

Celebrating Suffrage for 100 Years

An in Depth Review on the Anniversary of our Ancestor's Fight for Women's Rights

By Lucy and Ellie

The Suffragette Movement was a historical campaign for women's rights that has echoed through the ages, influencing the lives of females throughout history. Also, developing our world to its current almost completely equal population, although minor injustices are still prominent towards race and gender. This movement introduced women to votes, and, eventually, it developed into education, intellectually challenging professions which they had previously been denied and the abolishment of what had appeared to be the permanent classification as the housewife, hence the initial origins of the name, *housewife*.

Although the commonly associated initiation date of the suffrage is generally considered to be 1918, hence the nationally known anniversary of the suffragettes commencing throughout the entirety of this year; the ambition to create an equal society in which women can vote had really started in 1897 when Millicent Fawcett founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage, "Suffrage" directly defined as right to vote.

Before women won the right to vote, they were ridiculed and forced to work for very little pay in abysmal conditions in factories such as laundrettes, from which women would come home blistered and scarred, raw from the monotonous work they were assigned, in comparison to the office jobs of which some men enjoyed.

This year, we celebrate the year in which we gained our right to vote, and with it so much more.

This week, Comberton Village College is celebrating this freedom by hosting events, such as: *Women in Science* along with the entire nation celebrating this victory through events like *International Women's Day*, during which there were many other events celebrating the success of the suffrage.

Following, is some history on how the Suffragettes started, and how they, eventually, concluded.

Millicent Fawcett, the unofficial founder of the Suffrage, believed strongly in peaceful, persuasive protest and felt that intended violence or ferocity would persuade men that women could not be trusted to have the right to vote and she therefore strived to pursue her desire through patience and logical arguments. Millicent Fawcett argued that women could hold responsible posts in society such as sitting on school boards – but could not be

trusted to vote. She argued that if parliament made laws and if women had to obey those laws, then women should be part of the process of making those laws and that as women had to pay taxes as men, they should have the same rights as men; and, one of her most powerful arguments, was that wealthy mistresses of large manors and estates employed gardeners, workmen and labourers who could vote...but the women themselves could not regardless of their wealth.

She was infamous at the time for her constant retaliation with unquestionable arguments, for which no political leaders could dismiss or avoid, and, gradually, as her beliefs became more prominently known in society, so did the recognition as to the injustice and prejudice with which women were regarded.

However, as a result of her patient nature and tolerance of the ignorance of politicians at the time, Millicent Fawcett's progress was extremely gradual, and, although she converted some of the members of the Labour Representation Committee (soon to be the Labour Party), most men in Parliament believed that women simply would not understand how Parliament worked and therefore should not take part in the electoral process. Consequently, a vast majority of women were left seething and rebellious from the constant rejections from the government, and in 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, aiming to pursue a less subtle approach to the arrogance of the political figures. They yearned for women to have the right to vote and they were intolerant and impatient to the government, The Union rapidly becoming known as the Suffragettes. Members of the Suffragettes, in contrast to Millicent Fawcett were prepared to use violence to achieve their desires and initiated their rebellion promptly after the initiation of the Suffragettes.

However, the Suffragettes started off relatively peacefully, only creating their first ripple of acknowledgement in 1905 when the organisation created a stir from Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney interrupting a political meeting in Manchester to ask two Liberal politicians (Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Grey) if they believed women should have the right to vote. Neither man replied. As a result, the two women got out a banner which had on it "Votes for Women" and shouted at the two politicians to answer their questions. Such actions were all but unheard of then when public speakers were usually heard in

silenced and listened to courteously even if your personal opinions were of a different nature. Pankhurst and Kenney were thrown out of the meeting and arrested for causing an obstruction and a technical assault on a police officer. Following this, both women refused to pay a fine, claiming that they preferred to go to prison to highlight the injustice of the system as it was then. Emmeline Pankhurst later wrote in her autobiography that:

“This was the beginning of a campaign the like of which was never known in England, or for that matter in any other country...we interrupted a great many meetings...and we were violently thrown out and insulted. Often we were painfully bruised and hurt.”

Although the Suffragettes refused to bow to using the word violence, they used what they considered to be gentle persuasion to gain the acknowledgment of those in parliament, attempting to achieve this by burning down churches (as the Church of England was against what they desired); they vandalised Oxford Street, apparently breaking all the windows in this famous street; they chained themselves to Buckingham Palace as the Royal Family were seen to be against women having the right to vote; they hired out boats, sailed up the Thames and shouted abuse through loud hailer at Parliament as it sat; and others refused to pay their tax. Politicians were attacked as they went to work and their homes were fire bombed. Golf courses were vandalised. The first decade of Britain in the twentieth century was proving to be violent in the extreme.

Suffragettes were blissfully content if they were sentenced to prison, where they refused to eat and went on a hunger strike, causing the government to have concerns as to whether they might die in prison, consequently giving the movement martyrs. Prison governors were ordered to force feed Suffragettes, however, this plan seriously backfired as it caused a public outcry as a result of the fact that forced feeding was traditionally used to feed lunatics as opposed to what were mostly educated women.

The government of Asquith responded with the Cat and Mouse Act, which included when a Suffragette was sent to prison, it was assumed that she would go on hunger strike as this caused the authorities maximum discomfort. Unfortunately, the Cat and Mouse Act was a form of trap which allowed the Suffragettes to go on a hunger strike and let them rapidly get weaker and weaker, gradually removing any form of rebellion from them without the use of force feeding and releasing the Suffragettes when they were on the brink of insanity or death, weakened and withered when death was either inevitable or balanced precariously on the edge of it. If they died out of prison, this was of no embarrassment to the government, however, if they

did not die, which was commonly the case with the resilient and determined women imprisoned but those who were released were so weak that they could take no part in violent Suffragette rebellions. When those who had been arrested and released had regained their strength, they were re-arrested for the most trivial of reason and the whole process repeated. This, from the government's point of view, was a very simple but effective weapon against the Suffragettes.

As a result, the Suffragettes became more extreme. The most famous act associated with the Suffragettes was at the June 1913 Derby when Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King's horse, Anmer, as it rounded Tattenham Corner. She was killed and the Suffragettes had their first martyr. However, her actions probably did more harm than good to the cause as she was a highly educated woman. Many men asked the simple question – if this is what an educated woman does, what might a lesser educated woman do? How can they possibly be given the right to vote?

It is possible that the Suffragettes would have become more violent. They had, after all, in February 1913 blown up part of David Lloyd George's house – he was probably Britain's most famous politician at this time and he was thought to be a supporter of the right for women to have the vote!

However, Britain and Europe were plunged into World War One in August 1914. In a display of patriotism, Emmeline Pankhurst instructed the Suffragettes to stop their campaign of violence and support in every way the government and its war effort. The work done by women in the First World War was to be vital for Britain's war effort. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act was passed by Parliament and today, 2018, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of these women, who sacrificed lives so we could have what we do today.