

Suffrage in Nottingham

February 6th 2018 marked 100 years since the first women got the vote in parliamentary elections and while this was not all women, it was a significant staging post to the full franchise gained in 1928. Women over 30 meeting the property requirement, some 8 million, were able to vote for the first time in the election in December 1918 and women were also able to stand for election to parliament.

Nottingham was recognised as one of only seven suffrage cities and was given some financial support from the government to celebrate this. This article explores the high level of activity and the contribution made by women in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. It provides an overview of this campaign and some of the key aspects and individuals who contributed to the attainment of the vote for women starting with the very first petition presented to parliament by John Stuart Mill in 1866, which was signed by 50 women from Nottingham. This was followed by Nottingham petitions in 1869 and 1870 and certainly from that time there were meetings, and both men and women were actively campaigning. In 1871 a Nottingham committee of the London based Society for Women's Suffrage was founded and served as an umbrella organisation bringing together various temperance, religious and other groups across the city.

When the National Society for Women's Suffrage was established in 1872 as the first national group in Britain to campaign for women's right to vote, Nottingham was quick to associate with that group. About this time a wealthy woman Liliash Ashworth Hallett was funding suffrage meetings in Nottingham and Grantham and we have evidence in Alice Dowson's diaries of her attending suffrage events and meetings in the 1870's.

By 1880's there were meetings held on consecutive days in Morley's Club in Shakespeare Street and then in the Co-operative Hall in Sandford Street; and in March a well-attended meeting in the Baptist Chapel on Woodborough Road heard an address "Women's Suffrage, What will it do for Us?" Later on 30th November a Grand Demonstration with several women speakers both national and local, showed their support for the inclusion of women's enfranchisement in the 1884 Reform Bill. By 1881 another petition signed by 885 women householders was presented by Nottingham's MP Arnold Morley.

On 15 December 1881 the first annual meeting of the Nottingham branch of the national Society was held at the Exchange Rooms, as reported in the Evening Post of 16th December which gives an account of activities supporting women's suffrage over the past year, as well as electing a new committee of both men and women. Successive annual reports provide a record of events, at homes, meetings and other constitutional activity to support women being given the vote. Women engaged local MPs and particularly Liberal councillors in supporting and promoting the suffrage campaign but the 1884 Act still failed to introduce votes for women. In 1893 a Mansfield Women's Suffrage Society was founded with Emily Manners as secretary and in 1898 they also affiliated to the National Society for Women's Suffrage.

In 1897 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was established under the leadership of Millicent Garrett Fawcett and the Nottingham suffrage group affiliated in 1898 and held its first meeting under this new name chaired by Helena Dowson or Nellie as she was affectionately known. Nellie also represented Nottingham on the national executive committee. The NUWSS was not party political and supported a Private Member's Bill promoting equal voting rights for men and women albeit with a property qualification, and women worked with a variety of candidates to support this.

By 1903 there was much frustration and disappointment at the lack of progress and this led directly to the setting up in Manchester of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) by Emmeline Pankhurst. Their motto was 'Deeds not Words' and initially they were active in the north west but by 1906 they established the WSPU headquarters in London and began a campaign to gain support throughout the provinces by placing local organisers in key cities. Nottingham quickly set up a branch of the WSPU in 1906 with May Burgis, a teacher, as secretary and by 1908 Rachel Barrett a paid WSPU organiser had been appointed.

Following Liberal success at 1906 General Election the NUWSS under Millicent Fawcett was propelled into greater activity but 1907 and 1908 saw the failure of two further Private Members Bills. This led to the United Procession of Women in London in 1907 with 3000 women from 40 groups from around the country; sadly because of the wet weather this became known as the Mud March.

In Nottingham the WSPU and NUWSS were both active establishing shops, distributing leaflets and campaigning locally. A WSPU meeting was organised at University College on 28 November 1907 but was blocked by the University and was relocated to the Baptist church on Woodborough Road. The next meeting was at the Mechanics on December 2nd with both Christabel Pankhurst and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence speaking as part of the WSPU campaign to involve provincial women in the WSPU. However, the meeting was hijacked by an unruly group of men who sang bawdy songs, blew trumpets and released mice. An account in the following day's Evening Post gives details of the "scenes of indescribable" disorder. This meeting was followed by a women-only meeting on 9 December. Helen Kirkpatrick Watts, perhaps Nottingham's best-known suffragette was present and was galvanised into action.

Prime Minister Asquith came to Nottingham on 11 December 1907 and women wishing to attend had to provide their name and address to allow enquiries to be made about their suffragette sympathies. This led instead to WSPU members attempting to disrupt the meeting. The Nottingham WSPU continued to grow with several meetings taking place in 1908 and 1909, members also attended large national demonstrations. In February 1909 Helen Kirkpatrick Watts was arrested outside the House of Commons for 'wilful obstructing Police', messages of support from Nottingham poured in and an enthusiastic reception was held for her at Morley's Café on her release. Later in June 1909, Nellie Crocker the WSPU organiser at that point in Nottingham, and another Nottingham woman Mary Rawson were arrested.

The NUWSS was also active with meetings, 'at homes,' garden parties, stalls etc and on June 11 and 18 July 1908 they organised a large demonstration with other Midlands groups on the Forest. The increasing militancy of the WSPU created much more media attention raising the profile of the Votes for Women cause and at a mass NUWSS meeting on July 5 1909 in Nottingham Market Place there were large crowds present. However, the police were not present and many of the women were being badly hustled, leading to Nellie Dowson writing to the local paper to complain about the police.

