

# Berkshire Old and New



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**Berkshire Local History Association**

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***Journal of the Berkshire Local History Association***

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# **Berkshire Local History Association**

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The Association would like to express its thanks to all those who helped by assisting with the various stages of producing this issue of the journal.

## *Cover illustrations*

Front: Women's Social and Political Union shop in Reading (Reading Library).

Back: Women's suffrage badges (Reading Museum).

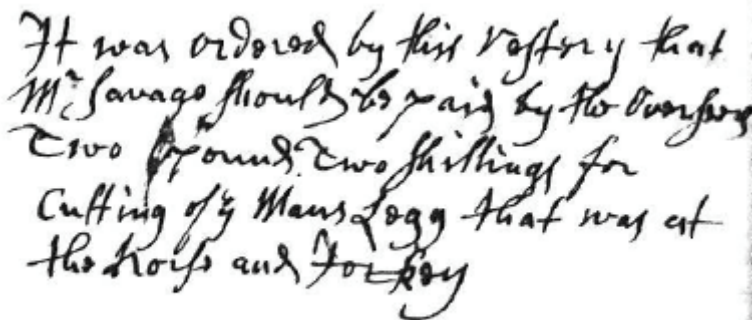
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# Vestrymen and paupers: the struggle to manage the poor in St. Mary's Parish, Reading, in the eighteenth century

Margaret Ounsley

On 11 February 1717 four Vestrymen of St. Laurence's Church, Reading, Thomas Biddell, Charles Bonney, John Hocker and John Spicer, sat down to sign 27 certificates.<sup>1</sup> These are now at the Berkshire Record Office in the records of the parish of St. Mary. They are settlement certificates, and there are thousands like them covering most parishes in Berkshire. The local historian owes a great debt to the members of the Berkshire Family History Society project which calendared them from the 1970s onwards, now available in the *Berkshire Overseers' Papers* (see sample below).



It was ordered by this vestry that  
M<sup>r</sup> Savage should be paid by the Overseers  
two pound two shillings for  
cutting of y<sup>e</sup> Mans Logg that was at  
the Hoys and for pay

The mystery behind this bundle is why so many were signed off at one time. The average *per year* in the records of St. Mary's for the rest of the century is five. Of the 27 names, 19 have wives and children, so, assuming an average of two children each (a conservative estimate) we are looking at 86 people, ostensibly moving in one week (this vestry met weekly). The population of St. Mary's at the time was about two thousand, so this arrival would have caused a population growth of four per cent over seven days. We could visualize a stream of poor migrants walking with their shabby bundles from St. Laurence's, along Broad St and up to St. Mary's Butts to settle in the miserable courts and hovels around Minster Street and Pinkney's Lane.

What could have caused that? A failure of employment? Some sort of catastrophic building collapse?

This interpretation would be completely inaccurate and is an object lesson in the pitfalls of working with documents written for purposes that may be obscure to us. In fact the story behind these certificates is perhaps more interesting and more eloquent than this, telling a familiar tale of resentment at welfare costs and fears of ‘scroungers’.

At the opening of the eighteenth century poor relief was managed on a parish basis. Broadly speaking, you could only claim relief from the parish where you were settled, by birth, marriage, work or as a ratepayer. Since 1662 and the Settlement Act, if you wished to move into another parish, and you were only going to be renting a property worth £10 or less, then technically you needed a settlement certificate from your parish of origin to say that they would meet any relief costs should you need to claim. If you did not have one and you needed to claim from the host parish, they were within their rights to have you removed back to your parish of origin. This system was managed with varying stringency over time and from place to place.

St. Mary’s Reading, like the other two Reading parishes, had a remarkably generous relief system at this time. On average, between 1717 and 1725 £400 was raised in rates per year, which was normally spent each year, only small amounts were ever carried over and the parish was often in deficit. This would amount to about £200 expenditure per thousand at this time. This compares to an average of £75 per thousand in York in 1715.<sup>2</sup>

In 1718 there were normally about 60 people on relief in St. Mary’s parish at any one time, about 45 ‘regulars’ and 15 ‘casuals’. This equates to an average payment per pauper of £6 8s. This was remarkably generous by contemporary standards, although it is only an average, masking variations in generosity.

Reading was a reasonably wealthy town, with a growing population, which made tax-raising easier, but this was not the whole story. Paying poor rates in Reading qualified you to vote, and voting could be remarkably profitable. In the 1754 election votes were being bought for 30 to 40 guineas at a time, and, unlike most constituencies, Reading had a lot of contested elections.<sup>3</sup> Paying 30 shillings poor rate must have seemed a good deal. In addition, Reading had huge charitable resources, mostly administered by the Corporation. Thousands of pounds had been left to the Corporation in the seventeenth century by wealthy merchants such as Kendrick and Aldworth or other prominent citizens such as Archbishop Laud.<sup>4</sup> In addition the wealth in land and chantries of the Abbey, much of it tied to charity, had been handed to the Corporation in a charter of 1560.<sup>5</sup> Using information from the Corporation Diary and Vestry Minutes, I have estimated that St. Mary’s parish could count on an income of about £350 from various charities per year. This was higher than the national average that would have predicted an income of £150.<sup>6</sup>

This meant that in the opening years of the eighteenth century, if someone were settled and ‘deserving’ – for example a widow, or sick or elderly – they could expect generous support. Their rent would be paid; they would receive medical care and nursing, as well as help with their housework if they needed it. Clothes would be bought and they would receive a stipend of about two shillings a week for food. If they died their funeral would be paid for.<sup>7</sup> The St. Mary’s payment books for the time show surprisingly generous payouts. Richard Parslow’s child received ‘a boddis, coat, two aprons and two capps and a pare of hose’ for 10s 2d.<sup>8</sup> If the parish was binding you as an apprentice then payments were even more generous. Maynard Warnham (a young woman) received from the parish a whole wardrobe: ‘A gown and two pettycoats, a pare Boddis, a shift and two Aprons, a pare hose and shooes and pattens and Hats and binding her Apprentice to Wm Honiberer’ for £5 18s 8d.<sup>9</sup>

The trouble was that Reading was going through an economic transition at this time; the old industries of cloth processing were long on the wane, and, while brewing, hospitality and transport services were on the up, there were a lot of unemployed weavers, dyers and fullers. In addition, agricultural distress always meant people moving in from the rural areas to look for work in Reading.<sup>10</sup>

1717 was one of those years. The winters were always the worst, with most immigrants to Reading coming in at this time. Local people also suffered from high food prices and competition for work. The demand for relief went up and up. By February the cupboard was looking very bare. The St. Mary’s paybook from that time shows that, even with the generous resources, they were facing a looming deficit of £14. What made the Overseers panic most was that any deficit at the end of the year (Easter) had to be met by them personally. While parishes often carried this debt over, there was no guarantee they would and the Overseers would have had to go cap in hand to the Vestry. At the very least it would have been a humiliation for them. The Overseers applied to the Vestry for an increase in the poor rate, which they got, but that would only come into force when the new Overseers came in. On 11 February the St. Lawrence Overseers issued their certificates. The certificates needed to be signed by magistrates.

The most likely interpretation of these certificates is not that 86 or so people had upped and moved to St. Mary’s in one week; but that they were already living in St. Mary’s, and *may not even have been claiming relief*. St. Mary’s Vestry, rattled by the looming deficit and rate rise, had decided to do their housekeeping to ensure they knew precisely where their liabilities lay, and who other parishes were responsible for. It is quite possible that it was part of a reciprocal exercise with St. Lawrence’s, but unfortunately their Overseers’ papers do not survive.

This set of documents makes a valuable contribution to an academic debate that has been raging since at least the early 1990s, most notoriously

between Norma Landau and Keith Snell.<sup>11</sup> What do settlement certificates mean? Were they given to people as they left their own parish to move to another? In which case they are an indication of when migrations took place. Or did people get them when they needed to claim relief? In which case they are indications of periods of distress. Or, did Overseers do ‘round-ups’ when they came in at Easter, to establish who were the potential poor? This bundle is none of these; it is a parish responding to a deficit in its poor rate. Although it is closer to Landau’s view that certificates acted more as a census of potential poor than Snell’s, it is another variation, and perhaps shows the extent to which the interpretation and practice of the Old Poor Law varied from town to town and parish to parish.

