enjoyable, with photographs, contemporary materials and even Alice's Hunger Strike Medal. The exhibition also included a touch screen

display about the suffragette Sophia Duleep Singh, god daughter to Queen Victoria (Sophia was a princess in her own right).

Peter's talk was informative as well as entertaining, and brought Alice to life as a determined but much-loved and respected family member. She was born in 1863 and worked in Leicester's Equity Boot and Shoe Factory, which granted her time to carry out her suffragette and, later, her trade union activities. In this she was tireless, founding the Leicester branch of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1907 and co-founding the Women's Independent Boot and Shoe Trade Union in 1911, all while raising a family of 6. She met with Annie Kenney and Emmeline Pankhurst and was imprisoned for her suffrage activism five times but survived to see all women gain the vote. She died in 1946 aged 83, and there is a blue plaque to her on the former boot and shoe factory in Western Road. It's good to know that her significant contribution to the struggle for women's suffrage has been recognised and acknowledged.

**Dorothy Whipple at
Bromley House Library**



On 22nd March 12 of our members met at Bromley House Library for our book group on Dorothy Whipple's 'They Were Sisters'. It was a real pleasure to

be welcomed into the Neville Hoskins room by Mel Duffill-Jeffs, the Library Director, and what better setting than this floor to ceiling book-lined elegant Georgian room to discuss one of Nottingham's most prolific authors of the 30's and 40's.

Dorothy Whipple was born in Blackburn in 1893 but lived in Nottingham from 1925-1958 at 35 Ebers Road in Carrington. She didn't go to university, but she became a successful writer, publishing her first novel 'Young Anne' in 1927 and her last 'Someone at a Distance' in 1953. Indeed, she was a very popular and prolific writer whose novels have ordinary people dealing with changing social times, and two (*They Knew Mr Knight* and *They Were Sisters*) were made into films. NWHG members were delighted to catch *They Were Sisters* on a far-flung Freeview channel a few months ago. We are currently scanning the airwaves for *They Knew Mr Knight*!

Our chosen book was '*They Were Sisters*', a page-turner recording the lives, relationships, marriages and family life of the eponymous three sisters. We felt she excelled in recording women's experiences with subtle and accurate observation and psychological understanding as seen in her devastating account of coercive and controlling domestic abuse – surely one of the first in literature and very current. We had all thoroughly enjoyed our read and could well understand why she is enjoying a revival since Persephone began to re-publish her books.

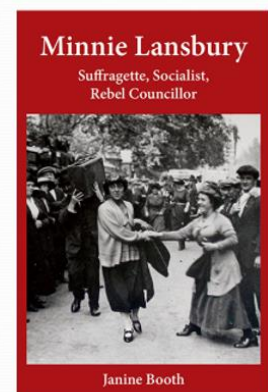
However, we also learned about 'the Whipple line' ... an expression used by Virago Press - who back in the 1970's when discussing and deciding what books they should publish felt the cut-off was with Dorothy Whipple. Clearly for them she was neither sufficiently feminist nor intellectual enough, writing

about what she knew: middle-class midlands women in the mid twentieth century. There may not be the extremes of wealth and poverty seen in some literature, but we do see hope, duty, suffering, and courage as experienced by the sisters.

That she has 10 titles in the Persephone 128 in 2018 – more than any other author- is proof that Virago were wrong and that her closely observed nuanced stories focusing on women's lives remain compelling to a growing and appreciative modern audience including NWHG members.

Minnie Lansbury – rebel and humanitarian

To return to the theme of committed and indefatigable women activists, Janine Booth, herself a dedicated socialist and trade-unionist, gave a spirited talk about her heroine, Minnie Lansbury on Saturday 6th April at the International Community Centre.



Born in London's East End in 1889, the first of seven children to Isaac and Annie Glassman, Russian Jews who fled antisemitic agitation and violence under Tsar Alexander II in the 1880s, Minnie was well educated, made possible by winning several scholarships as the family was far from well off. Thanks to her ability and determination, Minnie went on to train as a school teacher, developing a

growing awareness of the inequality faced by women along the way and becoming an active and astute member of the local branch of the NUT, the East London Teachers' Association.

In 1914 Minnie married Edgar Lansbury, the son of George Lansbury, socialist, poor-law reformer and leader of the British Labour Party from 1931 to 1935, so as well as experiencing poverty and social disadvantage in her childhood, Minnie was well aware of the inequality and lack of opportunities experienced by those in the community around her. She would also have been aware of the suffragettes and their tactics and George Lansbury's support for them. However, suffrage activity in the East End aimed to avoid militancy, adopting instead law-abiding tactics such as door to door canvassing and marches. This allowed working women like Minnie to participate without the risk of losing their jobs (unusually, Minnie had continued working after her marriage). Calling themselves the East London Federation of the Suffragettes (ELFS), they published their own newspaper *The Woman's Dreadnought*. Minnie was very active in ELFS and the Workers' Suffrage Federation (WSF) during the war, working to tackle want and deprivation, but it is for her defiance, along with 29 other Poplar councillors, of the unfair rating system that she is commemorated.

