

The history of female protest and suffrage in the UK



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Introduction

Popular protests can be about all sorts of issues, from opposition to a war, to action on world poverty, to protest against damage to the environment. But perhaps the ultimate form of popular protest is that against exclusion from democratic rights. Campaigns to secure the vote are based on the understanding that 'the people should be allowed to protest, and to do so by voting to choose who governs them'. This free course, *The history of female protest and suffrage in the UK*, focuses on one example of democratic protest – the campaign to extend the vote to women in the UK.

In the course, you will be introduced to Ada Nield Chew (1870–1945), who began by protesting against the working and living conditions suffered by working-class women, but eventually joined the campaign for women's suffrage. You will also spend some time with the prominent **suffragette** May Billinghurst, as well as looking at the ways in which the Women's Social and Political Union (**WSPU**), the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (**NUWSS**) and the First World War shaped and affected the battle for the vote.

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Learning Outcomes

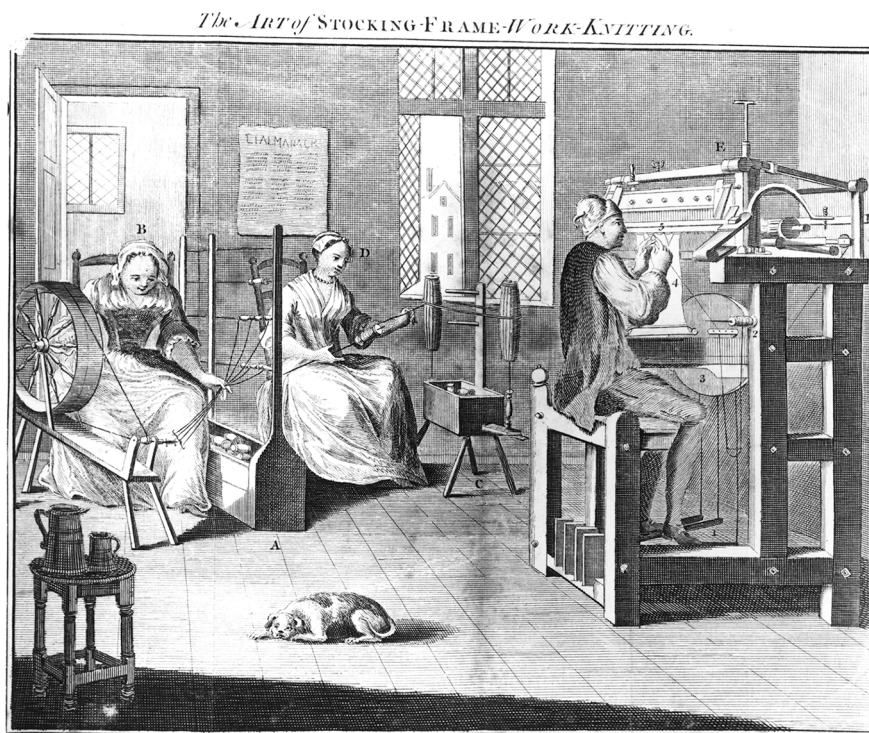
After studying this course, you should be able to:

- know about and understand the suffrage movement
- utilise some of the skills involved in the study of history
- use and analyse different types of sources, both primary and secondary
- read and interpret information from a variety of media
- think about and process information through description, explanation and analysis.

1 The changing position of women in the home and workplace

How, when and why did women get the vote? Your work on the suffragettes later in this course will help to answer these questions, but first it is important to reflect on the pre-history of the campaign.

Prior to the later eighteenth century (about 1760), the majority of the population had lived in the countryside and most manufacturing had taken place within individual and poor households. Wives and children had assisted in making goods for the market. Married women had played other economic roles too – acting, for example, as midwives, washerwomen or casual field hands.



Engraved for the Universal Magazine 1750, for J. Minton at the Kings Arms in St. Pauls Church Yard London.

Figure 1 Cottage industry: textile production often took place under what is frequently termed the 'putting-out system' in a semi-domestic setting, with female spinners and male weavers manufacturing cloth. This image, titled 'The art of stocking-frame-work-knitting', comes from volume 7 of the *Universal Magazine* (August 1750).

Many historians and sociologists believe that industrialisation in Britain between about 1760 and 1830 brought profound changes in household organisation and, as a consequence, the economic roles of women. According to this view, household production was destroyed, and home and work became separated as workers moved into factories in the towns. The home became almost exclusively a place where children were reared and families fed. In wealthier, middle-class households the family became a haven for its members and, more particularly, for the male breadwinners. In the nineteenth century, the middle-class family withdrew from its servants (who were thrust either below

the stairs or in the attic), its workplace (now located at a distance) and its community (living far from its workforce). 'Domesticity', in this model, was a luxury many could not afford.



Figure 2 François-Hubert Drouiais, *Family Portrait*, 1756. Samuel H. Kress Collection/ National Gallery of Art, USA.

There was also now a rapidly increasing number of poor men and women who had to put themselves up for hire because they could not earn enough from their own land to survive or support families. Some moved to the towns to find work, others to the coalfields. Many were on poor relief or entered the workhouses. The factories came later – in the second half of the nineteenth century in many cases. They drew both male and female labour; conditions were appalling and workers had few rights.