The documents themselves are a snapshot of the urban poor of Reading at this time, and are revealing. Of the 86 claimants, six of the poor were widows, three still with dependent children, so presumably still quite young. Three were weavers, a job that would once have provided a good living, but now not enough to rise above the poor. Five of them were shoemakers, the largest trade represented in this group, an indication perhaps of the numbers required in a place like Reading. There were two butchers and a hog-killer, a barber, a tailor and a hatter. There were also more esoteric trades, a ‘scribeler’ and a ‘bell man’. Two ‘gardeners’ reflected the market-gardening that flourished on the outskirts of Reading, providing fresh fruit and vegetables to the town’s markets. Scrape down further and we have very human, personal stories. We have Isaac Keswell ‘that lived at the Sun Coffee House’ a reference to his previous lodgings in St. Lawrence, and an indication that such urban sophistication had already arrived in Reading. There is Ventris Thorne, who we see elsewhere renting garden land. Obviously poor and struggling at this stage, he appears later as a Vestryman in his own right. Clearly he managed to thrive, and the number of other prominent Thornes in the parish and town suggest there was probably a supportive family network. There were at least six entries for Thorne marriages in St. Lawrence’s in the seventeenth century, and a John Thorne, woollen draper, had been sworn in as a JP in 1704.<sup>12</sup>

Others were not so fortunate. One was James Elkins, the hog-killer. He had been removed once from St. Mary’s to St. Lawrence in 1712, with his wife Mary and daughters Mary, nearly 17, Elizabeth, nearly 16, and sons William, nearly 11 and John, nearly 6.<sup>13</sup> Removal seems to have been quite unusual at the time, if the records are complete, and so it is most likely that they had applied for relief and were seen as a particular burden on the parish and, for whatever reason, St. Lawrence were not willing to pay St. Mary’s for their relief. The name Elkin does not appear in any of the marriage entries for the seventeenth century in St. Lawrence’s, so it is quite possible that they were migrants into there, having only achieved settlement by having been apprenticed, or possibly paying rates in later times. By the 1717 round-up, five years later, they had moved back to St. Mary’s

(something that happened remarkably often with removals). This time there is no wife recorded although there are (unnamed) children. Perhaps his wife had abandoned him, but it is much more likely that she had died. Since the older three children would have almost certainly left home by now, it looks as though at least one other had been born in the intervening years. Perhaps the aging wife had died in childbirth. What is clear is that James, most probably by now in his 50s after a hard labouring life, was left with children to care for and bring up single-handed.

This round-up was also the first symptom, in St. Mary's, of the eighteenth century's long struggle with managing the Old Poor Law system. In the very short term, the rate rise and housekeeping seemed to work. The following year the parish was able to balance its budget. With the benefit of hindsight we can see it as the first in a series of increasingly draconian and desperate struggles on the part of the parish to keep claimants and costs down.

The rates took a sharp rise in 1725, and we see another round-up of six certificates on 21 March of that year. St. Mary's adopted a variety of measures, often directed by the Corporation and working closely with the other two parishes. In 1725 the Corporation convened a meeting of the 'principal people of ye town' to discuss the refurbishment and renewed use of the, by now, decaying Oracle. The Oracle workhouse had been founded with funds left by John Kendrick in 1624, but had never functioned efficiently in its original purpose to put poor clothworkers to work.

The idea was that anybody, bar a very limited number of the most pathetic, should go into the workhouse to get relief, and there work at cloth processing of one sort or another in order to earn their keep. St. Mary's drew up a list of precisely 17 people who qualified to be relieved outside the workhouse. Seven of these were children who had been abandoned by their parents, the rest were aged, impotent or lunatic.<sup>14</sup> Even the widows who had formed the bulk of the 'deserving' poor before were deemed to be able to earn their own living in the workhouse.

This harsh reversal of regime, perhaps, is more reflective of a national moral movement at the time, driven by the work of organisations such as the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and articulated through Knatchbull's Workhouse Test Act in 1723. The Corporation invited a Mr 'Matley Merriott' down to advise on establishing a workhouse.<sup>15</sup> This was very likely the Marriott from the SPCK who was a pioneer of the workhouse movement for moral regeneration and almost certainly the author of the 1732 *Account of Several Workhouses*, which spoke so glowingly of this initiative in Reading.<sup>16</sup>

Such a punitive regime simply does not seem to have been workable. St. Giles appears never to have sent anybody to the Oracle at this time, and if St. Mary's did at the beginning this was soon abandoned. We see the



occasional entrant who looks to be a pauper – a Widow Cleary from St. Mary's in October 1728 – and there was a move to set up a school for poor girls there in November 1728, although it is not clear that the girls were inmates.<sup>17</sup> However, the remaining cloth-processing industries did not welcome the initiative as it undercut their work, and it looks as though the rooms were used by merchants and drapers for their own use instead. By 1749 John Watt, who had led the initiative as Mayor, laments that the Oracle 'has gone much out of repair and in a very ruinous condition and not employed as it ought to be.'<sup>18</sup>

St. Mary's soon reverted to outdoor relief. Payments, and the numbers of people on their books, slowly crept back up. Each period of difficulty saw another 'stock-take' of paupers by the Overseers, and a demand for certificates. By 1734 the rates were more than double those of 1725, and there was another round-up on 21 July 1735. On 28 June 1739 there were 19 certificates. The early 1740s saw the rates stuck at record figures for three years and 24 January 1743 saw another 14 certificates. Pauper examinations to establish parish of settlement became a larger and larger part of the parish bureaucracy. Reading's travel links made it vulnerable to migrants, vagabonds and travellers staying at the many inns. If they fell ill they became a burden on the parish. Mr Savage, the parish doctor, was paid £2 2s in March 1741 for 'cutting off ye man's legg that was at the Horse and Jockey.'<sup>19</sup>

By 1758 the parish decided again to adopt a workhouse system, but this time to build their own. A suitable place was found in Pigney's Lane, off Castle Street.<sup>20</sup> Initially it was simply an existing house adapted, but this proved to be too small and it was decided to knock it all down and replace it with a purpose-built workhouse. Rates rose to a peak in 1763, and by 1764 Vestrymen were instructed to help the Overseers give out relief, numbers were so great.<sup>21</sup>

Food shortages and riots got worse as the decade went on. In 1766 the Corporation had to call in the militia to 'protect the inhabitants and their properties from the riotous mob daily assembling and committing outrages in their neighbourhood.'<sup>22</sup> The finances collapsed under the strain and the Vestry had to borrow £200 to 'pay ye poor of the parish.'

In 1765 the parish abandoned its old poor rate system, and moved to a more familiar ratable value system. In 1772 the parish opened its new workhouse. From that point onwards most relief was given there, including to widows. While Eden's *State of the Poor* from 1797 described it as 'comfortable and convenient', it cannot have been anything like the generous, compassionate and flexible system which their grandmothers could have expected 80 years before, kept in their own homes, fed, clothed and nursed by the parish.<sup>23</sup>

The 1717 'stocktake' reflects the beginning of a hardening of attitude that progressed through the eighteenth century. The old parish system which

envisaged a settled population looking after their own widows, sick and orphans, was overwhelmed by the demands made upon it by migrants, the victims of cyclical unemployment and agrarian reforms. By 1807, the otherwise liberal and humane John Berkeley Monck was able to describe them as ‘swarming, indolent, improvident, discontented, dispirited, oppressed, degraded, vicious.’<sup>25</sup> In this St. Mary’s reflects a widening social gap, which was to lead to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the Union Workhouse.

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- 17 BRO R/AC/1/21 CM 27/10/1728 and 18/11/1728.
- 18 J. Watts, *A Black scene opened: Being the True State of Mr. John Kendrick’s Gift to the Town of Reading* (Reading, 1791) pp. 31-32.
- 19 BRO D/P98 8/2 VM 30 March 1741.
- 20 BRO D/P 98 8/2 23 April 1758. Pigney’s Lane became Coley Street. The workhouse would have been roughly where the Salvation Army Hostel stands today.
- 21 BRO D/P 98 8/4 10 May 1764.
- 22 BRO R/AC/1/1/23 Corporation Minutes 2 Sept 1766.
- 23 BRO D/P 98 8/4 Vestry Minutes Sept 1766.
- 24 J. B. Monck, *General reflections on the system of the poor laws: with a short view of Mr. Whitbread’s Bill and comment upon it* (London, printed for R. Bickerstaff, 1807). Monck bought the Coley Park estate in 1810.

