

Dame Ethel Smyth, ‘Duchess of Woking’

As the Borough commemorates the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, 1918, The Woking Magazine looks back at former Woking resident, author, sportswoman and suffragette, Dame Ethel Smyth.

Ethel Mary Smyth was born in Marylebone (then Middlesex) on 22 April 1858. She became one of the greatest British composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries although sadly severe deafness set in during her later life and she composed very little after 1930. Ethel moved to Hook Heath, Woking in 1910 to a newly-built house she named ‘Coign’, where her works from 1910 to 1930 were composed and where she remained until her death in 1944.

A rarity of the era, Dame Ethel was a keen sportswoman and a member of the Woking Golf Club and the White Heather ladies’ cricket team.

A well-regarded author on musical matters and women’s rights, Ethel had ten books published in her lifetime, all of them written after she had settled in Woking.

Dame Ethel devoted two years to the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) as a suffragette, suffering a brief period of imprisonment in Holloway jail. Following Emmeline Pankhurst’s release from hunger strike in prison in April 1913, she was sheltered by Ethel at her Hook Heath home.

Ethel never married, having rejected an offer from her longstanding friend Henry Brewster. She was a proud citizen of Woking and is reported to have stated that “if ever I were to be ennobled, the title I would choose would be Ethel, Duchess of Woking”.



Ethel Smyth in 1908 (Lewis Orchard Collection, Surrey History Centre)

The women’s suffrage movement in Surrey

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst, along with her daughter Christabel, formed the WSPU. From 1903 to 1917, the WSPU was the leading militant organisation campaigning for women’s suffrage in Great Britain.

The Woking branch of the National Union of Women’s Franchise Societies (NUWSS) formed in 1910. Woking also had a branch of the militant WSPU, which was established by 1911 partly due to Ethel Smyth’s active campaign.

When an estimated 50,000 women marched through Hyde Park for the Woman’s Suffrage Pilgrimage on 26 July 1911, Ethel’s suffragette battle song The March of the Women was sung by the crowds in solidarity.

During 1914 to 1918, two million women worked in roles traditionally fulfilled by men, an achievement which helped to silence many arguments against women’s suffrage. On 14 December 1918, 8.5 million women were eligible to vote in the general election for the first time.

The information in this article is contributed by Lewis Orchard and Barrie Higham, image courtesy of Surrey History Centre. Dame Ethel’s part in the campaign for Votes for Women is commemorated through the Surrey History Centre’s Heritage Lottery Fund project ‘The March of the Women: Surrey’s Road to the Vote’. Visit www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk for more information.