In 1919, Minnie was appointed one of four aldermen by Poplar's newly elected, and mostly working-class, Labour-led Borough Council. She and her fellow councillors dramatically improved services in the area, improving housing and health services, and enforcing the implementation of a minimum wage, but when the economy crashed in 1921, they were faced with a crisis. A large proportion of the rates was

usually handed over to cross-London bodies, such as The London County Council, the Metropolitan Police and the Metropolitan Asylums Board. These charges were continually increasing and so, in order to reduce the crippling financial burden on their constituents, Poplar councillors decided against collecting and handing over the payments. As a result, 30 councillors, including Minnie, were arrested in early September 1921. As true socialists, on arrival at Holloway they asked the prison warden 'Where's your union card!' They remained incarcerated until 12th October when all 30 were released from their various prisons to much cheering, a procession which numbered thousands and, of course, a brass band.

Minnie and Edgar went on holiday to recuperate, but her health had been affected by the poor conditions in prison. Indeed, Minnie had been transferred to the hospital wing within a day of her arrival. The winter had a further debilitating effect on her and, when Spanish Flu returned, albeit a much weaker strain than the 1918 version, Minnie died, aged only 32 on 1st January 1922. To quote Janine Booth, who has written *Minnie Lansbury: suffragette, socialist, rebel councillor*, 'Minnie Lansbury was a determined, angry, direct and articulate political campaigner'. What more might this selfless, altruistic woman have accomplished had she lived longer – but her achievements in her short life exceed the achievements of many individuals twice her age.

1866 Suffrage Petition

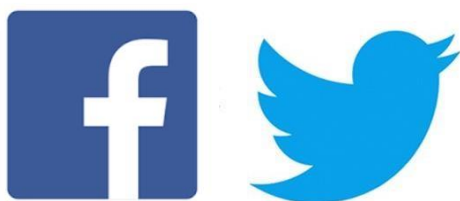
Work on identifying and providing biographical details for the 53 Nottingham women who signed the original suffrage petition in 1866 is almost finished. We're now readying the text for publication; both as a

booklet and later as a PDF on our website... Watch this space!

New NWHG Website

Our new website is now live – www.nottinghamwomenshistory.org.uk
We are pleased to announce that we have a new website and extend our thanks to the team at Nottingham Print and Web for designing this and providing us with support to ensure we keep this up to date. You can check out our events and read about our research on the new website. You will also be able to download several interesting documents including *Shoulder to Shoulder: Nottinghamshire Women make their mark*, written to commemorate Vote 100 and much more. We also have a new blog site and you can follow us on Twitter and Facebook.

Digital and Social Media



Thank you to everyone who continues to follow us on social media. You may have noticed that we have now moved from the Vote 100 twitter to a Nottingham Women's History Group account to reflect the move on to our new projects this coming year.

As always if you have any ideas for posts, events to share then please get in contact.

We have also recently launched our new website where we will collate all our information, events notices, as well as regular blog posts. The link is the same as our old site so please check it out!

Dates for your diary:

- **4th May to 18th May 2019:** Feminist Book Fortnight at Five Leaves Bookshop www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk which includes a talk by Nan Sloan about her recent book *The Women in the Room: Labours Forgotten History* on Thursday the 15th of May at 7 pm.
- **Sunday 12 May:** NWHG stall at Mansfield History Fair, Mansfield Library, 10 am – 4 pm
- **Monday the 13th of May:** 2019 Annual Arboretum Talk in the Bandstand 6.30 to 8 pm. This year's talk is entitled *Gardens for the Living and Dead: Nottingham's Victorian Cemeteries and Public Parks*.
- **Monday 13-Saturday 18 May:** The Party Somewhere Else, Nottingham's feminist theatre group, take over Nottingham Playhouse with great events from the 14th of May 2019 through to the 19th – check out the Playhouse website for details www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk 01159419419.
- **Tuesday 21 May:** NWHG Members' event at Nottingham University's Manuscripts and Special Collections, Kingsmeadow Campus, 2 pm – 5 pm
- **Thursday 13 June:** NWHG Women authors walk, 7 pm
- **Thursday 11 July:** NWHG Blue Plaque walk, 7 pm
- **3rd August to 15th September 2019 at Lakeside:** An exhibition of new work by Rosemary Wels. Rosemary, who is based in Nottingham designed artwork for Nottingham Women's

Liberation Group in the 1970s and was a founder and active member.

www.lakesidearts.org.uk

- **Sunday 15 September:** NWHG Blue Plaque walk, 2 pm
- **Sunday 6 October:** Women authors walk, 2 pm
- **Saturday 12 October:** NWHG AGM and talk at ICC, Mansfield Road
- **November, date tbc:** NWHG Members' visit to Nottinghamshire Archives
- **Further afield:** An excellent exhibition at The Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds - *Fifty Works by Fifty British Women Artists* from the 9th April to 27th July. Two local women artists, Evelyn Gibbs and Marion Adnams, are included in this exhibition.

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