

The Women's Suffrage Movement in Surrey

The roots of the women's suffrage movement in England lie in the aftermath of the Reform Act of 1832, which extended voting rights among men but not women. However, campaigns for equal voting rights did not become effective until the end of the century, with the formation of the Women's Franchise League and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Members of these societies were both male and female and were known as suffragists, from which the later, more radical suffragette movement developed.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst left the NUWSS and, along with her daughter Christabel, formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), arguing that a more drastic means of action was required for women to achieve the vote. From 1903 to 1917, the WSPU was the leading militant organisation campaigning for women's suffrage in Great Britain. Tactics used included illegal actions such as smashing windows, obstruction, violence, arson, and hunger strike following imprisonment; members became known as suffragettes.

The growth of Suffrage societies across Surrey

In Surrey, the movement appears to have been active from the 1870s, with the first suffrage meeting allegedly being held in Guildford in January 1871. A branch of the Central Society for Women's Suffrage had been formed in Reigate by 1906, with Ruth Pym as secretary, and by 1909 had affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies to become the Reigate, Redhill and District Society for Women's Suffrage.

South east Surrey had traditionally been an area of non-conformism and reform and by the late nineteenth century was home to radical but wealthy residents, particularly in the villages around Dorking.

By 1909, the Godalming branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) had been established, with Mrs Mary Watts (the widow of artist G F Watts), the president. Gertrude Jekyll, Surrey's famous garden designer, was also a supporter of the NUWSS, designing and working on banners for both the Guildford and Godalming branches.

The Guildford branch had a shop in the High Street from 1913-1919 at which the Guildford Trades and Labour Council held their meetings. By far the largest meeting in Guildford was in July 1913, when, in preparation for the Suffrage Pilgrimage to London, meetings were held both afternoon and evening in North Street. The evening meeting on 27 July was deemed to have been the largest public meeting held in the town with 8,000 attendees.

Further branches of the NUWSS were established in Farnham and at Royal Holloway College, Englefield Green (1908), Oxted and Weybridge (1909), Cranleigh (1910) and by 1913 there were further branches in Egham, Epsom and Limpsfield.

The Woking branch of the NUWSS formed in 1910. Woking also had a branch of the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which was established by 1911 partly due to the most prominent local campaigner Ethel Smyth, composer and author. As a result of her friendship with the Pankhursts, Ethel decided to suspend most of her musical activities to devote her energies to assisting and promoting the movement. Mrs Horace Barrett was the Woking WSPU secretary; in June 1912, member Mrs Skepwith, also a member of the Tax Resistance League, had her goods sold at auction to pay for her overdue tax.

Other suffrage campaigners who resided in and around Woking included Mrs Laird-Cox, Miss Davies-Colley and Mrs Edith Hoskyns-Abrahall (West Byfleet).

By 1913, the NUWSS had nearly 100,000 members and launched the Woman's Suffrage Pilgrimage to demonstrate to Parliament how many women wanted the vote. The march planned to converge on Hyde Park on 26 July 1913, with local groups passing through their own regions. An estimated 50,000 women reached Hyde Park in London on 26th July.

Activism and Militant Suffragettes in Surrey

Surrey also saw its fair share of activism. In February 1913, the house of Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, which was under construction on edge of Walton Heath golf course, was damaged by an explosion, for which Emmeline Pankhurst was sentenced to three years in prison. There was also an explosion of a bomb in the gentlemen's toilet at Oxted railway station, two months later. The ultimate activism came in June that year when Emily Wilding Davidson gave her life for the Women's Suffrage Movement, dying as a result of injuries she received from throwing herself under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby.

There is much controversy as to what she intended that day but it is generally accepted that she was attempting to pin suffragette colours onto the horse's reins. Whatever her intentions, there is some evidence to suggest that she was involved in the planning of the fire at the Members' Stand at Hurst Park Racecourse, near Molesey, five days later (Davison actually died on 8 June). On 9 June 1913, militant suffragettes Kitty Marion and Betty (Clara) Giveen were arrested for the deed. Their trial was held at Guildford on 3 July and they were sentenced to three years' penal servitude and immediately went on a hunger-and-thirst strike. Later that month, a bomb was left at Haslemere station but failed to ignite.

In 1911, in line with a national WSPU coordinated protest, Woking suffragettes Mary Elizabeth Stables and **Ethel Smyth** defaced their census forms (Smyth wrote "No Vote, No Census" across the sheet). Ethel's suffragette battle song **The March of the Women**, written the same year, was sung by suffrage supporters throughout London and elsewhere. Her uncompromising and energetic spirit led her to become a driving force in the women's movement and on 9 March 1912 she was arrested and taken to Bow Street Police Station for smashing the window of an anti-suffrage politician's office; she was sentenced to two months in Holloway prison.

Following Emmeline Pankhurst's release from hunger strike in prison in April 1913, she was sheltered by Ethel at her home in Hook Heath, Woking. However, the cottage was under constant surveillance by the Surrey Constabulary who, on 26 May re-arrested Emmeline under the Cat and Mouse Act (1913), as she attempted to leave; this notorious Act allowed for the temporary release of hunger striking suffragettes ('mice') who had become ill but also allowed their re-arrest once recovered.

Causing damage to golf courses, as an attack on male dominated organizations in the county, was a popular act of militancy. Interestingly, Woking Golf Club, of which Ethel Smyth was a member of the Ladies section, received no damage.

Suffrage and the First World War

At the outbreak of the First World War some but not all of the suffrage societies suspended militant tactics to focus on the war effort. The government in response granted an amnesty to all suffrage prisoners. Ironically, Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was one of the major societies to support the government, despite her having fire bombed the Chancellor's house only months before. Public support and sympathy with the movement had greatly increased following the rough and unjust treatment of protesting women. Suspending their protests in the face of a greater threat to the nation showed that they were rational and reasonable.

During 1914-1918, two million women worked in roles traditionally fulfilled by men, an achievement which helped to silence one of the arguments against women's suffrage. The contribution of women to the war effort became a key factor in obtaining the vote. In 1917, a report on electoral reform (resulting from a conference the previous year) universally recommended women's suffrage, albeit limited.

Securing the Vote – the Final Hurdle

The electoral reform report of 1917 led directly to The Representation of the People Act being passed on 6 February, 1918. However, the Act only awarded the vote to women who were householders or the wives of householders, aged 30 and over.

The sentiment of a bitter sweet victory must have been felt by many women. The leaders of the women's suffrage groups were exclusively middle class, many of whom received the vote in 1918 but the movement was nothing without the support of working class women who remained excluded by the Act. In November that year The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act was

passed allowing women to stand for Parliament. As a result, Constance Markievicz was the first elected female MP (Sinn Fein) although she did not take her seat; Christabel Pankhurst stood at Smethwick as the Women's Party candidate but was narrowly defeated, meaning that it was not until 1919 when the first female MP, Lady Nancy Astor, sat in the House of Commons.

On 14 December 1918, 8.5 million women were eligible to vote in the general election for the first time. However, it was a further ten year wait for the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act of 1928 until women were given equal voting rights to men, and the voting age was lowered to 21. Fifteen million women became eligible to vote in the general election of May 1929.

For more information on Women's Suffrage in Surrey visit

<http://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/themes/people/activists/suffragettes/suffrage-surrey/>