# Women's Suffrage in Berkshire

## Margaret Simons

The 6 February 2018 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the passing of The Representation of the People Act, which gave women aged 30 and over the franchise in general elections.<sup>1</sup> The fight for a woman's right to vote became, in the early twentieth century, synonymous with a number of protagonists, and we are familiar with the names of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, Millicent Fawcett and Emily Davison. However, the sensationalist history that surrounded the cause in the early twentieth century has its origins firmly embedded in the nineteenth century. The campaign for women's suffrage had been a hotly debated subject for 60 years before the 1918 Act was passed and there were many supporters dedicated to the cause. Indeed, it was a thorny issue that occupied parliament on a regular basis from 1866 onward. Furthermore, as coverage of parliamentary proceedings on the matter started to appear in county papers, the discussion of and focus on the subject at local level increased. It is these reports and accounts of both national and local activity that can help us gain an insight into the development and spread of ideas at grass roots level. It was an emotive subject that had male as well female supporters and through our research we can consider the local protagonists and will endeavour to give an account of the twists and turns of the campaign in old and new Berkshire.<sup>2</sup>

The first petition on behalf of female suffrage was put to Parliament by MP Henry Hunt in 1832 and was considered later in the decade by the Chartists, but it would be another 30 years before the subject came to the fore again. It happened at a time when Parliament was considering extending the franchise for men. In 1866 Barbara Bodichon formed the Women's Suffrage Committee and collected 1500 signatures. On this first mass women's suffrage petition the lone signatory from Berkshire was Mrs. Eliza Ratcliffe, Principal of the Burlton House Ladies' School in Castle Hill, Reading.<sup>3</sup> The petition was taken to the House of Commons by Emily Davies and Elizabeth Garrett and was presented to Parliament by MP John Stuart Mill. Mill was a sympathiser and supporter of the cause and proposed an amendment to the Second Reform Act of 1867, which aimed to extend the franchise to all householders regardless of sex who met the qualification criteria by replacing the term 'male person' with 'person'. Mill's amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73, but the votes in favour represented support from both sides of the house. This Mill viewed as a significant achievement. Mill's presentation of the petition and his amendment we might consider as a turning point, as, from 1870 onwards, Bills in favour of women's suffrage were presented on an almost annual basis to Parliament.

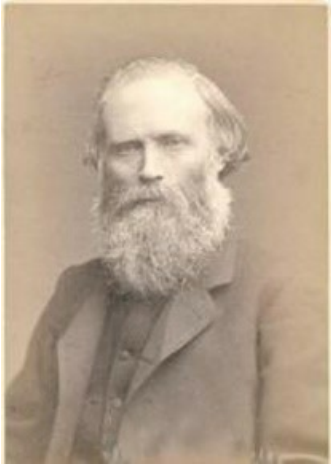
This action ensured the subject was kept current; supporters argued that if women paid tax, had to abide by the laws and paid their rates they were entitled to have their say in who they wanted to represent them in government. To ensure continued support and to achieve their aim, groups supporting women's suffrage began to appear from 1867. Most notable at the time were the Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage and the two National Societies for Women's Suffrage (NSWS), one in London and the other in Edinburgh.<sup>4</sup> At the end of 1867 the Manchester Society joined the other two and then became the Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage. The Manchester Society held its first public meeting at the Free Trade Hall on 14 April 1868 which is considered by some to mark the beginning of the suffrage campaign. However, it was the newspapers that acted as a conduit, disseminating the ideas and attitudes that were emerging. It was in this way that awareness of the female franchise increased and events were followed with growing interest as the movement gathered momentum. During the next three decades at least 450 organisations were formed throughout the country in support of women's suffrage.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that there should be a London-based organisation which could lobby Parliament was suggested by Manchester MP Jacob Bright. He was a proponent of the Municipal Franchise Act that was passed in 1869, which gave women the right to elect members to municipal councils on the same terms as men. This was the same year that the first pro-women's suffrage meeting was held in London in July. Bright went on to introduce a Women's Disabilities Removal Bill in 1870, drafted by Dr Richard Pankhurst. Although it passed its second reading, it was opposed by the government, and the same happened again in 1871. A Central Committee of the National Society was indeed formed and initially led by activists from Manchester, although its purpose was to represent the opinions of the provinces as a whole in the House of Commons. It had its first meeting in London in January 1872.

Berkshire's papers begin publishing reports of meetings, speeches and letters from around the country on women's suffrage from the outset. For example, in May 1867 *The Newbury Weekly News and General Advertiser (NWN)*, reported on a speech given by Professor Fawcett advocating the right of women's suffrage.<sup>6</sup> Later that year in December it also published an account of a woman in Manchester who appeared on the electoral register in error, and managed to cast her vote for Jacob Bright.<sup>7</sup> The *Berkshire Chronicle (BC)* reported on a meeting in York in 1867 supporting the cause for women. It published a letter forwarded from the Edinburgh branch of the NSWS at the end of 1868, and in that same year the *Reading Mercury (RM)* gave details of a meeting in Birmingham, the purpose of which was to further the cause of women's suffrage.<sup>8</sup>

From that first one in 1866 and with a growing interest, petitions became a regular occurrence until the 1918 Act was passed. Collecting names became a tool which supporters used regularly to lobby Parliament, and newspapers often informed readers about petitions in the making and when they were to be presented. For example, in February 1869 the *Berkshire Chronicle* told its readers that 56 towns were preparing petitions to be presented to Parliament in the coming season in favour of women's suffrage.<sup>9</sup> There were nine women from Reading who put their names to a universal suffrage petition presented in April 1869, although who they were is not known.<sup>10</sup> A month later, on 10 May, 66 inhabitants of Windsor presented a petition to Parliament, another the following year on 8 April and again on 3 May 1871. Moreover, it was not only the larger urban centres that presented petitions. Waltham St Lawrence, with a population of c.850, presented a petition on 24 April 1871. Back in Reading, at a meeting in 1872 it was agreed that the chairman should sign a petition in favour of Mr Jacob Bright's Bill to remove the disabilities of women, and forward the names to Parliament through the borough MPs Sir Francis Goldsmid and Mr G. Shaw-Lefevre. In the same year there were petitions from Maidenhead on 19 February and Windsor and Eton on 30 April. Two years later it was also agreed by Reading Borough Council that Sir Francis Goldsmid MP was to present a petition in favour of Forsyth's Women's Disabilities Removal Bill during the 1874 Parliamentary session.<sup>11</sup> A public petition was opened at Mr Lovejoy's library in London Street, Reading, in 1881 for all men and women in favour of female suffrage to add their names; no meeting or affiliation was necessary on this occasion.

There was enough interest in the cause of women's suffrage by 1871 for it to be the subject of a meeting at Windsor of the Reform Association of the Working Men's Institute. Although it was reported that there was opposition to the idea, a motion in support of female suffrage was carried. However, the first report of an actual meeting of size on the subject in Berkshire appears to be in 1872 when a meeting was held at Reading Town Hall, organised by the NSWS in support of Bright's Bill.<sup>12</sup> Alderman George Palmer was in the chair and on the platform with him was Rev. John Wood, Liliash Ashworth and Rhoda and Agnes Garret.<sup>13</sup> The hall was crowded with ladies and gentlemen, the former mostly filling the front rows. Palmer argued the case for the Bill not from any political standpoint, but from common sense, from a sense of equality and fairness, and from the viewpoint that sometimes opinions and ideas need to change. He told the meeting that there were 500 women qualified to vote for town councillors, a right given to women by the 1869 Municipal Franchise Act; despite this, and having all the liabilities of men in paying rates, they were excluded from voting for Members of Parliament. The NSWS had, in an effort to quantify those eligible to vote in the county at municipal elections, published a pamphlet, and in May 1872 the number of names on the register appeared



*Jacob Bright MP*



*Liliash Ashworth*

in the *NWN*. Reading had by far the greatest number at 482, Windsor 193, Abingdon 98, Maidenhead 63 and Wallingford 40; the figure for Newbury was not known.<sup>14</sup> Palmer ended his contribution to the meeting by saying: 'It could not be right to perpetuate injustice towards one half of the human race.'<sup>15</sup>

The *NSWS* representative Rhoda Garrett then addressed the audience for a whole hour arguing against some of the objections raised in opposition to women's suffrage. It was reported that she began by saying:

'...the Bible gives no authority for women's suffrage (laughter); others that if women were to stop at home and look after their husbands and children as they ought to do, they would have neither time nor inclination to mix in the strife and turmoil of elections; and that the Bible gives no authority for admitting women of the nineteenth century to the electoral franchise.'

