

# WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE ACTIVITIES IN TEWKESBURY

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*"We are here not because we are lawbreakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers."*<sup>1</sup>

Efforts by women to obtain the vote began many years before the better known activities of the Pankhurst-led 'suffragettes'.

Before the *1832 Reform Act* some relatively wealthy widows and unmarried women could in theory vote as the franchise was based on property ownership. However, in practice women did not vote. A married woman would have been excluded by default in that she was deemed in law to own nothing; it was all her husband's property. The 1832 Act specifically stated that only 'male persons' who satisfied property criteria could vote, thus closing the theoretical door completely.

The Chartist movement, which largely came about as a reaction to the limited franchise imposed in 1832, demanded votes for all adults regardless of gender. However, when the support of sympathetic MPs was sought, the proposal of equal voting rights for women was dismissed as unachievable and a potential hindrance to attaining complete male suffrage. The 1838 'People's Charter' subsequently restricted itself to votes for all *men* aged over twenty-one.

Nevertheless, female suffrage groups were formed, often to support their men but also to pursue their own rights. One such organisation was the Tewkesbury Female Radical Association whose secretary was Miss Eliza Hale. In a letter to the Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, she states their determination "to obtain for *them* and their husbands, brothers and sweethearts – Universal Suffrage". The Chartist women held independent meetings and took part in actions such as a 'sit-in' at St. Mary's Church, Cheltenham.<sup>2</sup>

However, by 1848 Chartism ceased to be a significant political force without having achieved its aims for men, leaving scant hope for women in general and negligible hope for working class women. Subsequent attempts to obtain female suffrage were largely made by middle-class women (with some important exceptions) in terms of both the leaders and constituents.

The earliest reference in Gloucestershire to the next wave of women's suffrage agitation is from the city of Gloucester on 4 May 1869 when the first of a number of petitions was presented to Parliament; a petition from Cheltenham followed eight days later.<sup>3</sup> In the same year the *Municipal Franchise Act* became law. It enabled female ratepayers to vote in local municipal council elections, although a court case in 1872 restricted this right to single and widowed women.

On 19 March 1872 a public meeting was held in Tewkesbury, chaired by the local Baptist minister, Thomas Wilkinson. The Rev. Wilkinson remained active in the women's suffrage movement becoming the corresponding member of Tewkesbury to the Bristol Suffrage Society. He was born in Northumberland and served as the Baptist minister of Tewkesbury for some thirty-four years, resigning in 1885 as he became bedridden due to spinal problems. He died in 1903 aged 81; an obituary described him as "a gentleman of considerable culture and ability as a preacher, and highly respected in the town".<sup>4</sup> The meeting that Wilkinson chaired in 1872 was probably addressed by Miss Rhoda Garrett who was touring the area at this time. She was an important early figure in the suffrage movement and a pioneering interior designer.

On 14 November 1876 a meeting in support of a bill attempting to extend the parliamentary suffrage to women was held at Tewkesbury Music Hall in Barton Street. The newly-elected mayor, J.H. Boughton, was chairman of the meeting and Rev. Wilkinson was again in attendance along with Rev. Henry Smith Warleigh, rector of Ashchurch, and Rev. Thomas Webster, Congregational minister. Miss Lilia Ashworth spoke along with Miss Emily Sturge, a campaigner for women's education and suffrage. The

former made a point in her speech indicative of the middle-class outlook of the movement at the time: that proposals to give the vote to rural male workers would give the vote to around a million “illiterate labourers” whilst 333,000 “women of intelligence and property” would be excluded. Liliash Ashworth was a leading early suffragist, but in later years disapproved of the more militant methods of the suffragettes. The speech that Emily Sturge made was described as “an interesting address, full of sarcastic humour and witticism”.<sup>5</sup> Local MPs, Captain W.E. Price and J.R. Yorke, sent letters to the meeting regretting that they were unable to attend but stating their support.