It was the propertied men of the upper and middle classes who had the vote and who, through representation at both local and national levels, shaped policy and legislation.

The belief in 'virtual representation' explains many of what we today regard as incongruities in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century suffrage. This applied to a society in which it was believed that the master in the workshop or the employer in the factory or mine stood in the same relationship to their workers as a father did to his family. The father, or patriarch, understood the needs of his children and acted in their interests. Likewise, the master and employer understood the needs of their workers and also acted in their interests. This view of society, as organised paternalistically, prevailed until well into the twentieth century, if not beyond. If one believed in paternalism, then depriving working men and women of the vote was not incongruous at all.

In reality, men often didn't earn enough to support their families without help from the wages of wives and children. Setting aside the predicament of the very poor – the unemployed or casually employed labourers and their families – who led a precarious existence and often moved in and out of the workhouses, there were many 'respectable' families from the working class and the **lower middle class** who relied on a combination of male and female labour and/or wages.

2 Women's suffrage: establishing a chronology

The term 'suffrage' means the right to vote in elections. Universal suffrage means that all adults (with a few exceptions) have the vote.

The struggle for women's suffrage was inextricably linked with the fight for better working conditions for women. Women had often been brought into the factories because they were cheaper to employ than men.

Our popular image of this struggle to gain votes for women is of a militant activist, interrupting public meetings, chaining herself to railings and smashing windows, ready to go to prison in the name of her cause (Figure 3). These things certainly happened, but they don't tell the whole story of the struggle, which lasted for decades and drew support from people from all classes and regions.



Figure 3 An arrest of a protesting suffragette.

Activity 1 Finding out what happened when using a modern timeline

Task 1

Look at the interactive timeline in the link below, which gives an overview of some of the important developments in the campaign, and then answer the questions that follow.

Open the timeline in a new tab or window.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

1. In which year was the National Society for Women's Suffrage set up?

- ☐ 1857
- ☐ 1867
- ☐ 1877

Discussion

The National Society for Women's Suffrage was set up in 1867. Lydia Becker was a founder member.

2. In which year was the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) set up?

- ☐ 1877
- ☐ 1887
- ☐ 1897

Discussion

The NUWSS was set up in 1897. Millicent Fawcett was its leader.

3. In which year was the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) set up?

- ☐ 1903
- ☐ 1913
- ☐ 1923

Discussion

The WSPU was formed in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia.

4. In which year were women over 30 given the vote?

- ☐ 1908
- ☐ 1913
- ☐ 1918

Discussion

Women over 30 were given the vote in 1918.

5. In which year were women over 21 given the vote?

- ☐ 1920
- ☐ 1924
- ☐ 1928

Discussion

Women over 21 were not entitled to vote until 1928.

Task 2

In the text box below, or in your learning notebook, note down anything that surprised you when looking at the timeline.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

It's surprising, if not a little shocking, that women in the UK didn't gain the same voting rights as men until 1928 and that this happened long after the vote was granted to women elsewhere. Women gained the vote in Finland in 1906, for example, and in North America in 1919.

If you know anything about the struggle, it may well surprise you that there were many female **suffragists** who pre-dated the suffragettes. Suffrage campaigners had, from the 1860s onwards, argued for women to be granted a parliamentary vote on the same property-based franchise as men. Generally, they used constitutional methods and arguments. In 1897 the many local suffrage societies joined together to form the NUWSS and became, as a consequence, a force to be reckoned with.

It is crucial to note that a key element seems to have been the change from the peaceful protest advocated by the NUWSS to the much more active stance of the WSPU, which clearly felt that 'deeds' rather than 'words' were needed.

Note also that the campaign for women's suffrage was not restricted to the suffragists and suffragettes. In addition to the information given in the timeline, in 1909 the People's Suffrage Federation was formed to campaign for the extension of the vote to all adults – male and female – and it drew support from the trade unions and the Women's Co-operative Guild. In 1910 the NUWSS put its weight behind the efforts of the Conciliation Committee, which sought to persuade members of all political parties to introduce a moderate franchise reform. Even the WSPU called a truce. A Conciliation Bill was brought before Parliament. There was certainly support from both sides of the House of Commons, although Herbert Asquith's Liberal government didn't believe there was sufficient support to enact a women's enfranchisement bill. The Liberal government dissolved Parliament and when the same party returned to power, it focused on National Insurance (broad welfare reforms) designed to alleviate poverty. The members of the WSPU, despairing, broke the truce.

3 The life and work of Ada Nield Chew



Figure 4 Ada Nield Chew, a prominent campaigner for women's rights, including the right to vote.

You will now explore in more detail the life of a remarkable woman – Ada Nield Chew. You will use different types of sources to find out more about her life. Ada Nield Chew's story helps us to understand the ways in which many women came to protest against the limitations placed on them in contemporary society.

Activity 2 Using a biography

Read the following entry from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) on Ada Nield Chew.

[Ada Nield Chew biography](#)

Create a chronology for her, using the interactive below. Open the link in a new window or browser.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

People change over time and Ada Nield Chew was no exception. As you will see in the following discussion about her, she began her career of 'protest' absorbed by issues such as women's working conditions and the evils of the capitalist system, and only later saw that a solution lay at least partially in obtaining votes for women. She then became a suffragist, campaigning peacefully for women's suffrage.