And then:

'if a woman begins to take an interest in the affairs of mankind generally they might become more critical to the claims of men to that admiration which has hitherto been received by them as a right.'<sup>16</sup>

From the platform Rev. J. Stevenson responded in support, by moving a resolution to the effect that:

'...the exclusion of women otherwise qualified to vote is injurious to those excluded, and contrary to the principles of just representation ...'<sup>17</sup>

Miss Liliash Ashworth seconded the resolution and addressed the assembly:

'Some time ago in the House of Commons it was debated whether a criminal ought not to be disfranchised for life. Mr Gladstone said it was not

right to stamp a man with a lifelong electoral incapacity. Although it was five years since the question of women's suffrage was first debated, there is still a very indistinct idea of what they were asking for. People thought that they were asking that all women should vote, and that they were going to alter the present basis of the suffrage. It was not so; it was founded upon the present basis of the suffrage. They only asked that household suffrage should be made a reality; that women may vote as well as men. At present one man in every six had a vote. What the Bill proposed to do was to enfranchise one woman in every sixty. It was estimated that perhaps 70,000 women would be enfranchised by it.<sup>18</sup>

The resolution was put and carried by Rev J. Wood with only two votes against. Miss Agnes Garrett proposed a vote of thanks to the Chairman which was carried and the meeting, which had lasted well over two hours, closed. When Bright's Bill was put before Parliament for the third time, it was defeated after its second reading.

All three ladies attended a meeting chaired by Rev. E. Hall of Eton and Windsor at the end of 1872, at which Mr Chamberlain spoke:

'To exclude those who were heads of houses because they were women, from the privilege of the franchise was an injury and an act of injustice...'<sup>19</sup> The rest of the meeting then progressed with the same rhetoric as had been put forward by the ladies at Reading.

At a meeting held in Reading in 1874 it was decided to support Conservative member Mr W. Forsyth's Bill even though it had an amendment excluding married women. Giving married women the vote when their husbands already had it was one of the objections against women's suffrage; by removing them some felt there would be a greater chance for the Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill to get through, but it was still to no avail. In 1877 Jacob Bright reintroduced the Bill with married women included, but again it was defeated, and on two further occasions. Caroline Biggs and Miss Beedy held what appears to be the next major meeting in Reading in May 1878.<sup>20</sup> Headed 'Taxation and Representation', it was chaired by the Mayor Mr J. Silver. Also present were George Palmer, Rev. Charles du Port and Rev. Charles Honey, vicar of Earley. The journalist from the *BC* informed readers that the Mayor had accepted the chair on the understanding that he did not entirely sympathise with the subject and that he was at liberty to say so. However, he went on to say:

'In common with everyone he never could oppose women's rights. They could not be opposed. They had all the argument and sympathy as well as the persuasive power on their side. As to the question of the franchise, he would certainly prefer trusting himself to the quiet thoughtful vote of the women than to the excited balderdash emanating from beer and sawdust.'<sup>21</sup>

A man, then, who could perhaps see both sides, but could not quite relinquish the established way of doing things. Alderman George Palmer supported the first resolution saying:

'...it was contrary to free and constitutional government that any number of persons should be deprived of representation in Parliament and that the suffrage should, therefore be given to women. ...women should rule whether men liked it or not. The enthusiasm in Reading was not very great in favour of women's rights, and their friends would have to work hard to obtain what they wished, that their sex should not be a disqualification for voting for Members of Parliament.'<sup>22</sup>

The resolution was seconded by Rev. C. D. Du Port who added:

'...that he had asked two men above the average of culture and education to attend the meeting, and one sent him a few lines of rhyme, and the other, a clergyman, said it was too good a joke for him to stand by him on such a platform in Lent.'<sup>23</sup>

Clearly it was a matter for humour and cynicism for some, and if George Palmer's comments were a reflection of the general opinion, then support for the cause was evidently lacking in the town even after 11 years. However, in general, this was a meeting in favour of giving women the franchise and the motion was carried, but there was no specific discussion about the inclusion of married women. Whether married women were included or not made no difference: subsequent bills were not successful and women were completely excluded from the 1884 Third Reform Act.

In 1878, George Palmer was elected MP, and T.A.B. Corley tells us, in his biography of the Huntley and Palmer company, that in his maiden speech in the Commons, he supported a private member's Bill to grant women the vote. He asked:

'What is the best thing to be done in the interests of the country?'<sup>24</sup>

In his answer he cited the case of a widow left to rear a large family and who also had substantial lands and responsibilities. Yet, this woman was disqualified from voting simply because she happened to be a woman; he was in fact speaking of the experiences of his mother. His speech garnered meagre coverage by the London papers and did not succeed in convincing the Hon. Members that the franchise should be extended to women. Mr Courtney's Bill was treated with derision and was hopelessly lost, with the extension of the franchise seen as 'sentimental nonsense', an 'arrant sham' and as 'the thin end of the wedge' by opponents.<sup>25</sup>

It was a view that some of Palmer's colleagues on the Borough Council may have shared. From 1875 onwards councillors were consenting to let correspondence regarding women's suffrage lie on the table at the end of meetings. The tardy way in which the requests for support from various quarters, including Lydia Becker, were left, is evidence that Reading Borough Council had become unclear about their position on the matter.<sup>26</sup> Even Palmer's early passion seems to have changed. A few years later, Corley states that he no longer held those views put forward in his maiden speech and he did not know the reason for this about turn.<sup>27</sup> In 1884 during the passage of the Third Reform Bill, an amendment was moved by William



Woodall, MP for Stoke on Trent, to extend the franchise to women. The Reform Bill had been making rapid progress through Parliament until this point, and the Liberal Prime Minister Mr Gladstone was worried that it would not be passed that year if delayed by the amendment; particularly that it would be blocked by the Tory party if it were included. The *BC* reported that it would have been more honest for him to have stated that he felt there was not much demand for the extension of the franchise to women. After a lengthy debate the amendment was rejected by 271 to 135, with the *BC* claiming that those MPs who had pledged to support the women's franchise instead chose Mr Gladstone's view. Among the 'faithless' was George Palmer, who in voting against the amendment, it said, had 'Deserted his fair clients'.<sup>28</sup> However, they were all faced with the question of supporting a Bill that extended the 1867 concessions beyond the boroughs, increasing male suffrage from about two million to over 5.5 million and creating a more uniform franchise throughout the country. Palmer perhaps felt that, if he supported an amendment to enfranchise a minority of women, it would jeopardise the extension of male suffrage. Therefore, he took what seemed the more just course of action. He stood down as MP in 1885 at the end of Gladstone's government, when the number of seats for Reading was reduced to one.

It was clearly an emotive subject, the support of which depended upon a number of different factors, not least the attitudes and mores of the time and the steadfastness of support. Agreeing with the principle is often easier in theory than in practice and there were many meetings throughout the county where it was perhaps easy to debate and discuss the issue, as was the case at a conference held by the Reading Liberal Club in February 1881. In the same year the matter was also being discussed at a number of non-political gatherings at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. It was an unlikely venue for a number of meetings, both at Government House, and at the home of Captain and Mrs Savile, where Lydia Becker and Caroline Biggs spoke. It was Captain Savile's opinion that a lady of property paying taxes may not vote, yet those she employed and to whom she paid wages could and did. Whether his concern was actually about female enfranchisement or that, from his middle-class perspective, such a situation was demeaning to a woman of position in society is debatable. Mrs Savile, on the other hand, organised a meeting of the Working Women's Club to be addressed by Lydia Becker, Caroline Biggs and Miss Stacpoole at the Stores, Sandhurst.