The approval of those MPs contrasts with the opposite attitude of Tewkesbury MP, Richard Biddulph Martin. In 1884, when he addressed a meeting of his constituents in the Philharmonic Hall, he stated that “he did not believe that there was any reason at present for the assimilation of male and female suffrage”.<sup>6</sup> His sister-in-law would not have agreed. His brother, John Biddulph Martin (to the disapproval of his family) had married the American, Victoria Claflin Woodhull in 1883. She had campaigned for women’s suffrage in her home country and had even tried to stand as a presidential candidate there in 1872.<sup>7</sup> She had a chequered history having divorced two previous husbands and advocating what was interpreted as ‘free love’ – the freedom to marry, divorce and bear children without government interference. With her sister, Tennessee Celeste Claflin, she set up the first female run stockbrokers and published newspapers. When she came to England, she did contact the suffrage leader, Mrs. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who wrote to the American suffrage leader Susan Brownell Anthony for an opinion. The latter advised: “Let her severely alone. Both sisters are regarded as lewd and indecent. I advise against any contact.”<sup>8</sup> Victoria Woodhull-Martin does not appear to have been involved in any suffrage activities after her marriage to John Martin. After being widowed in 1916 she and her daughter Zula resided at Bredons Norton, near Tewkesbury, where they engaged in educational and philanthropic activities. Penelope Martin, a sister of Richard and John Martin, was also active in women’s suffrage activities prior to her early death during childbirth in 1873.

On 9 December 1881 a meeting was held in the Philharmonic Hall, Tewkesbury, involving nationally active suffragists: Mrs. Helena Shearer, a Dublin born socialist, Maria Colby, a Bristol based organiser and Miss Annie Young. Local participants were J.R. Yorke, of Forthampton Court, MP; William Spurrier, watchmaker and jeweller based in the High Street; John Boughton, Tewkesbury magistrate, alderman and surgeon; and Mrs. Harriet McIlquham. She was the most significant and nationally prominent suffragist associated with Tewkesbury, active in a number of suffrage organisations over the years.<sup>9</sup> Although a Conservative MP, the meeting chairman John Yorke had been a firm supporter of women’s rights over the years and he spoke strongly in favour of them having the vote: “they should be granted the same rights as they would be entitled to if they were men”.<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. McIlquham gave a lecture at the Co-operative Hall in Gloucester on 26 January 1882 under the auspices of the educational department of that society, remarking that “the room in which they were assembled seemed almost sacred to her, inasmuch as it was built by the pence of the working men.” She made many familiar points on the unfairness of denying women the vote, adding that women’s suffrage would aid the temperance cause.<sup>11</sup> She spoke again in Gloucester on 3 May 1882 along with Emily Sturge, Liliash Ashworth (by now Mrs. Hallett) and Miss Helen Blackburn, secretary of the Bristol and West of England Society for Women’s Suffrage.<sup>12</sup>

On 12 January 1884 the *Tewkesbury Register* carried an announcement of a meeting to be held that day in the town to discuss the effect of the *1884 Reform Act* on the issue of women’s suffrage – the act did nothing to further their cause. The meeting chairman was the mayor, J.H. Boughton, and Harriet McIlquham was one of the speakers. Also addressing the meeting was the Chilean born (Frances) Henrietta Müller, a significant women’s rights activist who founded the *Womens’ Penny Paper*, a publication described as “exhibiting an ‘uncompromising feminism’, unequalled by any other journal of the period”.<sup>13</sup>

At a Liberal Party meeting in Tewkesbury on 31 July 1885 Mrs. McIlquham asked the Liberal parliamentary candidate, Godfrey Samuelson, whether he supported women's suffrage, adding that "she was a Liberal but did not believe in the worship of Mr Gladstone". Samuelson replied that he was in favour in principle, "but was not strongly anxious to promote its practice"<sup>14</sup> He lost the election to John Yorke.

