

The Suffragettes of Nottingham

How Nottingham women fought to be heard.

By Hannah Salisbury

Before the introduction of the Reform Act in 1832, most men and all women were denied the right to vote. Successive reform acts slowly saw the enfranchisement of small sections of society, by 1884 most men had been granted the right to vote. Highlighting the only grounds for a disqualification from voting as gender.

The 6th February 2018, saw 100 years since Parliament introduced the Representation for the People Act. Granting *some* women, the right to vote. This act saw women over the age of 30 whom owned, either of their own right or through their husbands, property worth at least £5 (the equivalent or around £275 today). This is seen as a great landmark for women's rights, however the act was not just about the enfranchising of women, as it also gave all men over the age of 21 the right to vote. A further wedge between the genders and an equal standing. It would be another decade until men and women shared an equal standing with voting rights.

The fight for women's suffrage is famously a turbulent one. In 1897, women's suffrage societies came together to form

the **National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies**, under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. Fawcett proved to be a determined and passionate fighter for the cause who strongly believed in peaceful tactics. She believed non-violent demonstrations, petitions and the lobbying of MPs were movements with the clearest path to success. With the organisation being painted as intelligent, polite and law-abiding, the women would prove themselves as both responsible and capable members of society, more than able to participate in politics. The party's leadership was exclusively middle class and the franchise faced the issue of drawing in women from various sectors of society to unite.

By the turn of the century, members of the movement had grown impatient. Their efforts had got them nowhere and under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst, a member of the Manchester Suffragists, a new movement was born. Splitting from the NUWSS in 1903, the **Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)** was formed, named 'suffragettes' by *The Daily Mail*, the movement put peaceful acts behind them and turned to more militant strategies.

'Deeds, not words, was to be our permanent motto'

-Emmeline Pankhurst

From the smashing of windows, chaining themselves to railings and their speeches, of which many are still quoted today, they brought together women from all sectors of society and created a unified identity for women suffrage fighters. The suffragettes brought their fight to every corner of the country and Nottingham was no different.

In 1913, the same year of Emily Davison's death at the Epsom Derby races, the Nottingham Boat Club was burnt down by suffragettes, it's thought this was due to it being a men-only organisation. However, their action had consequences and at the next women's rally in Nottingham, members of the boat club arrived to cause disruption.

Helen Watts



(Credit: Col. Linley Blathwayt. Wikimedia Commons)

Born in 1881, from a conservative background, her father was a vicar for the Holy Trinity Church in Lenton. Helen Watts rebelled against her authoritative upbringing and followed a determination to be heard. She became an active member of the suffragette movement, hitting

headlines in 1909 when she was arrested at a 'women only' meeting at Caxton Hall. The meeting had drawn a passionate audience whom towards the end of the meeting formed a procession towards the House of Commons. Police had been made aware of their intentions, and were under orders to disperse the gathering. Several women, including Helen Watts were arrested and held overnight at Bow Street station.

'I'm afraid it will be a great shock to you to see my name in the papers as taking part in the NWSPU deputation to the House of Commons this evening. I was the second to be arrested [...] even Mrs Pankhurst, Jessie Kenny and Miss Seymour and others have been round beaming at us through the hole in the door and making us all feel puffed up'

-Watts in a letter home to her family, on the night of her arrest.

She was arrested once more whilst fighting for the cause, this time sentenced to five days imprisonment in Leicester Gaol. Adamant she had been arrested unjustly, she refused to dress in prison clothes and went on a hunger strike to which she stuck to even when threatened with force feeding.

Edith Annie Lees

A founding member of the Nottingham branch of the National Council of Women, Edith Annie Lees was a fervent member of the suffragette movement who took her fight across the country. Once receiving a prison sentence for breaking windows, she wrote home to her husband in Nottingham boasting of her deed. It is thought her sentence was short, most likely due to her pregnancy at the time.

There is little known of these women, and many of the others that fought for the cause, outside of their work for the suffragette movement. There is no doubt that their actions had a great impact upon their society and how women were viewed

within it. Although their fight was a long one, their efforts will forever be cemented in history, their voices remembered for their determination to make themselves heard and bring equality to the genders.