Such meetings, it can be argued, had little impact, but are a useful measure of the interest being shown, the effectiveness of the messages being put across by the various groups and supporters, their influence on attitude and as a measure of change. In March 1885, at the last meeting of the season at the Eton Institute, a debate on the matter resulted in an equal vote, but the chairman cast the deciding vote against. The St Nicolas Debating Society

in Newbury agreed that the vote should be extended to women at a meeting in September, yet an amendment was proposed and carried that it was undesirable to do so at the present time. In the same month at Wokingham Mr Edwin Lawrence, the Liberal candidate for the forthcoming election, had said at a party meeting that he felt the extension of the suffrage for men was sufficient for the present and he wouldn't touch on the subject of women.<sup>29</sup> Sir George Russell, after a meeting at Bray, Maidenhead, said he was in favour of women's suffrage and was duly selected as the Conservative candidate, a lone voice amongst those in a position to change the status quo.<sup>30</sup> In March 1886, at the Farringdon Junior Debating Society, after the arguments were put for and against by men, the vote was in favour by a majority of five.<sup>31</sup>

This evidence suggests a mix of opinion, with only a few willing actually to go out on a limb and declare their support, as George Palmer had. Fifteen years after he presided over the first meeting in Reading Town Hall, he was again in the fray presiding over a full meeting on the subject in January 1887. He was joined by the Revs. C. R. Honey, R. R. Suffield, N. A. Ross, and J. H. Tuckwell among others, and Millicent Fawcett and Miss Florence Balgarnie of the NSWS.<sup>32</sup> The latter read the notes of apology from Mr T. Murdoch MP for Reading, who wished success to the meeting and expressed sympathy with the movement. Sir George Russell said:

'I am extremely sorry that owing to your meeting being on the 27th, I shall probably be unable to attend it. Otherwise, I should have made it a point to be present to mark my sense of the justice and expediency of your movement. At all events, we have got it out of the region of ridicule, and the day cannot be far distant when duly qualified women will be admitted to the franchise, from which they are now so unjustly excluded. Each successive extension of the franchise still further strengthens your claim. You may rely on me, both inside and outside of Parliament, to do all in my power to hasten the day when you will obtain your just rights.'<sup>33</sup>

Canon Garry wrote:

'The subject is one in which I take great interest... It is manifest injustice to exclude any householder merely on account of accident of sex.'<sup>34</sup>

After a short introduction by the Chairman, Mr E. West proposed the following resolution:

'That in the opinion of this meeting the Parliamentary Franchise should be extended to women who possess the qualifications which entitle men to vote, and who, in all matters of local government, have the right of voting.'<sup>35</sup>

He also added that he believed Reading wished qualified women to be placed on the same level as men as regards the vote, and that it should be done for its own sake and not for that of either political party. Mr J.W. Martin seconded the resolution, which was supported by Millicent Fawcett, who then took the stage and began by quoting from a recent article by Mr Matthew Arnold, a poet and literary, social and religious critic:



*Lydia Becker*

‘...the labours of the friends of light, from John Stuart Mill downwards, during the last twenty years had succeeded in proving that the exclusion of all women except one from direct political power was an anomaly.’<sup>36</sup>

After this the resolution was carried unanimously. Mr J. J. Cooper moved:

‘That a petition, to the House of Commons based on the foregoing resolution be adopted and signed by the Chairman on behalf of this meeting and forwarded to Mr Murdoch, MP, for presentation to the House of Commons.’<sup>37</sup>

Miss Balgarnie then informed the audience that the cause now had the support of 344 members of the House of Commons and was practically carried the previous year. Mr William Woodall was to reintroduce the Bill, in the current session, 1887, but again married women were excluded.

The Bill, put forward again in 1889, still excluded married women and failed. By this time there was growing opposition to this exclusion, the opponents of which broke away from the NSWs and formed the Women's Franchise League. Among its members were Dr and Mrs Pankhurst. This was yet another schism for the suffrage campaign, already fragmented due to political differences. The League adopted Dr Pankhurst's original Women's Disabilities Removal Bill including married, widowed and single women. In 1892, A. K. Rollit introduced another private member's Bill, which was opposed by future Prime Minister Henry Herbert Asquith. Although MP for Reading, Mr. Murdoch, who had previously shown sympathy, voted against, the Bill was only narrowly defeated by 25 votes. It was evidence that at this time support for women's suffrage had gained favour. In 1894 an appeal for Women's Suffrage was organised to be presented to Parliament and a letter was sent to the *Reading Mercury* to inform readers that a house-to-house canvas was to be carried out in Wokingham to obtain female signatures.<sup>38</sup>

During the 1895 general election a number of women's suffrage groups with no political allegiance came together to lobby peacefully, and this cooperation formed the basis for the formation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Better known as the NUWSS, the society's organisation was democratic and under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. It used legal and peaceful means to further its aims, with the introduction of Parliamentary bills, and continued to spread the word through meetings. Berkshire became part of the Oxford, Berks and Bucks Federation when it was formed in 1911. The drawing-room meeting appeared as a regular

format for suffrage meetings, particularly in Windsor, and Miss Starling, from the Central London Association for Women's Suffrage, was welcomed at a meeting at 5 Park St, Windsor in 1902. It was a lively meeting where opposition came from both sexes, with Rev F.R. Keightley maintaining that 'among other objections women's suffrage was the thin end of the wedge'.<sup>39</sup> The following year a meeting was called in the Gladstone Hall to further the cause of the NUWSS, but such was the attendance that Windsor residents were described as being in a flabby condition in relation to support in the town. During the course of the meeting there was persuasive rhetoric in favour of women, and the audience were made aware that at the last division on the Bill there were 232 who voted for with 161 against. The meeting closed with a resolution in favour of women's suffrage on the same qualification as men.

It was what we may refer to as the 'so near and yet so far' results that caused frustration amongst many suffrage supporters. This, together with the failure of the Independent Labour Party to support the cause, was the reason Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst with her daughter Christabel and others established a breakaway group. The Women's Social and Political Union, or the WSPU for short, was established in Manchester in 1903. Largely a women's organisation, its aim was to obtain the vote for women on the same grounds as men.<sup>40</sup> This new group adopted a more militant approach to the elusive franchise and adopted the slogan 'Deeds not Words', operating more like an army. Its *modus operandi* was to attack people and property. The members of the WSPU were referred to as suffragettes from 1906, whilst the NUWSS members were suffragists. As the terms were often used interchangeably it was clearly a cause for confusion, but also humour. During a suffrage meeting at Tilehurst, Reading, a lady speaker explained the difference between the two. 'A suffragist', she said, was someone who 'jist' wanted the vote, but a suffragette was one who wanted the vote and meant to 'get' it.<sup>41</sup> The WSPU convinced MP Bamford Slack to introduce a Bill in 1905, which was 'talked-out', i.e. the debate prolonged to prevent time for a vote to be made. This changed the WSPU direction: they abandoned their support for social reforms and attacked any government who did not support enfranchisement for women.

The forthright approach of the WSPU and their methods were not to everyone's taste, and in 1907 a split occurred over a disagreement regarding the autocratic method of management practised by the Pankhursts. The Women's Freedom League (WFL) was formed by almost 80 women, including Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington-Greig, significant figures in the movement. It was still a militant organisation using direct action, such as passive resistance to taxation and non-cooperation with the census, but was democratically run. The more active approach may also have done more harm than good, especially in those quarters where opposition was strong or minds were undecided. At a meeting of the Reading Conservative

Association, the speaker Mrs Murdoch, who was not a supporter of women's suffrage, referred to the 'hooligan methods adopted by the Suffragettes ... (as) a disgrace to womanhood'. She went on to say that 'it would be folly to bow the Knee to hooligan rule.'<sup>42</sup> She clearly had no time for such women other than that they gave her ammunition against giving women the vote. A similar sentiment was expressed at a Unionist meeting in West Reading, where, although it was felt opinion was still divided on the matter, recent conduct of the suffragettes suggested they, women, were unsuited for public affairs.

While, it is suggested, there was little in the way of a following or presence of suffragists in Reading before 1907, the suffrage cause was clearly gaining momentum, and interest was such that in November 1906 a branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Associations was formed.<sup>43</sup> The organisation's president was Mrs C. D. Rose, Miss Edith Sutton was vice-president and Miss Hart-Davis was one of two secretaries. Other secretaries at various times were Miss F. Milner and Miss Dale of Kendrick Road. At the first meeting in January the following year they had 68 members, and declared they were open to men and were to be affiliated to the NUWSS, their object being to obtain the Parliamentary franchise on the same terms as men. Speakers were, among others, Rufus Isaacs and Eva Gore-Booth.<sup>44</sup> They took premises in Cross Street, Reading, for a week from 18-25 March, where 300 supporters signed The Women's Franchise Declaration. In December of that year they had offices at 17 Cross Street, where tickets and invitations could be had for the meetings and debates that had been taking place around the town. They sold suffrage literature and used the premises for raising funds. At some point they also had committee rooms at 154 King's Road and a stall in the Market Arcade for literature. By 1913 the Reading Branch was the second most active in the area after Oxford with offices at 7 Town Hall Chambers.