In January 1889 Harriet McIlquham had the temerity to stand as a Liberal candidate for the Cheltenham division of Gloucestershire County Council. She obtained 30 votes (just under 3% of those cast). The local press noted that she "was admired for her pluck"<sup>15</sup> However, even if she had won, she would have had to give up her seat. A court judgement (upheld on appeal) four months later ruled that votes cast for women were "simply votes thrown away". This decision resulted in Lady Sandhurst, who had won a seat in Brixton for the Liberals, having to stand down; a Conservative opponent who had brought the court action took her place.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. McIlquham took a leading role in many women's suffrage meetings throughout Gloucestershire and further afield. She was a regular correspondent to local newspapers espousing the cause of women's rights. All this in addition to her extensive local government work.

In November 1889 the Tewkesbury Working Men's Club held a debate on whether the franchise ought to be extended to women. George Lee proposed the motion and received support from T.G. Raynsford, Peter Walker, C. Fletcher and Messrs. Bedford and Durrant. Mr. N.A. Mann opposed on the grounds that "woman's lot was at home, and expressed his disbelief in female politicians". He was supported by W. Potter and A. Whale. The vote following the debate was 32-13 in favour of extending the franchise to women.<sup>17</sup>

There was also support from the more well-off in the locality. Mrs. Sophia Fletcher, a wealthy widow who lived at Pull Court, Bushley, died in 1890 and left a bequest of £100 to the National Central Society for Women's Suffrage.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1880s and into the 1890s there was a relative decline in the women's suffrage movement. A number of developments and issues combined to take momentum out of the general issue of reform and left women isolated. Reforms in local government extended the voting rights of female ratepayers to county and borough elections and allowed them the right to stand for and to serve on school boards, poor law boards and later, rural district and urban district councils – rights that Harriet McIlquham took full advantage of. Gladstone's *1884 Reform Act* gave the parliamentary franchise to more working men in rural areas, but again expressly excluded women. Splits in existing women's organisations occurred over such issues as Irish home rule, moves to affiliate with political parties and conflict over whether married women should be included in the franchise. Suffragists were also disheartened by the emergence of organised anti-suffragist movements. Significant activities in Tewkesbury and district had more or less ceased by the late 1880s, although Mrs. McIlquham was still active as a member of both the Women's Franchise League, founded in 1889 by Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst and her husband Richard, and the radical Women's Emancipation Union [WEU], founded by Elizabeth Wolstenholme in 1891.

The turn of the century saw a radical change of tactics in the women's suffrage movement. In 1903 Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union [WSPU], a non-party all-women militant organisation, whose slogan was "deeds, not words". They became known as the 'suffragettes' as opposed to the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies [NUWSS] led by Millicent Fawcett, known as the 'suffragists'.

On 20 January 1907 Emmeline Pankhurst's daughter Christabel, a leader of the WSPU's militant activities, spoke at the Glevum Hall, Gloucester under the auspices of the Gloucester branch of the Independent Labour Party. The hall was "packed", Mrs. Earengy of Cheltenham chaired the meeting and among others was supported by Theodora Mills of Cheltenham and Harriet McIlquham. The latter declared her intention to support militancy – reported under the sub-heading of "Mrs. McIlquham Joins The Insurgents".<sup>19</sup>

Mrs. McIlquham ... said she was one of the old respectable workers on the cause of women's suffrage, but nothing, she was convinced would be done until they became outrageous. She grieved to say it, but that was borne in upon her by her own experience. She had been working in the cause for over 50 years, and did they wonder that she threw herself in with 'the impatient lot?' Since she was first interested in the question by a lecture given by George Jacob Holyoake, she had gone quietly on in the movement led by John Stuart Mill and others, but now she was heart and soul with the 'insurgents.'