How married women are referred to in scholarly discourse

Why do you think that scholars call Ada by both her maiden and her married surnames? Historians believe that doing so reduces the possibilities of confusion caused by the prevailing UK custom of a woman changing her name on marriage. If we were to refer to Ada as Ada Nield in one part of her life and as Ada Chew later, those unfamiliar with her history might think that we were referring to two separate women. It also serves to remind us that the achievements of many women took place before they married. Interestingly, Doris, Ada's daughter, also imported her mother's maiden name into her own, presumably to ensure that her mother's legacy would not be subsumed within Doris's father's.

3.1 Ada Nield Chew's background and early work

Ada Nield Chew was a working woman from a working-class background. She was one of many children and had known hardship in her youth. However, she was an able woman who had benefited from the brief education afforded her. Despite ceasing her own schooling at the age of 11, Ada improved herself sufficiently to become highly literate and to be able to teach pupils in a small church school. It was her literacy and her ability to write in a direct, relevant and well-reasoned way that enabled her to argue for working women's rights and better working conditions. She also took advantage of changes that permitted women to become members of the boards of Poor Law guardians.

Nield Chew wrote pieces for the *Crewe Chronicle* in which she was concerned to direct attention to examples of the inadequate wage and the poor working conditions of a particular class of workers – tailoresses. However, she also developed another way of getting her message across: using the 'true story' style of writing.

3.2 The true story genre

This style of writing, which you are going to explore in the activity below, was one that Nield Chew adopted to communicate in particular to a middle-class readership. Had she been writing today, Nield Chew would probably have written screenplays for docu-dramas, inviting her audience to enjoy vicarious experiences and drawing attention to socio-economic problems. The intention behind the story you will read – 'The Mother's Story' – is similar. This text has been selected because it refers to the plight of women in Stoke-on-Trent, one of the 'Five Towns' of 'The Potteries' mentioned in her story. As you are reading, consider how Nield Chew adopting a different style of writing would have drawn attention to conditions for women in quite a different way.

Activity 3 Learning through stories

Task 1

Read the following extract from Ada Nield Chew's 'The Mother's Story'.

In your first read-through, think about what effects Nield Chew might have been aiming at in writing it. What effects does it have on you as a reader? As you read, make notes on this, either in the text box below or in your learning notebook. This will help to focus your reading in preparation for the next part of this activity.

[Ada Nield Chew, 'The Mother's Story'](#)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Ada Nield Chew wrote in a very engaging way about the experiences of women far removed from the literate, middle-class audience she anticipated. She thought, probably correctly, that her audience had no appreciation of the hard life lived by the working poor, and especially by the women. Her approach and style of writing gave an immediacy to the stories she told. Had she simply protested against generalities, would her points have hit home so hard and so well?

Task 2

Reread 'The Mother's Story'. Make notes, either in the text box below or in your learning notebook, in answer to the following questions:

- What is the problem that Nield Chew identifies?
- What remedy does she propose?
- What, according to her, are the implications of the war on dirt?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The main points you will probably have noted are:

- The problem that Nield Chew identifies is the war being waged ineffectually by working-class women against dirt and the effects of poor housing and sanitation.
- Ada Nield Chew reflected that if anything was to be done to solve the problem, it would demand concerted action of some kind. At the end of the story she sees this as necessarily concerted action by women themselves.
- She believes that the problem is inextricably linked with the poor health of the nation. (It was at about this time that the governing class was becoming acutely aware of the fact that many working-class males were medically unfit for military service.)

3.3 Joining the campaign for 'Votes for Women'

Ada Nield Chew became involved in the campaign for the vote as a suffragist during the period 1911–14. She believed that the vote was just the first step in removing the many social and economic burdens which restricted the lives of the working classes. She approached it first as a member of the early Labour Party. In 1911 she became secretary of the Women's Labour League. Although women did not have the vote, they could work to support election campaigns, and Nield Chew was involved in campaigns at Holmfirth (1911), Crewe (1912), Midlothian (1912) and several others in 1913 and 1914. Figure 5 shows Nield Chew campaigning for the Independent Labour Party (ILP) at the Crewe by-election in 1912. Eventually, however, she was to dissociate herself from any particular political party. She became a noted speaker and, although Labour candidates didn't win seats, the suffragists probably managed to prevent Liberal candidates from winning.



Figure 5 A photograph of Ada Nield Chew campaigning for the ILP during the Crewe by-election of 1912.

Ada Nield Chew's story underlines the fact that individual women came to protest against women's lack of the vote by several routes and were not necessarily convinced suffragists from the very start. Nield Chew was first and foremost a campaigner for better working conditions and greater opportunities for women and she saw women's suffrage as a way of securing those.

4 The suffragette movement

Now that you have explored some of the nuance in the history of the campaign for women's suffrage, you're going to focus on what many today think of as the only aspect of that campaign: the one made famous by the suffragettes who brought militancy and violence to the fore of domestic politics in the years before the First World War.