They were clearly at pains to make sure their message was being heard and to make it clear that they disassociated themselves from the more militant suffrage societies. Ahead of the NUWSS' Suffrage Procession on 13 June 1908, the Reading Society held a series of open-air meetings. The first in St Mary's Butts attracted a good number, although it was reported not all were there for the purpose of hearing what had to be said. Two more followed, one in Caversham and the third near Reading Cemetery. The procession of 13,000 suffragists from The Embankment to the Albert Hall on 13 June was quite a spectacle, and had among their number 70 members of the Reading Women's Suffrage Society who had travelled to London on the 11.45 am train. The Reading banner (one of the largest) was followed by 50/60 members and amongst those heading the group was Councillor Edith Sutton. The society was represented by a dozen working women, teachers and nurses, the female doctors joined the medical section of the march and one walked under the banner of the Primrose League.<sup>45</sup>

The following week the WSPU held a procession followed by a meeting in Hyde Park, after which Christabel Pankhurst sent its resolution to the Prime Minister asking for his response to so large a gathering (some thought it 500,000). He replied that he had nothing to add to his statement of 20 May when he addressed a deputation of 60 Liberal MPs telling them that he would not consider Stanger's Bill, another enfranchisement bill for women. Instead he would bring in electoral reform before the end of the Parliament. Many thought that the female franchise would be included, but the WSPU were not convinced, and they called a public meeting in Parliament Square on the evening of 30 June. The women, it was reported, were treated with such brutality by police and other men that two women, incensed by the violence, went to Downing Street to throw stones at the Prime Minister's windows. Mrs Pankhurst endorsed their actions, the first damage caused by suffragettes.

The first suffragette activity took place in Reading in January 1908 when Mr A. Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, visited the town to attend a meeting organised by the Liberal Party in the Town Hall. It had been hoped to avoid any disruption by limiting the sale of tickets to known women and by making them available only on the morning of the meeting. However, the meeting was infiltrated by seven members of the WSPU who stood up at intervals shouting 'Votes for Women' or 'What about the Women'. Their outbursts were met by calls of 'chuck her out' and they were physically removed from the meeting, one on her way out dropping a leaflet outlining '14 reasons for supporting women's suffrage'.<sup>46</sup> The women held a meeting outside the Town Hall, where they were very pleased with their reception and let it be known that there would be a WSPU meeting in February which Mrs Pankhurst would be attending. There was a large number of rowdy youths who enjoyed taunting the speakers and who caused a bit of a stir at the station when the suffragettes went to catch their train. A group of lads was also out for a bit of mischief at a NUWSS meeting held in Wokingham in December 1908. The account of the meeting stated that the motion in favour of votes for women was carried, yet most of the men and women at the rear of the hall voted against. In defence, Miss Edith Sutton wrote in a letter to the *Berkshire Chronicle* that many of those at the back of the hall were lads who had put both hands up. She claimed that there was in fact a small majority in favour amongst the responsible voters. It seems likely it was a close-run thing and difficult to be absolutely sure either way.<sup>47</sup>

The year 1908 was altogether a busy one in relation to women's suffrage in Berkshire, whether or not because of the election in April 1908 in which anti-suffragist Liberal, Herbert Henry Asquith, became Prime Minister. Both the NUWSS and the WSPU demonstrations in London in June were significant events. The Women's National Anti-Suffrage League (WASL) was formed by Mrs Humphrey Ward the following month with much support among the upper classes. An East Berks branch of the WASL was



*Cllr Edith Sutton*

formed at a meeting of an esteemed group in Wokingham Town Hall at the end of November 1908. Lady Haversham presided, Lord Haversham was there also, along with Sir Edward Clarke KC and Lady Clarke, Mrs Walter, Mrs Benyon and others. Lady Wantage was also in attendance, and that same month she helped in the formation of a North Berks Branch and was its president.<sup>48</sup> Gladys Potts from Streatley was its secretary and one of the campaign's most prominent speakers. It has been said of Lady Wantage that she was responsible for the strength of anti-suffrage feeling in Berkshire, although there is perhaps a stronger claim for this in the north-west of the county. During 1910 the strength of anti-suffrage feeling made it very difficult for open-air meetings in support of suffrage to take place. When Mrs Bertrand Russell came to speak at NUWSS meetings in Wantage and Abingdon she was 'hotted' out of both. At the 1908 meeting, in Lady Haversham's opinion, a woman's place was in the home and her responsibilities lay within her domestic circle. She went on to impress upon the women of Berkshire the necessity of banding themselves together to oppose the granting of the franchise to women. Sir Edward Clarke's objection was that it would:

'...gravely and seriously reduce the intellectual capacity of the electorate, women were less educated than men.'<sup>49</sup>

Even among an anti-suffrage group this comment was met with dissent. Nevertheless, a committee was formed, Lady Haversham was elected president, and among others on the committee were Mr C. Hay of South Hill Park and Mrs Walter of Bearwood. It was moved that the petition against women's suffrage that was currently going around the country should be signed by members of the Anti-Suffrage League in Berkshire.

This group of anti-suffragists was busy, and many were guests of Mrs Benyon in the Long Gallery at Englefield House in March 1909 for the inaugural meeting of the South Berks Branch of the WASL. Furthermore, many also attended a meeting in Reading later in May, where they were of the opinion that there should be a Reading Branch, and by September a committee was formed. Mrs G.W. Palmer was elected president and vice presidents were Lady Wantage, Lady Haversham, Mrs Benyon and Mrs Martin Sutton. In December the East Berks Branch had its first annual meeting in Maidenhead, where Lady Haversham spoke out against suffragettes. The branch had collected nearly 5,000 signatures in favour of the League's aims, but only 116 of those who signed joined the branch. At a branch meeting in Reading in December Mrs Colquhoun is reported as saying that:

'there would be danger to the State if the vote were given to women. It was necessary that they should have a clear idea of what the vote meant. The vote was a power to be used for the benefit of the whole community. The sovereign power was in the hands of the electorate, and, if all women had the vote, it would mean that they, outnumbering as they did the number of men by 1,070,000, would have the direction of Imperial policy.'<sup>50</sup>

She also spoke out against the activity of suffragettes over the previous eighteen months saying they had 'lowered the estimation of womanhood'.<sup>51</sup>

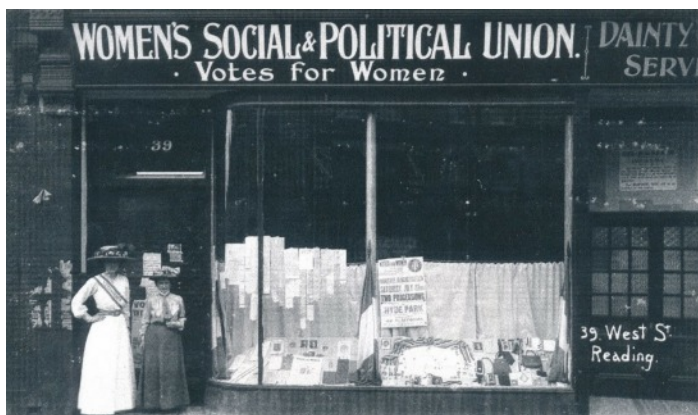
It was towards the end of 1908 that Reading became the centre of an energetic WSPU campaign when there were rumours of a bye-election. Mrs Pankhurst came to Reading and spoke to a *Chronicle* reporter to explain the unusual activity in the town. They were to open a committee room in St Mary's Butts and had already arranged meetings and 'at homes' for ladies, but men were welcome to attend. The bye-election activity was managed by Miss Scott, a seasoned organiser. When asked 'Do you look upon Reading as good soil for your propaganda work?' she replied, 'We do...', before going on to say that they had a good number of sympathisers who had been waiting for more active work in the town.<sup>52</sup> However, at the meeting to officially open the campaign in St Mary's Butts on a Friday evening in early October, not all was harmonious, and she met with opposition from a large section of the crowd gathered round the wagonette they used as a platform. On the way to the station, Mrs Pankhurst and colleagues were followed by a hostile crowd of mostly young people. Later that month, on Monday 26 October, in the large Town Hall, a meeting was held to finish the vigorous WSPU campaign. The audience, including a number of men, was addressed by Emmeline Pethwick-Lawrence, who, it is said, was enthusiastically received. The meeting was said to be of an 'uproarious character'; a large number of college students had secreted themselves at the back of the hall and persisted in disturbing the meeting for quite some time until they finally tired of the activity.<sup>53</sup> Miss Scott spoke to a reporter after the meeting and said she was very pleased with how things had gone in Reading and that they



had acquired many new members and that they should set up a branch of the National WSPU in the town.

