

## THE WORCESTER SUFFRAGETTES

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the 1870s and 1880s the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) occasionally sent speakers to Worcester, and there was some suffrage activity in the 1900s. In February 1903, a debate at the Victoria Institute discussed the resolution, "That the suffrage should be granted to women". It was lost by three votes.

It was not until 1908 that a Worcester branch of the NUWSS was formed, with a Miss Power of 5 Field Terrace, Bath Road as secretary. There were other branches in Malvern and Barnt Green, both formed in 1913, and in Kidderminster, and in 1908 the Birmingham NUWSS set up a branch in Redditch.

Worcester is, like Bristol, a cathedral city – suffragette Gladice Keevil called it "the faithful city" – and had an active Church League for Women's Suffrage.

The militant Women's Social and Political Union never opened a permanent branch in Worcester and activity in the town was co-ordinated by the Birmingham branch.

Both Bristol and Worcester had local branches of the National Anti-Suffrage League.

## **THE CHURCH SUFFRAGE LEAGUE**

Canon James Maurice Wilson (1836-1931) and his wife Georgina ran the Worcester Church Suffrage League, giving talks and hosting meetings in their home. Canon Wilson had been headmaster at Rugby for 20 years, after which he was headmaster at Clifton College in Bristol for eleven years, during which time Mrs Wilson did social work amongst girls in Bristol. Her husband became canon on Worcester in 1905 and was also a Governor of Worcester College for the Blind.

The Dean of Worcester, Dr William Moore Ede (1849-1935), and his wife Sarah were also active suffragists. The Dean spoke at meetings of the Women's Suffrage Societies in Worcester, Leamington Spa and Cheltenham. The Dean and Canon Wilson signed a letter to *The Times* in 1909, prompted by the formation of a male anti-suffrage organisation, pointing out that many men did support women's suffrage.

## **THE ANTI-SUFFRAGE LEAGUE**

A key anti suffragist locally was Worcester East MP Austin Chamberlain (1863–1937). He was the son of politician Joseph Chamberlain, and his brother Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940), was prime minister from 1937 to 1940. Austin was MP for Worcester East from 1892 to 1914 and MP for West Midlands from 1914. He held a number of key positions including Civil Lord of Admiralty (1895–1900); Financial Secretary to the Treasury (1900–1902); Postmaster General (1902–1903); Chancellor of the Exchequer (1903–1906 and again in 1919); Sec of State for India (1915–1916); Minister without Portfolio in the War Cabinet (1918–1919). He was the leader of the Conservative Party between 1921 and 1922, and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1924 to 1929.

His half-sister Beatrice Chamberlain was on the Executive Committee of the National Anti-Suffrage League. During the 1906 election, Beatrice, who was a good speaker and organiser, helped Austin by marshalling support for him amongst the women of East Worcestershire.

Worcester seems to have been perceived as an anti-suffrage stronghold. In 1913, when the Labour MP for St Pancras North, Willoughby Hyatt Dickinson, introduced a Women's Franchise Bill in the House of Commons, the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage carried out a postal canvas in his and one other constituency – Worcester. Worcester, with 10,022 men and women, sent in 5292 replies, of which 4070 were against. Women already had the municipal vote, and of the voters canvassed, 588 women were against and 307 for the suffrage.

In 1909 the Worcester branch of the Women's Anti-Suffrage League declined the challenge to a public debate with suffrage campaigners – perhaps understandably, as the other side had advertised the event before obtaining their consent.

### **“A BOROUGH HEREDITARILY CORRUPT”<sup>1</sup>**

The Liberals came into power in a landslide victory in the general election of 1906. In Worcester, which had returned a Conservative in every election since 1885, the successful Conservative candidate was George Henry Williamson. Williamson, who lived in Wimbledon, had until a few years before the election lived all of his life in Worcester. He was chairman of the Worcester firm of Williamson and Sons, tinsplate manufacturers, as well as a former alderman, mayor and high sheriff in the city.

As it turned out, Williamson's election was a gift for pro-women suffrage propaganda.

During the election campaign, the Liberals employed a retired police superintendent from Peterborough to keep an eye on the Conservative party. He discovered evidence of corrupt election practices such as bribing and treating voters to drinks. The scandal involved magistrates, election agents, licensed victuallers and clerks, but Williamson himself was exonerated of illegal intent. He was, however, unseated, and when the Government refused to issue a Writ for another election in Worcester before the next Parliament, Worcester was left disfranchised – unrepresented in Parliament. During the debate in the Commons, Austin Chamberlain spoke bitterly against the postponement of the Writ.