In the next sections of this course you will look at the suffragette movement in more detail. You'll look at mass support for the women's suffrage movement before studying the suffragettes and their methods. You'll reflect on the achievement of the suffrage movement as a whole and, in order to do this, you'll be examining many different types of sources, including photographs that you have to find on other websites. The skills needed for visual analysis will be a new set to add to your toolkit!

This is how WSPU organiser Annie Kenney (1879–1953) summed up suffragette tactics, seeing their approach as modelled on that of the Chartists before them:

Some of the other societies are, I know, dead against our action. But what have they done? They have been trying to get women's suffrage for sixty years. We are taking up the methods of the old Chartists, and are fighting for our rights. The police said to us yesterday, 'Do you know you have broken the law?'; and we replied 'Yes, and we will break it again if we don't get something done for us.'

(Kenney, 1906, p. 6)

The years between 1903 and the outbreak of war in 1914 saw a surge of public interest in the 'Votes for Women' campaign. While the peaceful NUWSS continued patiently to put forward the moral case for reform, the militant WSPU grabbed the headlines with a series of dramatic actions. Both organisations operated an extensive network of branches across the country and could count their supporters in the thousands. What had once been a marginalised issue in British politics was fast becoming one of the central topics of debate.

But success was a long time coming. Why? Women, even those who actively supported the suffrage campaign, were not united. Did that affect their chances?

Later on, you will look at the physical force protests of the WSPU in more detail, but first let us get a sense of the range of public support for votes for women by considering a single mass demonstration, the Women's Coronation Procession.

4.1 The Women's Coronation Procession

The Women's Coronation Procession took place on Saturday 17 June 1911 in London. This was a time of renewed hope for the women's suffrage movement. There seemed to be a genuine prospect of a bill being put before Parliament, and the WSPU had called a truce on its militant actions to give the parliamentary process a chance to work. It was decided that the time was right for a grand demonstration in London that would bring together the various wings of the women's suffrage movement.

The choice of time and place was no accident – a summer's evening in central London, just a few days before the coronation procession of King George V, a time when visitors from across the world would be present in the capital.

You're going to find out more about the Women's Coronation Procession now by using two types of primary sources.

The first is a newspaper report. The procession in question, which, as mentioned above, occurred on Saturday 17 June 1911, was widely reported in the national newspapers on Monday 19 June.

Activity 4 Using a newspaper report to find information

Read the following article.

[The Times, 'The Women's Suffrage Demonstration'](#)

As you read, make notes, either in the text boxes below or in your learning notebook, on the following questions:

What use was made in the procession of the history of women's endeavours?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The historical message of the procession was that there had been many women of distinction over the centuries; for example, Abbess Hilda, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I and Florence Nightingale. Women had achieved great things in the past, and (through the professions represented in the procession) were still achieving great things in the present. How could the vote be denied to people such as these?

In what ways did the procession convey the breadth of support for women's suffrage?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The procession emphasised the range of support for women's suffrage in a variety of ways. There was support from the different national regions in the UK, the British Empire and the rest of the world. There was also support from people of different classes, employments, political alignments and religious denominations.

What was the balance in the procession between peaceful and militant supporters of votes for women?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The article is keen to stress that the militant WSPU was not the only or even the main group in the procession – there was a larger contingent of moderate 'constitutionalists' who were associated with the NUWSS under the leadership of Mrs Henry Fawcett.

What do the organisation and scale of this procession indicate about the women's suffrage movement at this time?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The procession shows us clearly that the campaign for women's suffrage was not just a matter of a few militant individuals – it was a large, popular movement of many thousands of people, with highly efficient structures of organisation that were capable of mounting an impressive demonstration in the capital.

Did your responses cover some of the same issues as those mentioned in the comments above? Don't worry if yours don't look exactly the same. As is the case throughout this course the main thing is that your notes and responses help you to engage with and remember the materials.

4.2 Photographic records

The steep rise in the use of cameras in the second half of the nineteenth century means that historians have a rich archive of photographic records from this time onwards, and you're now going to consider how these further primary sources might contribute to the development of your thinking about the suffragettes.

Is it possible to find photographic records of the Women's Coronation Procession online? Luckily, an archive of over a hundred suffragette images is held by the Museum of London, and these images can be viewed through its website.

Activity 5 Images of the Women's Coronation Procession

Go to the [Museum of London Prints](#) website and search for 'women's coronation procession'. This should bring up a selection of images relating to the procession. Note that if you click on an image, you will see a larger version of it and a brief text to explain its contents; it is also possible to enlarge the image further.

Now answer the following questions, either in the text boxes below or in your learning notebook:

What evidence can you find here about the range of groups that supported women's suffrage?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Most in evidence is the range of nationalities present – there are images of Irish, Welsh and Scottish contingents, and a particularly striking image of a group from India in the Empire Pageant. (The campaign for women's suffrage was an international movement, and by 1911 there were parts of the world that had already granted women the vote in elections. Dominions within the British Empire that had a degree of self-government had led the way – the vote was granted to women in New Zealand in 1893 and in Australia between 1893 and 1909.)

What do these images suggest about the level of organisation that went into this procession?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Clearly, a lot of organisation had gone into creating this well-coordinated and large-scale demonstration. The NUWSS and WSPU were only two of the leading lights among a range of women's suffrage societies, and together these groups were able to summon thousands of supporters from across the UK and beyond. One of the WSPU's main skills was publicity, and as an example of this you may have come across the handbill that it produced to advertise the procession (image number 001308 on the Museum of London Prints website). Note that, like so much of the WSPU's output, it is printed in the WSPU colours of purple, white and green.