It is unclear whether Mrs. McIlquham was ever an official member of the WSPU although she certainly donated money and carried out work for them. She was also a member of the Women's Freedom League [WFL] for some years. The league was a breakaway group from the WSPU opposing violence, instead using forms of protest such as, non-payment of taxes and refusing to complete census forms (as did the WSPU) 'if we don't count we won't be counted'.<sup>20</sup>

Women's suffrage meetings continued to be held in Tewkesbury although they were not necessarily reported in the local press – on 16 September 1908 Mr. Dyson, the headmaster of Trinity School, noted in his logbook: "Meeting of Suffragettes in Cattle Market adjoining school this afternoon".<sup>21</sup>

The Conservative MP for Tewkesbury at this time was Michael Hicks-Beach. At various meetings he was careful not to express a clear view on suffrage questions. However, in 1909 during a debate in the Commons on a private member's bill that proposed giving the vote to every man and woman aged over 21 with three months' residential qualification, he contended: "that a Bill of this kind, by enlarging the number of poorer and less responsible voters, would tend to make the House of Commons less representative of the real interests of the country".<sup>22</sup>

On 23 June 1909 four suffragists arrived in Tewkesbury by motor car, parked outside the police station (then in Bredon Road) and went in to register their intention to hold a meeting at the Cross. They were told by Inspector Martin Keyes that they would be prosecuted for obstruction if they did so. He then went out and inspected the car, to find that a placard at the back reading "National Union Women's Suffrage Society" obscured the rear number plate. He told the leader of the group, Rachel Costelloe of Iffley, Oxford, that "it was a very serious matter" and that she was liable to a prosecution for this. Prosecuted she was and in her absence she was fined 1s.[5p] with 8s. [40p] costs by the chairman of the magistrates, Cecil Moore (father of the novelist John Moore). Moore smirked as he offered seven days imprisonment as an alternative.<sup>23</sup>

Inspector Keyes died of heart failure four months later at the age of 45 leaving a widow and five children. Magistrate's Clerk, H.A. Badham, in paying tribute to the police officer, remarked that "he was always ready and desirous of giving an offender the benefit of the doubt".<sup>24</sup>

Rachel Costelloe was a writer and feminist activist, a close friend and chief associate of Millicent Fawcett in the NUWSS. In 1911 she married Oliver Strachey (brother of Lytton). She wrote several biographies and novels and founded the Women's Employment Federation which campaigned for women's admission to professions that they were excluded from and for equal pay. She edited the feminist newspaper, *The Common Cause*, and worked for the League of Nations and the Anti-Slavery Society; she stood three times unsuccessfully as an Independent for Parliament.<sup>25</sup>

Harriet McIlquham died on 22 January 1910 and is buried at Staverton. Obituaries described her as a "tireless worker for the rights of her sex" and stated that by her death "a lady has been removed who occupied a foremost place among the women workers of the last and present century". Her local government career was lauded and mention made of her membership of the Women's Suffrage Society, Women's Emancipation Union, Women's Freedom League and the National Union of Women Workers. Her associations with the Independent Labour Party and Cheltenham Ethical Society were noted – she gave lectures to both organisations on sociological, philosophical and literary subjects.<sup>26</sup> Mrs. McIlquham's passing did not stop suffrage activities in Tewkesbury. On the evening of 17 February 1910 "a trio of suffragettes addressed a small crowd at the Cross".<sup>27</sup>

Despite the endeavours of Mrs. McIlquham and her associates, the need for women to have the vote seems to have been lost on some sections of Tewkesbury denizens. In October 1910 a debate was held in the town by the Tewkesbury Wesley Guild. Rev. R.A. Morris, local Methodist minister, proposed that the franchise be extended to women on the same terms as men. Rev. G.W. Harte, pastor of Tewkesbury Baptist Church, opposed arguing that “it was not necessary, and that women were already adequately represented by men”. Apparently the debate was “enlivened by many humorous sallies”. The vote at the end of the debate (no indication as to whether any women present were allowed to cast votes!) was a small majority against granting the franchise to women.<sup>28</sup>

