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Rosa May Billinghamurst

Hayley Trueman

Trueman, H. (2004) 'Rosa May Billinghamurst', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Copyright © Oxford University Press 2020. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

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Billinghurst, (Rosa) May (1875–1953), suffragette, was born on 31 May 1875 at 35 Granville Park, Lewisham, London, the second of nine children of Henry Farncombe Billinghurst (1832–1912), bank manager, and his second wife, Rosa Ann, *née* Brimsmead (1842–1931). At the age of five months she suffered an illness which resulted in paralysis from the waist down. For the rest of her life her legs were strapped in irons and she relied on the use of an invalid tricycle for mobility.

As a young woman May Billinghurst worked among Greenwich workhouse inmates, and with poor children in the Deptford slums. She also joined one of her sisters in the work of rescuing young girls from prostitution in Greater London. It was the injustices she encountered while engaged in this work that shaped her political beliefs and led her to join the fight for women's suffrage. She had been a member of the Women's Liberal Association, but resigned in early 1907 to join the newly formed Lewisham branch of the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). She became heavily involved in organizing campaign events and public meetings, and in June 1910 she helped form the Greenwich branch of the WSPU, becoming its honorary secretary. A familiar face now at WSPU events and demonstrations she became widely known as 'the cripple suffragette'. Her disability was certainly no bar to her participation in the physically demanding activities undertaken by suffragettes.

May Billinghurst joined her comrades at the WSPU demonstration in London on 18 November 1910, which was to become known as 'black Friday'. She was badly assaulted by the police, who, having pushed her down a side road by twisting her arms behind her back, pocketed the wheel valves of her tricycle leaving her unable to escape from the angry crowd. These harrowing events only made her more determined to participate in militancy. Four days later she was arrested at another demonstration and subsequently imprisoned for five days, for attempting to push her tricycle through a cordon of police. In March 1912 she was once again imprisoned for militant activity, sentenced to one month in Holloway prison for window-smashing.

A final term in prison in January 1913 for destroying the contents of a post-box was to test to the limits her political convictions. On starting her eight-month sentence in Holloway prison on 9 January 1913, she immediately went on hunger strike. Against the medical opinion of her own doctor, despite her infirmities, and against her will, the prison authorities attempted forcibly to feed her several times. One attempt to gag open her mouth was so violent that her teeth were damaged and her cheek gashed open. After serving only ten days, she was released from Holloway by the order of the home secretary. After her release she campaigned to stop the forcible feeding of suffragette prisoners and continued to battle for the vote.

With the onset of war May Billinghurst left Lewisham and went to live with her artist brother Henry Billinghurst in Regent's Park village. Her commitment to feminist societies continued throughout her life: she was a member of the Suffrage Fellowship and the Women's Freedom League, donating £100 in 1953 to Jill Craigie's Equal Pay Film Fund. The last few years of her life were spent living at 2 Fordbridge Road, Sunbury-on-Thames. She died on 29 July 1953 in St Mary's Hospital, Twickenham, from heart failure while recovering from pneumonia. Her unrelenting commitment to the welfare of women and her belief in reincarnation led her to leave her body to the London School of Medicine for Women.

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May Billinghamurst's obituary in the *Women's Freedom League Bulletin* on 4 September 1953 described her as having 'a strong sense of humour, even perhaps, a mischievous one ... full of life and courage and not to mention jollity ... [thinking] of this life as but one of many'.

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