This section has given you the opportunity to find out about the Women's Coronation Procession and has introduced you to two types of primary sources – newspaper reports and photographs. It is worth noting, however, that this is one of many different peaceful demonstrations that took place at the time. It wasn't all arson and window breaking.

The aim of this section has been to convey that women's suffrage was truly a mass movement, supported by many peaceful 'moderates' as well as militant activists. Research has shown that members of the NUWSS and the WSPU supported one another at different stages of the campaign (see Crawford, 2001, pp. 735–6). However, many campaigners were faced with the dilemma of choosing between 'moral force' and 'physical force' tactics. Was an approach of sticking to moral argument the best long-term path to success, or was physical action needed to get things moving? Could physical action undermine the cause because of the public response?

5 Votes for women: militant action

The previous section explored women's struggle to gain the vote in the UK in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by looking at some primary sources. Now the focus shifts to some of the types of action in which these women took part.

5.1 Different types of action

The WSPU was engaged in a range of activities, not all of which involved law breaking. These included the usual campaigning activities of:

- holding public meetings
- making speeches
- writing articles, pamphlets and books.

One of the WSPU's most successful endeavours was the weekly newspaper *Votes for Women*, which members worked tirelessly to sell across the country. They would walk the streets (see Figure 6), dressed in the WSPU colours of purple, white and green, carrying a poster and, if necessary, standing in the gutter, because they could be arrested for causing an obstruction if they stood on the pavement.



Figure 6 A suffragette selling *Votes for Women*.

But of course, the WSPU did more than this. One favourite tactic was for a protester to chain herself to the railings of a government building and deliver a speech to the passers-by for as long as possible before the police managed to cut her free and arrest her (see Figure 7). Another tactic was the smashing of windows of government and commercial properties – even 10 Downing Street was subjected to this treatment.



Figure 7 Three policemen arrest a suffragette outside Buckingham Palace. London, June 1914.

In the terminology of the WSPU, the group was engaged in a military campaign and medals were awarded to members who served time in prison. At any one time, the women's jail at Holloway could have hundreds of suffragettes within its walls. The leaders Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst all served multiple prison sentences.

5.2 The Cat and Mouse Act

Most suffragettes were denied the privileges in prison owed to political prisoners and in response they went on hunger strike. Many were repeatedly force-fed with nasal or mouth tubes (Figure 8), a horrific process that could have long-term consequences for their health.



Figure 8 Suffragette being force fed with the nasal tube in Holloway Prison.

With the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-health) Act of 1913, commonly known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act', the government attempted a different policy, abandoning force-feeding and releasing hunger-strikers when they were weak, only to reimprison them when they had got their strength back. But the policy was a failure, one reason being that released prisoners tended to go into hiding and evade capture.

The next activity will involve you undertaking a web-based search to find out some specific information on a particular suffragette's experience of the Cat and Mouse Act.

Activity 6 Searching for information about the Cat and Mouse Act

Use your favourite search engine to find out about a suffragette called Lilian Lenton and her experiences of the Cat and Mouse Act. You may find lots of interesting information during this search, but you should spend only about 20 minutes searching before moving on to read the Discussion.

Hint: you can narrow your search by using double quotation marks around phrases.

Discussion

If you first searched for information on Lenton herself, you may have found one or more of the following:

- a Wikipedia [article](#)
- an article on a website called [Spartacus Educational](#)
- a clip from a British Pathé newsreel [Suffragettes Meet Again](#) (1955).

The Wikipedia page, on first look, contained an error regarding the date when women were granted the vote, claiming that it was 1914. (This error has since been corrected on the site.) Wikipedia is often more accurate on the facts that are directly relevant to the subject of an article (such as Lilian Lenton's biographical information).

You may also have found information during your search about a book called *Rebel Girls* by the historian Jill Liddington (Liddington, 2006), which contains information about Lenton.

Searches for 'Cat and Mouse Act', as you may have found, bring up educational websites in the main. Some sources, such as [Spartacus Educational](#) are short but factual. Some of the wording used on the [History Learning Site](#) is very similar to that used in the timeline for the [Working Class Movement Library](#), which mentions the Act. Perhaps one of them copied the text from the other? This topic also has a Wikipedia entry, which appeared to be accurate.

"Lilian Lenton" and "Cat and Mouse Act", combined, may have produced fewer hits. The [BBC archive film](#) of Lenton explaining about the Act, or Lenton's Wikipedia entry, may have come up. This shows how the use of double quotation marks around phrases can help to narrow searches.

Were you surprised by what you learned of this Act? Does its popular name do justice to what was involved, or does it diminish the experiences of those affected, do you think?

5.3 Were suffragettes terrorists?

As the years went by, and hopes of new legislation on votes for women were dashed, the WSPU's methods became more extreme. One approach was to burn down buildings during the night – they were checked beforehand to make sure that no human or animal was present inside. The country house of the leading Liberal politician David Lloyd George was fire-bombed in February 1913.