However, Worcester was duly punished for its corruption – and suffragists were quick to comment on the scandal. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, President of the NUWSS, wrote to *The Times* pointing out that men were only ever temporarily deprived of the vote as a punishment for “gross corruption” but such deprivation is “inflicted on women, not temporarily but permanently, for the crime of being women.”<sup>2</sup>

To make matters worse, Worcester ratepayers were charged 3.5d in the pound to pay for the costs of the Election Enquiry. Many of those ratepayers were women.

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<sup>1</sup> *Evening Telegraph, Scotland*, 15 February 1908.

<sup>2</sup> Millicent Garrett Fawcett, letter to *The Times* 21 February 1907.

In September 1907, Canon Wilson added his signature to that of over 300 women ratepayers who sent a protest to Worcester City Council. The Birmingham WSPU also write to the Council protesting against the “gross scandal” of penalising women ratepayers for male voters’ misdeeds.<sup>3</sup>

Millicent Garrett Fawcett wrote to the *Times* again in July, reiterating that women were permanently disfranchised, and again pointing out that women ratepayers were expected “to pay for electoral offences in which they can have had no possible share.”<sup>4</sup>

## THE WOMEN’S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION

Worcester was allowed to hold another election in 1908. WSPU leader Christabel Pankhurst announced that the WSPU would be sending workers to the city, and she commented, “In Worcester the women ratepayers have had to pay an extra 3d in the £1...and so have been penalised for the misdoings of male voters. That is so unfair that we think we shall secure a large share of the attention at Worcester to the women’s point of view.”<sup>5</sup>

The NUWSS also set up a headquarters in Worcester during the election, which took place in February. The Conservative candidate was Edward Goulden, who lived in Berkshire, and Harold Elverstone of Cheadle Hulme stood for the Liberals.

Gladys Keevil (1884–1959), who was the WSPU organiser in the Midlands, led the suffragette by-election campaign in Worcester from their headquarters at 28 Broad Street. Many women came to help her, including Miss Una (1880–1975) and Miss Joan (?) Dugdale; Maud Joachim (1869–1947), and the Brackenbury sisters, Georgina Agnes (1865–1950) and Marie (1866–1946). Their mother was also a supporter of the WSPU and their home in Campden Hill Square in London was used by recuperating hunger strikers.

The WSPU held meetings outside factories in Worcester, including Lea and Perrin’s, GWR Fitting Depot, Evan’s Vinegar Works, and Dent’s Glove Works – and also outside Williamson’s tinsmith – the unseated candidate from 1906! They held day time and evening meetings in the Co-Operative Hall, and Mrs Pankhurst spoke at the Sheep Market on 31 January. On 5 February there was a reception for Mrs Pankhurst at the Star Hotel, which is now The Whitehouse Hotel – Gladice reported that “almost everyone of importance in Worcester was present”.<sup>6</sup>

On polling day the suffragettes hired several vehicles, labelled them “votes for women”, and toured around the town, shouting “Down with the Liberal government” and “Women, demand votes this Session”. Edward Goulden won the election.

Gladice Keevil visited Worcester again in 1908 with Elsie Howey (1844–1963) who lived in Malvern with her mother who was also a WSPU supporter, to publicize the first major WSPU suffragette demonstration. This demonstration was held in Hyde Park on 21 June 1908 and known as Women’s Sunday. They held meetings in Worcester as well as in Malvern,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 4 September 1907.

<sup>4</sup> Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Letter to *The Times* 18 July 1907.

<sup>5</sup> *Evening Telegraph*, 2 January 1908.

<sup>6</sup> *Votes for Women*, March 1908

Bromsgrove and Evesham. Gladice also organised early morning pavement chalking parties in Worcester and Hereford.

At least 250,000 people gathered in Hyde Park on Women's Sunday. Twenty special trains brought supporters from the provinces. Gladice Keevil was one of the speakers, and Georgina Brackenbury chaired one of the platforms. Women travelled up from Worcester: special trains went from Foregate Street or Shrub Hill and the return fare cost six shillings.

