

Our tribute to Suffrage and the Suffragette Movement

Typical members' comments "What an interesting afternoon, I learnt a lot"

Firstly, we heard about the Suffrage Movement in and around Kidderminster just before the starting of WW1 and how it continued after the war ended in 1918.

Many ladies from all backgrounds were involved in the Suffrage organisations, holding meetings in the Town Hall and having articles produced in the local Shuttle newspaper.

There was a sense of pride at the way the women of the area had immersed themselves in war work and this would go some way to improving their cause to be given the right to vote.

The First World War was in many ways the catalyst that sparked a change in opinions and attitude across many sectors of British life, including the way women were perceived in the workforce, the home and was responsible for many social changes. The women's contribution to the war effort had challenged the notion of women's physical and mental inferiority and made it more difficult to maintain that women were, both by constitution and temperament, unfit to vote. The vote was much more than simply a reward for war work; the point was that women's participation in the war helped to dispel the fears that surrounded women's entry into the public arena.

From Jo, we heard about the involvement of Emily Wilding Davison, who was born in 1872. Davison joined the Women's Social & Political Union - WSPU in 1906. This union brought together those who thought that militant, confrontational tactics were needed to achieve their ultimate goal of women's suffrage. After leaving teaching she devoted herself full-time to the union. She was arrested for the first time in March 1909, many more arrests followed with the last being in Nov 1912.

The treatment of the suffrage prisoners was seen as barbaric torture. Writing in the Pall Mall Gazette, Emily explained: "I have committed many unlawful actions which I did deliberately and with all my power, because I felt that by nothing but the sacrifice of human life would the nation be brought to realise the horrible torture our women face". On attempting to take her own life she said, "If I had succeeded I am sure that forcible feeding could not in all conscience have been resorted to again"

On the occasion of her last arrest for assaulting the police in the execution of their duty, Emily Davison was sentenced to 10 days imprisonment and released following a four day hunger strike. It was the seventh time she had been on hunger strike and the forty-ninth time she had been force fed.

4th June 1913 Derby Day at Epsom Racecourse a fatal incident occurred.

The verdict of the court was: that Emily Wilding Davison died of a fracture to the base of the skull, caused by being knocked down by a horse, Anmer; through wilfully rushing on to the racecourse, during the progress of the race; death was due to misadventure. She had died on the 8th June.

Val told us that the move towards a vote for women started much earlier than in the 1900's. Mary Wollstonecraft helped to start the campaign in 1792, in vindication of the Rights of Women with a reference to the need for women's political representation. Forty years later in 1832, the first petition for the women's vote was presented to the House of Commons and over the next century, campaigners kept up the pressure, reinventing, re-energising and passing the baton from woman to woman, until the more militant suffragettes took over.

Val related the experiences of Suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst, who was a leading British women's rights activist, born July 1858, into a family with a tradition of radical politics. In 1889 Emmeline founded the Women's Franchise League, which fought to allow married women to vote in local elections. In 1903 she was to found the more militant WSPU, that gained much notoriety for its activities. Emmeline's daughters were both active in the cause. British politicians, press and public were astonished by the demonstrations, window smashing, arson, and hungerstrikes of the suffragettes. Emmeline was arrested on numerous occasions over the next few years and went on hunger strike which resulted in violent force feeding. The period of militancy was ended abruptly on the outbreak of war in 1914, then Emmeline turned her energies to supporting the war effort. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act gave voting rights to women over 30. Emmeline died on 14th June 1928, shortly after women at 21 years old were granted equal voting rights with men.

Margaret had looked at the life of Bernie Constance Crossland from a personal point of view, as she had been taught Geography by her at Kidderminster High School.

Mrs Crossland was born in January 1907 and died March 1995, she was the last surviving suffragette in Britain. Bernie was seven years old when she marched with her mother in a demonstration for women's right to vote. Bernie's mother was Eleanor Higginson, a militant who had chained herself to railings outside Parliament and been on hunger strike in Holloway Prison. Eleanor was a great friend of suffragette, Edith Rigby, both of them being members of the Labour Party. Together they ran the Preston branch of the WSPU. In a BBC Women's Hour programme in 1968, Eleanor recalled how the WSPU meetings progressed to more public and militant action. The ladies used to shield themselves for rough police treatment with cardboard corsets and cotton wool to protect their breasts. With the campaign being put on hold during WW1 Eleanor helped organise jam making sessions because of food shortages. She later moved to Bognor Regis and became a magistrate living with other WSPU members in a house she called Pankhurst.

Margaret related many stories about Bernie whilst she taught in KHS. The giving out of stationery, she always wore brown or green coloured clothing -

geography colours! She used to fold her arms under her bosom and hoist it! She was fascinated by pupils who were left-handed!

Bernie lived long enough to participate in the 1987 opening of the Pankhurst Centre in Manchester, a feminist centre and archive for suffragette memorabilia.

Cath completed our topic about Suffrage by relating the horror of force feeding, a violent form of torture which many Suffragettes suffered regularly, in their pursuit of the movement to gain equal Votes for Women. For many of the militant suffragettes the experience of being arrested, given a prison sentence, followed very quickly by the ladies going on hunger strike, and then having to suffer the torture of being force feed many times each day became the normal treatment.

One of the ladies describes the experience: "it will haunt me with its horror all my life, it was barbaric. Carried out by male prison officers, with unsterilised equipment, no consideration and not much experience, the women were subjected to the treatment as many as four times a day, every day. The treatment was compounded by the authorities allowing the force feeding to carry on until the women were very weak and then they would be released to build up their strength, but then readmitted for more days of their sentence and the procedure would start again.

Sometimes to try and avoid the treatment the women would barricade themselves in their cells, but the authorities hosed them with icy water, cell doors forced open, the women warmed up and force feeding started again. No way did the authorities want the suffragettes to die as that would have exacerbated the issue and turned them into martyrs.

All this barbaric treatment was being done legally, as in 1913, in response to the wave of hunger strikes, the government under Lord Asquith passed the Cat and Mouse Act, a cruel law which deemed the legality that prisoners could be on hunger strike to the point of emancipation, being released from prison to recover their strength and then recalled to serve a little more of their sentence, when the practice of force feeding would be restarted.

We must remember these brave women who put themselves through so much, that all women would eventually gain an equal vote with men.