Another tactic was vandalising paintings and other valuable objects in galleries and museums (targets included the Velázquez painting popularly known as 'The Rokeby Venus', which represented the Goddess of Love as a female nude), and many ended up being closed to women or to the public in general.

There were real dangers of a public backlash against this sort of extreme action, especially in the last desperate years of protest between 1912 and 1914. Increasingly, indignant men were physically attacking WSPU members, shops and offices, and driving the movement underground.

Then, in August 1914, the narrative abruptly changed with the outbreak of the First World War. The women's suffrage societies stopped most of their activities for the duration of the war. Exactly how events might have unfolded without this dramatic rupture in history, we will never know, though many books and other scholarly sources debate this question (see, for example, Martin Pugh's 'Epilogue: War and the Vote' in his book *The March of the Women* (2000)). You'll return to this question later in the course.

It's possible to look further into the militant activities of the WSPU by considering another type of source available to you on the internet. There is a growing archive of television and radio programmes, including historical documentaries, to be found there.

Activity 7 The things we forgot to remember

This activity has two tasks.

In this activity you will explore a radio programme from the series *Things We Forgot to Remember*, which has been split into two clips for Tasks 1 and 2 below. Listen to each clip, and, either in the text box provided or in your learning notebook, answer the question asked following the first audio and carry out the task set following the second.

Task 1

Listen to the following audio.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 1 *Things we forgot to remember*, clip 1

What tactics did members of the WSPU use or consider using in their campaign?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You might have written about:

- arson
- destruction of property
- bombing
- assassinating the Prime Minister.

Task 2

Now listen to the next audio.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 2 *Things we forgot to remember, clip 2*

Summarise the difference of opinion between Krista Cowman and June Purvis over the issue of whether or not members of the WSPU can be described as 'terrorists'.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Krista Cowman is prepared to admit that the WSPU used tactics that could be described as 'terrorist'. However, June Purvis resists this description of their campaign. Whose views did you find yourself closest to as you were listening?

This activity has demonstrated once more that it's important to investigate the range of opinion on a topic, as well as the purpose and possible bias of a particular source.

5.4 Reflecting on the militant actions of the suffragettes

What did the militancy of the WSPU achieve? Without doubt, it stirred up publicity. In the years leading up to 1914 there was a steady flow of headlines in the national press about the latest building to be burned down, the latest museum piece to be vandalised or the latest possible bomb hoax, coupled with the latest arrest, hunger strike, release or reimprisonment of a leading suffragette.

But was this the 'right type' of publicity? Did it make the goal of securing votes for women more or less likely? Historical opinion remains divided. One danger was that, especially in the years of heightened militancy between 1912 and 1914, it allowed the authorities to treat the women's suffrage movement simply as a public order issue, rather than engaging properly with the arguments for electoral reform that the movement wanted to put across. It also may have discouraged law-abiding readers for whom the whole idea of breaking the law was out of the question.

On the other hand, the militant activities of the WSPU ensured that the women's suffrage movement remained at centre stage in the national debate. It prevented opponents of women's suffrage within the establishment from ignoring the issue and brushing it to one side. The WSPU had a knack of stirring up public attention, always managing to provoke a response, whether positive or negative. The hope was that as long as that public interest was alive, the possibility of reform was also alive.

In the meantime, the NUWSS continued its work, still drawing in large numbers of supporters and making the moral case for reform. It showed that the cause of women's suffrage was not backed only by militants, but was also supported by many moderate,

law-abiding citizens – a message that was crucial for winning over the state and the public as a whole. Its role in the quest for votes for women should not be forgotten.

As noted earlier, there is one major factor that makes it hard to determine the relative contributions of the WSPU and the NUWSS to securing votes for women: the intervention of the First World War. When war broke out in 1914, the issue was unresolved. You will see later in the course that the war was to have a transforming effect on attitudes in government and among the public towards giving women the vote.

6 The suffragettes: a personal history

One of the most important types of literary and historical writing is *biography*, an account of an individual person's life. Earlier in this course you read a biography from the ODNB when you examined the life and work of Ada Nield Chew. Biographies help us to connect with history on a human level, offering us a perspective on the past from the point of view of a single human experience. For some readers, biography seems more accessible than an impersonal account of social forces or cultural trends. In this section you will have a chance to explore your own response to this issue, as you find out about an individual suffragette.

6.1 May Billinghurst

The life stories of many of the leaders of the suffrage campaign make for fascinating reading. They were utterly dedicated, passionate idealists, who fought valiantly for their cause.

It is important to note, however, that they were also individuals with distinctive personalities. You're going to investigate one notable example in more detail in this section: May Billinghurst.



Figure 9 May Billinghurst.

In order to find out about Billinghurst, you will use an ODNB resource again.

Activity 8 May Billinghurst

Read the biography below and answer the following questions, either in the text boxes below or in your learning notebook:

[\(Rosa\) May Billinghurst biography](#)

Why do you think that May Billinghurst became a suffragette?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The account gives a specific reason for Billingham's commitment to women's suffrage: the injustices that she had witnessed when working in London to rescue young girls from prostitution. This reflects an important truth about the women's suffrage movement – the vote was sought not just as a goal in itself, but as a means by which to improve the lives of women in society as a whole. The same had been true of the Chartists, who had seen getting the vote as a means of forcing the state to take better care of its citizens.