## **FLORENCE FEEK, A PERSHORE SUFFRAGETTE**

On 31 March 1909, thirty women attempted to get into the House of Commons to speak to Prime Minister Asquith. Nine of them were arrested after a struggle with the police. Amongst them was Florence Feek (1876–1940) of Pershore. Florence was the daughter of Julius Harnworth Feek, who was the minister of the Baptist church at 2 Broad Street for 31 years. She later became a Quaker. She was a civil servant who worked in the Post Office in London, and was also involved in social work with women and girls. It was that work, she said, that made her a militant.

The women were charged with obstruction and were all sentenced to a month in prison. In court, Florence protested that she was not a criminal, but a political prisoner.

When the nine were released on 30 April, a WSPU reception was held for them in London. A suffragette banner designed by writer and artist Laurence Housman (1865–1959) – “From Prison to Citizenship” – hung on the stage behind Christabel Pankhurst. Laurence and his sister Clemence (1861–1955), who was also an artist and a supporter of women's suffrage, were born at Perry Hall near Bromsgrove. Laurence and his brothers – one of whom was A E Housman the poet – attended Bromsgrove School, but like most women of the time Clemence had to make do with a governess at home.

Florence and the others spoke about their prison experiences. She said that “the words of the Women's Marseillaise' had haunted her in prison, and added that it was more than a reward for the time she had spent in prison to know that her two brothers and a man friend had entirely changed their views on the militant methods.”<sup>7</sup>

Florence retired from the Post Office in 1936. Tragically, she was killed in an air raid in London in September 1940.

## **ESCALATING MILITANCY**

As the suffragette campaign progressed and the Government still refused to grant women the vote, suffragette militancy escalated from breaking windows to a campaign of unprecedented destruction from 1912 which lasted until the start of the First World War in August 1914. Telephone wires were cut, works of art damaged, empty houses set on fire, and golf courses vandalised. Suffragettes also damaged the contents of letter boxes with chemicals or fire.

Not surprisingly, the suffragettes were criticised for their militant actions; the NUWSS had already in 1908 distanced itself from the window-breaking suffragettes. However, some local

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<sup>7</sup> *Votes for Women*, 7 May 1909.

suffragettes did not fall out of favour with the NUWSS. Lady Isabel Margesson (1863–1946) had been a member of the NUWSS and President of the Redditch branch in 1904, but left them in 1906 to join the WSPU. She still received invitations to speak for the Birmingham NUWSS. Her daughter Catherine was the organiser for the Reading WSPU. The family home was at Barnt Green House near Worcester.

In 1912 a meeting of the Warwick and Leamington Spa branch of the Church League for Women's Suffrage blamed militants for poor attendance and complained, "They are not playing the game. It isn't cricket."<sup>8</sup>

In February 1914 at the national General Council of the Church League, the Worcester Branch called for a repudiation of militancy. Their resolution was defeated, and a number of them left the League, amongst them the Bishop of Worcester, the Right Reverend Yeatman-Biggs; The Dean of Worcester and his wife; and Canon and Mrs Wilson.

Worcester was never a hotbed of militancy. When the Countess of Selborne opened a grand Franchise Fete held in Leamington Spa in 1912 she proudly reported that while there were militants in the area, "they have never done anything to injure the cause or bring it into disrepute. Locally, Suffrage work has been carried out peacefully, intelligently and pluckily."<sup>9</sup> The Bishop of Worcester was one of the Fete's patrons, at which the Worcester Suffrage Society was represented.

Although two suffragettes ended up in Worcester Goal in 1913, it was not for arson in the city. In December 1913 Lillian Lenton (1891–1972) of Bristol and another woman burned down a mansion in Cheltenham. At the time Lillian was still on the run from the police, after being released on licence from prison in February following a hunger strike. The pair were sent to Worcester Gaol on remand, where they went on hunger strike and were released on 28 December. Lillian absconded and was arrested in Birkenhead in May 1914 but released after another hunger strike. She was still free when war broke out in August 1914.

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<sup>8</sup> *Leamington Spa Courier*, 8 March 1912.

<sup>9</sup> *Leamington Spa Courier*, 19 April 1912.

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<http://www.lucienneboyce.com/research/researching-the-suffragette-movement.html>

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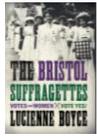
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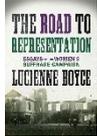
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***The Bristol Suffragettes***  
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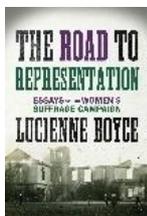


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