In September 1911, a Tewkesbury and District Branch of the NUWSS formed.<sup>29</sup> Miss Kate Robertson, the Western Division organiser of the society, wrote that “very little is known of about Suffrage there and most of the people on whom I called did not even know that there was a National Union.” Mabel Malleson, daughter of the significant suffragist Elizabeth Malleson of Dixton Manor, Winchcombe, was elected first branch president. Secretary was Rosie Livens, daughter of the artist Henry John Livens of Timber House, Winchcombe. William Earengy, a Cheltenham solicitor succeeded as president of the branch in 1913. He held the office of Recorder of Tewkesbury 1930-1931 and became a judge in 1931. He was the husband of the Cheltenham women’s suffrage activist Florence Earengy.

On 16 October 1911 Tewkesbury Town Council considered a request from the aforementioned Miss Robertson to pass a resolution in favour of the *Conciliation Bill*, a private member’s bill to give some women the vote. The resolution was proposed by F.W. Godfrey, seconded by G.P. Howell and supported by H.H. Papps, W.T. Boughton and J.W. Howells. However, they were not successful as the rest of the council voted against it.<sup>30</sup> Similarly the actual *Conciliation Bill* did not succeed in Parliament.

A meeting of the Cheltenham branch of the Conservative and Unionist Women’s Franchise Association [CUWFA] was held at Watson Hall, Tewkesbury on 6 March 1912. Lord Kingsale, the association’s president, was in the chair and opened proceedings with strong criticism of recent militant suffragette actions. They were “a disgrace to themselves; to their country, and to their cause”. Miss Violet Martin was the chief speaker, she pointed out that it was “ridiculous to boast of representative government” when women were without the vote; she went to say that “also as the women were being called upon to help pay M.P.’s £400 year, could not they who had to pay the piper have some choice in the calling of the tune”. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* report of this meeting noted that the CUWFA “oppose *universal* suffrage in any form”.<sup>31</sup>

The Tewkesbury branch division of the NUWSS shared a platform with the CUWFA at Winchcombe Town Hall on 19 March 1912. A motion to urge MP Hicks-Beach to support the latest *Conciliation Bill* was proposed by William Earengy and seconded by Miss Flora Kelley, secretary of the Cheltenham branch of the CUWFA. The latter urged the audience to work by constitutional methods for the cause and Dr. Earengy indicated that they could all work together for suffrage without abandoning their party convictions on other questions.<sup>32</sup> The actual bill was defeated 222-208 in Parliament.

On 26 October 1912 a joint deputation from local NUWSS and CUWFA met with Mr. Hicks-Beach to discuss the parliamentary situation regarding women’s suffrage. Led by William Earengy and Flora Kelley, they emphasised the cross-party support the movement had among his constituents. Hicks-Beach is reported as having “accorded a courteous hearing to the deputation, and discussed the situation with them in all its aspects”.<sup>33</sup> In February, at a Unionist meeting in Churchdown, he had said “There might be room for improvement in our present franchise ... but that was a totally different thing from saying that every hobbledehoy should have a vote”.<sup>34</sup>

Flora Kelley was present again at another meeting held under the auspices of the NUWSS at Tewkesbury Abbey Girl’s School in January 1914. The meeting was interrupted by a cracker exploding in the passage at the side of the room. Among the speakers was Lady Maud Parry who argued that they wanted the franchise extended to all citizens regardless of gender, who had the same qualifications as franchised men; she also praised the Labour Party “for their consistent attitude in the matter”.<sup>36</sup>

Upon the outbreak of World War 1 the WSPU suspended their militant activities and supported the war effort – Emmeline Pankhurst urged women to “fight for their country as they fought for the vote”. The WSPU was dissolved in 1917 with Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst founding the Women’s Party. In 1925, to the dismay of her far-left daughter Sylvia, who wept on hearing the news, Emmeline joined the Conservative Party. She was selected as their candidate for Stepney but died before the election. The NUWSS was split with a minority opposed to the war, but it too immediately announced a suspension of political activity in favour of war work. In 1919 the NUWSS became the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.