Did Billingham's disability stop her from taking part in suffragette activities?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Billingham's disability didn't stop her from taking part in suffragette activities. Moving about by tricycle, she organised public meetings, took part in demonstrations, was arrested, went on hunger strike and was force-fed. The ODNB entry does not mention this, but there are also reports of her being present in an attempt by a group of suffragettes to force an entry to Buckingham Palace on 21 May 1914 (Crawford, 2001, p. 54).

What personal qualities and beliefs might have sustained her in her efforts?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

A central motivation for Billingham was her lifelong commitment to women's causes, which started before her involvement with the suffragettes, and continued many years afterwards. It is also interesting to note the references to her sense of humour, courage and belief in **reincarnation**, all of which may have helped her to persevere.

When reading a biographical account of a prominent suffragette, it is important to remember that the women's suffrage movement drew on the support of tens of thousands of people (men as well as women), without whom the campaign for votes for women would have got nowhere. The great majority of these supporters, who may themselves have led extraordinary lives, will never have biographies written about them.

However, biography is still a useful pathway into the past. As you may have noticed from the discussion of the ODNB above, when you study an individual person's life, you often end up thinking more broadly about the times in which they lived. A good biography seeks to interpret an individual in context, because this is necessary in order to understand both their formation and their motivations. It can stretch to include many aspects of the subject's contemporary world. It also helps the reader to take notice of the context and to learn more about it. The life story of a memorable individual can gain readers' attention very successfully, combining as it does elements readers may recognise, as well as those which might be very different, in the story of a life. The best examples combine all the literary skills employed in good story writing (character development, techniques to set the scene, plot development, perhaps even suspense!) with the historical perspective,

helping to explain the past in more general as well as individual terms, and, by extension, the present as well.

7 Votes for women: the First World War and gaining the vote

This section will give you the chance to arrive at an assessment of how and why women were ultimately successful in gaining the vote. As part of this study, you're going to return your attention to the First World War, to find out a little more about how this affected women's role in society.

7.1 The First World War and the suffragettes

When war broke out in 1914 the suffragettes stopped their law-breaking activities and, in return, the government arranged a mass release of suffragettes from prison.

Members of both the moderate NUWSS and the militant WSPU committed themselves to the war effort; Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst were both forthright in their support for the war. However, there were dissenting voices within the movement. Some took a pacifist stance, including Sylvia Pankhurst, who went her own way in defiance of her mother and sister.

The war years were to have a transformative effect on women's roles in society. Not only were about a million more women drawn into the workforce, but also women were to be found doing jobs that had previously been done by men, as men were called into the armed forces. Women served in the police, worked on the railways, and became mechanics, carpenters, van drivers and coal heavers.

Directly for the war effort, they worked en masse in munitions factories, and the numbers of military nurses swelled to cope with the huge stream of casualties. The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps performed a variety of tasks within the military, including canteen work and administration. By 1918 there was even a 'Women's Royal Air Force' with women air mechanics.

The terrible death toll at the front led to new questions being raised about whether all adult males should be given the vote to reward them for their sacrifices. When an all-party Speaker's Conference on the issue was held at Parliament, lobbyists for female suffrage took the opportunity to press the case for votes for women.

At this point, Millicent Fawcett (1847–1929) played a significant role. She had struggled to keep the NUWSS together as it became increasingly divided with respect to the war. But she was the sort of moderate figure who could negotiate with the politicians while at the same negotiating with the supporters of women's suffrage to accept a compromise deal. Historians who argue that in the end it was the moderate NUWSS that secured reform would point to its contribution at this stage.

Millicent Fawcett was honoured with a statue in Parliament Square, London, which was unveiled in April 2018. She became the first woman to be recognised in this way. There are 11 other statues in this square, all representing famous men, including Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Palmerston and Nelson Mandela. Why do you think she was chosen?



Figure 10 Statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square.

7.2 Getting the vote

The Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the vote not only to men over the age of 21, but also to women over the age of 30. (Women, in addition, had to fulfil a property requirement, which meant this legislation excluded poorer women.) Women were also now entitled to stand as MPs. Historians debate the precise nature of the reasons for this dramatic change, but rewarding women for their role in the war effort was definitely a factor. It was also significant that Asquith (who had been opposed to women's suffrage) was no longer Prime Minister and had been succeeded by Lloyd George, who turned out to be more sympathetic to the cause of votes for women – despite the earlier fire-bombing of his home (which you read about earlier in this course).

Once this crucial change had been made, there was strong momentum for further reform. In 1928, a few days after Emmeline Pankhurst died, women were finally given equality with men in national elections, gaining the entitlement to vote from the age of 21.

From all the materials you have engaged with so far, you will probably be coming to a conclusion about what you think were the most significant factors in women being given the right to vote.

Activity 9 Factors in women getting the vote

Using the text box below, or your learning notebook, make a list of what you think are three of the most significant factors in women being given the right to vote. Add a line or two of explanation, based on your work on the course materials or on the additional resources you have consulted in the activities. Were particular individuals very effective in the campaign, do you think? You could list them if so.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

There are a number of factors you could have chosen. Did you focus on individuals, or on campaign strategy, or on historical events, such as the coming of war?