The actual date of when a Reading branch of the National WSPU was formed in Reading is not known, but they had a shop in Reading at 39 West Street from 1908 until 1911 and then at 49 Market Place between 1912 and 1915. Given that they had to open committee rooms in October for the bye-election campaign, it is likely the shop was taken at the end of the year. At the shop they would have dealt with membership enquiries and sold suffrage literature alongside other goods to raise money for the cause. The WSPU campaign in Reading, it is thought, focused on women working at Huntley and Palmers' biscuit factory, and a Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement was formed in 1910.<sup>54</sup> At a 'lively meeting' of the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement at the Cross Street Hall in October that year, at which Mr Kenneth D. Scott presided, the Conciliation Bill was opposed with the majority in favour of adult suffrage. A Mr Hodgson argued that the Bill would create a property elite, would not enfranchise 80 per cent of women as it was claimed, and on that basis disqualification on the grounds of sex should be abolished in favour of adult suffrage. Miss Margesson (Reading shop organiser), who spoke on behalf of the WSPU said the Bill did not meet their demands, but it was thought that this was all that those in power would allow at this point. In other words, yet another compromise.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, the Reading branch of the NUWSS had been proactively testing the attitude of women in the town during 1909 towards female suffrage by undertaking a poll. They identified 1575 women who, but for their sex, would be parliamentary voters and asked 'Do you think you ought to have the vote?' The vast majority, 1046, said yes and only 60 no; of the remaining 460, the majority would not sign because they did not agree with



*The Women's Social and Political Union shop in West Street, Reading*

the activities of the militant societies. Therefore, this was evidence that the often-used retort that women do not want the vote is not necessarily true, in Reading at least.<sup>56</sup> There was a well-attended meeting in Tilehurst in November organised by the Reading branch, where an unruly element of youths (some, it is said, from Reading) caused disruption armed with a toy trumpet, bell and rattle. As if this were not enough, a mouse let loose caused hysteria, so it was not the most orderly of meetings. Such activity does help shed light on some of the more active opposition to women having the vote. However, the work of the Reading Branch and that of Oxford, which had been formed in 1904 and had 250 members, may have encouraged the setting up of a North Berks Branch of the Society in November 1909. It was hoped the new society would cooperate with the two existing societies, the latter of which had been busy that year holding indoor and outdoor meetings in North Berks at Abingdon, Appleton, Begworth, Blewbury, Boar's Hill, Kennington, Marcham, Radley, South Hinksey, Sunningwell and Wantage. A year later the branch reported at its first annual meeting that it had been busy organising meetings at Abingdon, Appleford, Blewbury, Botley, Childrey Common, Newington, Steventon and Wallingford.

Other new societies were active too. A branch of the London Society for Women's Suffrage was started in Windsor by Florence Gibb of 3 Claremont Road, Windsor, in 1909, with Miss Stanbury from the London Society a regular speaker. At the first of a series of 'at homes' organised by the society at the end of May 1910, Miss Stanbury spoke at a meeting in the lower Guildhall on the basic principles of women's suffrage. It seems this approach was chosen because a large number of the 70-strong audience of men and women were beginners and interested to know more about the cause. Is this a sign perhaps that after 50 years of campaigning there was still confusion and uncertainty as to exactly what women's suffrage was actually all about? Moreover, as we have seen, more branches of various organisations for and against were being formed as women's suffrage became more topical. The WFL were particularly proactive: their series of caravan tours started in 1908 in the south east. In August 1909 the van parked in Newbury Market Place and a meeting was organised. The Mayor agreed to chair it, although he made it clear he was not altogether in sympathy with the cause. The two members travelling with the van were Miss Rolf and Miss Monro; the latter, the journalist reported, was an effective speaker. A crowd, it is reported, from 2-3,000 gathered and listened to what was said, but not without interruption and there was a police presence.

At the end of 1909 discussions were being held regarding the arrangements for a visit by David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to Reading. He came to canvass for the Liberal cause in the forthcoming Parliamentary election in support of their candidate Rufus

Isaacs, but finding a location that would accommodate the expected large crowd was a problem. The meeting was eventually held in the tram sheds, Mill Lane, on 1 January 1910 with a crowd of 6,000. *The Reading Standard* headline ran:

‘READING READY FOR THE FRAY. UNPRECEDENTED ENTHUSIASM IN THE BOROUGH. GREAT SPEECHES BY MR LLOYD GEORGE AND MR ISAACS. NO PAWNING OF THE POOR MAN’S BREAD. SUFFRAGETTES’ RUSE: MR. LLOYD GEORGE MOLESTED.’<sup>57</sup>

Precautions had been taken to keep out any likely trouble-making suffragettes. The building had been thoroughly searched before the meeting, so it is a mystery as to how two canny ladies succeeded in getting into the meeting. Miss Streatfield and Miss Hudson were subsequently discovered and ejected, but not before one of them shouted in response to Lloyd George who was making a reference to robbery,

‘You’re a robber, because you take the women’s money and don’t give them the vote.’<sup>58</sup>

As Lloyd George left the meeting a man, acting on behalf of the women, seized him by the collar and refused to let him pass. This man was Kenneth Duke Scott, of Hurst Nurseries, Twyford, a notable supporter of women’s suffrage. He defaced his 1911 census return form, refusing to give the names of the female members of his household. After the intervention of Rufus Isaacs a note was given to one of the newspaper representatives by the Chancellor’s assailant, which said:

‘Don’t you think you’re a miserable hypocrite to reject as you do the just claim of women for enfranchisement?’<sup>59</sup>

Miss Streatfield said she had been roughly handled by the crowd and that was after lying hidden all day on her back at the bottom of a pit. When asked if they were not hungry, she replied that they had refreshed themselves with meat lozenges.

Between 1910 and 1912 Parliament considered various ‘Conciliation Bills’ which would have given some women the vote, but none were passed.<sup>60</sup> There was plenty of activity supporting the Bills and then frustration and retaliation when they did not pass. There was a suffragette demonstration on Station Road in Reading in early 1910 around the statue of King Edward VII, which they used as a podium and to display the WSPU slogan ‘Deeds not Words’ on a banner. That the large crowd listened to the speakers showed an interest in their controversial demands. In June a number of Reading suffrage supporters attended a procession in London. Under the WSPU banner walked Miss Norton, Miss Edith Morley, Miss Margesson and Lady Isabella Margesson. Miss Jessie Lawes, from Tilehurst, walked with those who had already been in prison for their militant activities. Mrs Pankhurst was in Reading later in the year when she spoke at a meeting in November at the Town Hall. Organised by the secretary for the Reading Branch of the WSPU, Miss Catherine Margesson,

others on the platform included Miss Edith Morley, Dr Esther Carling and Mr Carling. Mrs Pankhurst said it was time for action and spoke of her desire for the Bill to be passed before the close of the autumn session. However, it was her opinion that the Bill wouldn't be passed as she accused Mr Asquith of being anti-suffragist. At this time there were about 21 women's suffrage organisations in existence and the Bill, if passed, would give the vote to about one million wealthy women, married women not included. She was indeed correct, and Friday 18 November was a day known as 'Black Friday', when the Bill made it past the second reading, but once again Mr Asquith announced that there would be no more time to ensure that the Bill could become law in the current parliamentary session. One hundred WSPU members were arrested and there was significant brutality towards the women. Two members died from their injuries.