There were arrests in Nottingham in July 1909 when the WSPU attempted to disrupt a meeting of Sir James Yoxall but Charlotte Marsh, Helen Watts and Laura Ainsworth were released without charge. Helen was again arrested in September in Leicester at a meeting addressed by Winston Churchill and served one month in Leicester gaol where she went on hunger strike. And on September 6th 1909 there was a protest against these arrests and force-feeding in the Market Place.

In Nottingham the two suffrage groups had often worked closely together but these WSPU arrests were starting to put a strain on this. In 1909 Mary MacArthur of the National Federation of Women's Workers also came to Nottingham directing a recruitment drive for female lace and hosiery workers. Their focus was on wages and protection for women workers rather than the vote but there does seem to have been some contact with suffrage supporters as seen in a photograph from the visit.

As the 1910 election approached, followed by a second election in December that year, the suffrage campaigners increased their activities collecting signatures for petitions from the WSPU shop at 36 Bridlesmith Gate. A first reading of a bill to include women's franchise was passed in June 1910 but progress faltered because of the second election. Both WSPU and NUWSS came together and a deputation attended parliament on 18 November – a day which became known as Black Friday, due to the heavy police presence and rough-handling of women as well as some arrests including of Nottingham women. On 22 November a 400-strong group of suffragettes again went to parliament but this simply resulted in further arrests again including some women from Nottingham.

In April 1911 there was a national census and this provided another form of non-militant protest and both suffragettes and suffragists nationally and here in Nottingham protested in this way. Some women arranged to be away from home and 'evade' the census, while others 'resisted' it, refusing to give the information requested. "If women don't count, don't count women" and "No vote, no census" were written on census forms. In Nottingham we know of 6 evaders and 3 resisters but there may have been many more.

By mid-June 1911 hopes were raised again of a new bill to include women's franchise and a 40,000 procession – the Coronation Procession was held on 17 June 1911 to support this. Alice Dowson in her diary refers to this as a 'splendid occasion' with over 100 women from Nottingham attending. By November however campaigners felt betrayed and infuriated by the Government's inactivity and this led to more militant activities and a campaign of window smashing, post box tampering and even arson. Nottingham based suffragettes were again involved and some arrested; Nellie Crocker the WSPU local organiser and Gladys

Roberts living in Nottingham were both arrested for window smashing in London and spent March – June in Holloway, and naturally Nellie's absence affected WSPU activity in Nottingham.

Charlotte Marsh replaced Nellie Crocker as local WSPU organiser in 1912, she had a long history of militancy and had been in prison many times and in February 1913 we begin to see direct action in Nottingham - post boxes were attacked with black liquid, police foiled an attack on Bulwell golf club, post boxes in Mansfield and Beeston were attacked and in April more post boxes in the city. There were also attempts to disrupt meetings with Sir James Yoxall and key government figures and on May 12 Nottingham Boat House was burned down causing £2000 damage.

These militant tactics were followed inside gaol by the women going on hunger strike and then often being forcibly fed, something they regarded as torture and won them much public sympathy. This in turn led to the Government introducing in March 1913 the 'Cat and Mouse Act' – whereby they released women on license to get well before re-arresting them to serve the rest of their sentence. This act led to many protests including here in Nottingham on 12 March.

In the summer of 1913 NUWSS organised another non-militant mass movement event, the Women's Suffrage Pilgrimage which over a 6-week period saw suffragists from all over the country making their way to London with many meetings and events on route. A photograph shows the pilgrimage passing through Mansfield and there is an account in a Dowson family member's diary lodged at Nottingham Archives. At Pleasley Hill in north Nottinghamshire the pilgrims and activists from Mansfield and around, were met and addressed by their leader Millicent Fawcett in the vicarage grounds. From there the pilgrimage went to Southwell and Newark and was met with crowds of 3-4000 before continuing to Hyde Park where it ended on 26 July with over 30,000 people and 20 speaker's platforms and having raised £8000. A reserved carriage took women down that day from Nottingham and the banner was recorded as attracting much attention and Nellie Dowson was one of the speakers at the East Midlands platform. In Nottingham the WSPU also held a demonstration against the Cat and Mouse act on the same weekend and continued with more direct action with women chanting 'Votes for Women' in churches and later in December there were more post box attacks at the general post office and several other sites.

In 1914 there were 2 further arson attacks at Babbington colliery and at a barn at Bulcote, then the biggest barn in the country, and on 24 June when preparations were being made for a visit by the King and Queen an independent suffragette from outside Nottingham, Eileen Casey, was arrested with bomb making equipment and charged with attempting to blow up the king. It isn't known exactly what her intentions were but certainly she aimed to highlight the cause in her appearances at the Guildhall and was imprisoned.

Both locally and nationally suffragette and suffragist activity was high in public and Government consciousness but when on 28th June Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Serbia, all this was to change and by August 4 Britain was at war with Germany and this

overtook everything else. Most of the various women's suffrage organisations suspended their protests and threw themselves behind war efforts. Nationally the WSPU supported the war effort and encouraged their followers to do so changing the name of their magazine from 'Votes for Women' to 'Britannia' and in July 1915 they worked with the Government on a demonstration in Hyde Park focused on women's right to serve. The NUWSS also suspended campaigning activity and diverted their energies into organising various relief programmes and 1914-18 saw women employed and volunteering in many roles such as nursing, munitions work and agriculture.

After the war the 1918 Representation of the People Act became law on February 6 and it is that that we are celebrating in 2018 as that facilitated women over 30 albeit with a property requirement nonetheless able to vote for the first time and by December 1918 women were also able to stand for election to parliament.

The comment in Alice Dowson's diary say it all "The Woman's Suffrage has become an accomplished fact! The result of so many years labour."

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