In 1918 the *Representation of the People Act* gave the vote to all men over 21 and to women over the age of 30 who were householders or married to householders, or were graduates voting in a university constituency. It was not until 2 July 1928 that all women were accorded equal voting rights with men – just 18 days after the death of Emmeline Pankhurst.

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<sup>1</sup> Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), speech from the dock in October 1908 when on trial for ‘inciting to riot’.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Benson, ‘Chartism in Tewkesbury and District’, *THS Bulletin* 19, 2010. For extended accounts of local Chartist activities also see: Benson, ‘William Morris Moore (1813-1841)’, *THS Bulletin* 20, 2011 and ‘William Penn Gaskell’ (1808-1882), *Cheltenham Local History Society Journal* 28, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland A Regional Survey [Survey]* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> *Gloucester Citizen*, 9 Feb 1903.

<sup>5</sup> *Tewkesbury Register*, 18 Nov 1876.

<sup>6</sup> *Gloucester Citizen*, 7 Feb 1884.

<sup>7</sup> John Dixon, ‘When Hollywood – Possibly – Collides With Tewkesbury!’, *THS Bulletin* 10, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Lois Beachy Underhill, *The Woman who ran for President* (New York: Bridgeworks, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Medley (1837-1910) London born suffragist and local government politician, married James McIlquham and lived at Staverton House, Boddington. See Jennifer Slack, ‘Harriet McIlquham: A True Pioneer?’, *THS Bulletin* 15, 2006, for a full account of her local government career in Tewkesbury and district.

<sup>10</sup> *Worcester Journal*, 17 Dec 1881.

<sup>11</sup> *Gloucester Journal*, 28 Jan 1882.

<sup>12</sup> *Gloucester Journal*, 6 May 1882.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Auchmuty, ‘Müller, (Frances) Henrietta(1845/6–1906)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, Oct 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/56279>]

<sup>14</sup> Crawford, *Survey*.

<sup>15</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 19 Jan 1889. For an account of the suffrage activities in Cheltenham see, Derek Benson, ‘Women’s Suffrage Activism in Cheltenham’, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B00OZY2NNE>

<sup>16</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 25 May 1889.

<sup>17</sup> *Tewkesbury Register*, 23 Nov 1889 and 30 Nov 1889.

<sup>18</sup> *Gloucester Citizen*, 26 Dec 1894.

<sup>19</sup> *Gloucester Journal*, 26 Jan 1907.

<sup>20</sup> Crawford, *Survey*.

<sup>21</sup> *Trinity National School Log*, Tewkesbury Library (thanks to Sam Eedle for bringing this to my attention).

<sup>22</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 20 Mar 1909.

<sup>23</sup> *Tewkesbury Register*, 3 Jul 1909.

<sup>24</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 6 Nov 1909 and 13 Nov 1909.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Caine, ‘Strachey, Rachel Pearsall Conn [Ray](1887–1940)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38017> ; Cathy Hartley, *A Historical Directory of British Women* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> *Cheltenham Examiner*, 27 Jan 1910; *Leamington Spa Courier*, 28 Jan 1910; *Tewkesbury Register*, 29 Jan 1910.

<sup>27</sup> *Tewkesbury Register*, 19 Feb 1910.

<sup>28</sup> *Tewkesbury Register*, 15 Oct 1910.

<sup>29</sup> Crawford, *Survey*.

<sup>30</sup> *Gloucester Citizen*, 16 Oct 1911.

<sup>31</sup> *Gloucester Citizen*, 7 Mar 1912; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 9 Mar 1912.

<sup>32</sup> *Gloucester Journal*, 23 Mar 1912.

<sup>33</sup> *Gloucester Journal*, 2 Nov 1912.

<sup>34</sup> *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 10 Feb 1912.

<sup>35</sup> His wife had died some two months before his death and his father two months after.

<sup>36</sup> *Gloucester Journal*, 17 Jan 1914.