As is so often the case with the study of history, the debate continues, with historians and other researchers of the women's movement putting forward a range of interpretations. (You could look for some examples in the work of Elizabeth Crawford, or Martin Pugh, both of whom have been mentioned in this course; there are plenty of relevant discussions online too.) Opinion remains divided on the WSPU, but one cannot doubt the bravery and sacrifices of its members in trying to secure a basic human right.

7.3 Economic roles and cultural identities

Inevitably, so far, this course has concentrated on the main goal of the women's suffrage movement. But before this course concludes, it's worth mentioning once more that the 'Votes for Women' campaign was linked with a broader set of issues with respect to improving women's lot socially and economically, and challenging cultural assumptions about the roles and abilities of women.

The women's suffrage movement didn't just seek the vote as an end in itself. It hoped that the economic position of women, together with their legal rights and educational opportunities, would be improved by making the state accountable to female voters. You will remember that Ada Nield Chew came to the suffrage movement after actively working for women workers' rights but, in the years before the First World War, the potential improvements in working conditions and welfare were often seen by women, as well as men, as alternatives to granting universal adult suffrage. This initially had the effect of dividing the women's movement. Yet the movement presented a cultural identity of women as intelligent, rational, resourceful and capable of taking the initiative – ideas that seem common sense to many now, but which still need defending in the twenty-first century.

As it turned out, in the decade that followed women gaining the vote in 1918, a series of measures were introduced that aimed to improve women's lives. It became illegal to bar women from jobs because of their sex; women gained the power to divorce their

husbands for adultery; widows were granted state pensions; and an equal pay campaign was begun. This was just as key members of the women's suffrage movement had hoped. In terms of changing the cultural perception of women, this was a longer-term goal that could be achieved only gradually. There were people at the time who argued in all seriousness that women were naturally less intelligent than men because their brains were smaller, and that women were such emotional beings that they could not be trusted to make a sound political judgement.

This was one reason why celebrating the achievements of women past and present was important to the female suffrage movement. The movement encouraged a cultural perception of women as clever and resourceful, thereby undermining popular prejudices. The Women's Coronation Procession of 1911 included a historical pageant of famous women who had achieved great things. Women were also keen to wear academic gowns on such occasions to show their educational achievements at universities. Later, the war years of 1914–18 created another opportunity to highlight the abilities of women, as they contributed to the war effort and took on jobs usually done by men.

Activity 10 What have you learned?

Look back at this course and answer the following questions:

1. When were the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) formed?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The NUWSS was formed in 1897; the WSPU was formed in 1903.

2. What was the key difference between the NUWSS and the WSPU?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The main difference between the two organisations was that the WSPU used militant tactics in its campaign to obtain the vote, sometimes breaking the law, whereas the NUWSS used peaceful, law-abiding tactics.

3. In which respective years did women over the age of 30 and women over the age of 21 obtain the vote?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Women over 30 obtained the vote in 1918; women over 21 obtained the vote in 1928.

Conclusion

This free course, *The history of female protest and suffrage in the UK*, has been designed to help you to develop your knowledge of the history of the suffrage movement and of some of the key individuals and events that contributed to women gaining the vote in the early twentieth century. History often focuses on a relatively small number of influential individuals; you may well have heard of Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst prior to starting this course. Many other figures play their part in processes of historical change, though, and here you have been introduced to other prominent suffragists and suffragettes, including Ada Nield Chew, Lilian Lenton and May Billinghurst.

You have also been introduced to specific skills related to the study of history, especially how to make use of different kinds of historical sources, drawing on a wide range of media. Your study of this topic has also helped you to practice skills of interpretation, explanation and analysis.

We hope that you have enjoyed this course and gained a greater understanding of historical processes in general, and the history of women's suffrage in particular.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [Y031 Arts and languages Access module](#).

Further resources

You might find the following two free OpenLearn resources interesting:

[Protest banners: women's suffrage](#)

[100 years of votes for \(some\) women](#)

Glossary

lower middle class

Historians debate who belonged to this class, but generally it included clerks, white-collar workers, schoolteachers in all but the best public schools, small shopkeepers and publicans (see also class; middle class).

NUWSS

National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

reincarnation

The rebirth of a soul in another body.

suffragette

A term used to describe activist suffragists who were determined to get the vote for women whatever the cost. The term was first used by Charles E. Hands in the Daily Mail to describe members of Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The activists embraced the description, saying that the term 'SuffraGETtes' [sic] implied not only that they wanted the vote, but also that they intended to get it. The suffragettes only adopted militant tactics from 1912 onwards.

suffragists

A general term for supporters of suffrage movements, whether male or female, radical or conservative, peaceful or militant. Thus, Ada Nield Chew and Emmeline Pankhurst were both suffragists although their standpoints were very different. Commonly, to avoid confusion, historians use 'suffragette' to describe the radical and later militant female suffragists.

WSPU

Women's Social and Political Union.

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Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Sara Haslam, Kirsten Jeffrey, Hannah Lavery, Rosemary O'Day, Steve Padley and Stefanie Sinclair.

The course authors would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the authors of the following Open University courses: *An introduction to the humanities* (A103) and *Making sense of the arts* (Y180).

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