The activities of the suffragettes became increasingly radical and rebellious, and more became willing to deploy militant tactics. Mable Norton of Caversham, a member of the Reading branch of the WSPU, was sentenced to seven days in Holloway for her part in a demonstration. In her account of events she described how:

'I wasn't a bit hysterical when I took a small hammer and smashed five windows one after the other. I did it quietly and deliberately. Then a walk down the street to the police-station cheered by a friendly crowd.'<sup>61</sup>

It seems Mable was active again in April 1912 at another window-smashing demonstration in London when she told the *BOA*: 'I am free after three weeks detention in Holloway.' The authorities allowed bail, but she refused, preferring, she said, to be a 'guest of the government'.<sup>62</sup> She remarked that, since her previous sentence of a week, conditions in prison had improved. Another member of the Reading WSPU, Miss Prior of Yateley, was sentenced to two months hard labour for her activities. Mabel's name also appears in *The Suffragette*, the WSPU paper, once when she donated towards the cost of displaying a poster for the paper in the station for a year, and the other when she gave five shillings towards the shop fund.<sup>63</sup>

From 1911 onwards we see a more determined approach from all organisations, for and against, in the county. Windsor especially seems to have continually embraced the debate and there continued to be a mix of activity. In early 1911, Lady Mary Needham of Francis Road, Windsor, set up an East Berks branch of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (NLOWS); this was an amalgamation of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League and the Men's League for Opposing Woman Suffrage in December 1910. Between 1911 and 1912 there were at least six outdoor rallies organised by the suffragists on Castle Hill, drawing crowds of 300, with speakers often from London. Between 1911 and 1914 there were 13 meetings held in the Guildhall. One, in March 1912, was organised as a debate by Florence Gibb with both sides represented. The Mayor, Sir Frederick Dyson, in opening proceedings said to the audience, 'don't throw

eggs', a request he presumably felt was necessary because of a previous experience. Fortunately for the speakers on this occasion, nobody did.<sup>64</sup> There was also the formation of a branch of the Church League for Women's Suffrage at a meeting in the Town Hall in July 1912, at which the founder Rev. Claude Hinscliff was present. However, it was in 1913 that Windsor felt the backlash of suffragette activity, when along with all other royal residences in the country Windsor Castle was closed for six months for fear of suffragette attack. Many livelihoods in Windsor depended on the tourist trade and were severely hit. It was thought the loss to the economy to have been in the region of £25,000. Amanda Bryett who has researched the cause in Windsor has said that 'nowhere hated suffragettes more than Windsor'.<sup>65</sup>

Elsewhere in East Berkshire a meeting was arranged at the Victoria Hall in Bracknell in March 1911 under the auspices of the newly formed NLOWS with Lord Haversham in the chair. There was a contingent of suffragists present including some from Reading. The meeting reported on a canvas that had been taken of the women municipal electors of that Division. Of the 2335 women who were asked if they favoured women's suffrage, 1071 made no reply, 603 against, 265 for.<sup>66</sup> It was part of a countrywide effort to ascertain what women actually wanted, and the results, it was claimed, showed that women were far more united in refusing the vote than they were in demanding it. In Reading at the end of 1910 there was some doubt over the outcome of the canvas there, which claimed overwhelmingly that Reading women householders were against female suffrage. Both Miss Edith Morley, a suffragette, and Miss Edith Sutton, a suffragist, wrote independently to the *RO* on the matter. Miss Morley said that on no occasion had she been contacted in spite of being a householder and on the municipal register. Miss Sutton was canvassed, but was not asked to sign a declaration, so nothing about the canvas could be proved. Given the wide discrepancy compared with the number of women polled by the suffragists two years earlier, both ladies were in doubt about the efficacy of the exercise.<sup>67</sup>

In 1911 at meetings of the North Berks branch of NLOWS in Wantage and Abingdon, Miss Gladys Pott addressed the meetings against the passing of Sir George Kemp's Bill, now before Parliament, to give women the vote. A resolution was passed ordering a letter to be sent to the Prime Minister and Major Henderson MP:

'That in the opinion of this meeting the Imperial Parliament should refuse to sanction any measure granting the Parliamentary franchise to women until the question has been placed as a main issue before the country at a general election.'<sup>68</sup>

However, not all were against this particular Bill. At a meeting of the East Berks branch of the NUWSS in Crowthorne some 250-300, mostly men, returned a large and enthusiastic majority for the Bill to pass through the current session of Parliament.<sup>69</sup>

In North Berkshire, the Square, Pangbourne, was the location for a number of suffrage meetings organised by the local branch of the NUWSS, which was formed in late 1911 with Miss L Jones as secretary. The crowds were reported as being hundreds strong at times, and Hilda Jones acted as chair and speaker at various events. Mrs M. Garrett-Jones the sister-in-law of the Jones sisters occasionally took the chair at meetings and was herself a niece of Millicent Fawcett. Pangbourne meetings obtained a reputation of being somewhat lively and in 1914 there was a presence of five policemen, but the expected disruption did not materialise and all passed off satisfactorily. Elsewhere in North Berks it was reported that there had been a great revival in interest in the suffrage movement in the Abingdon area. The Corn Exchange was the location for a debate between Miss Gladys Pott of the NLOWS and Miss Munro of the WFL at the end of 1912, and in early 1913 it was hosting a meeting of the North Berks Branch of the NUWSS.

The WSPU belief that direct action was the only way to secure women the vote gave rise to ever increasing and more daring and deliberate acts of violence against property and individuals. From the early days of window-smashing in 1908 to the later arson attacks, they employed various tactics to force the motion of votes for women and were only too prepared, as we have seen, to pay the price of a prison sentence to further the cause. Tilehurst suffragette Miss Jessie Lawes (a cousin of Mrs Pethwick-Laurence) was arrested in Bristol in November 1909 for trying to throw a stone through a window of Colston Hall where Mr Winston Churchill and Mr Augustine Birrell were present. She was arrested and ordered to pay 20 shillings and costs, but, on refusing to pay, was sentenced to 14 days.<sup>70</sup> It was not her first time in prison that year: she had been involved in window-smashing in London at Downing Street and was one of 115 arrested along with Mrs Pankhurst.<sup>71</sup> Whilst imprisoned in Horfield Gaol for the Bristol incident she refused food and after two days was force-fed. Hunger strike was a tactic employed by some suffragettes since 1909, but forced feeding made the women ill and was injurious to health, with long-term consequences for some.<sup>72</sup> On her release, she was reported as saying that the agony (of force feeding) was awful and she had become so unwell that she spent the rest of her stay in hospital. It was said she was in 'a very serious condition of health.'<sup>73</sup> Such was the hue and cry surrounding this ill treatment that the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act 1913, or the 'Cat and Mouse Act', as it became known, was introduced. The Act allowed those prisoners who had gone on hunger strike to be released then re-arrested when well enough to finish their sentence. Rufus Isaacs, MP for Reading until October 1913 and Attorney General, was involved in the official policy surrounding the Cat and Mouse Act. He was also responsible for overseeing the prosecution of key members of the militant suffragette movement for conspiracy to commit damage and injury, including Mrs Pankhurst. According to his son and biographer, in doing his job he was

acting contrary to his personal beliefs, which were in favour of giving women the vote.<sup>74</sup>

One way to avoid not having to choose whether to go on hunger strike and be force-fed in the days before the 1913 Act was to avoid being caught. At the end of 1912, attacks on post boxes were occurring throughout the country. In Reading on a Saturday evening in November, between 8 and 9pm, such an incident had occurred. Under cover of darkness an envelope containing a thick black fluid was put into five boxes. Many letters were stained and in each of the boxes an empty envelope was found with the words 'votes for women' written across it. The post boxes being some way from each other in Caversham Road, Eldon Road, Oxford Road, Abbot's Walk and Friar Street suggests that more than one person was involved, and Reading police were of the opinion that strangers to the town were responsible. The damage was reported as not that great: only half a dozen addresses were not readable and were returned to sender.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, at Stoke Park golf club, Slough, two greens were damaged overnight in February 1913, but not enough to disturb play. The unknown perpetrators left behind papers bearing the words 'Votes for Women'.<sup>76</sup> Not all suffragettes were militant, but just being a known suffragette could put you in a position of suspicion. Edith Morley tried to board a train at Reading and was prevented because Herbert Asquith was expected and, until his safe departure from the station was assured, no suffragette would be allowed access. She was wearing her badge.

In 1913 amid the growing militant activity of the WSPU, due to the withdrawal of the Great Reform Bill and the defeat of Dickinson's Bill, the NUWSS organised a five-week law-abiding pilgrimage. Beginning on 18 June there were six main marching routes throughout the country that the suffragists could follow, culminating in Hyde Park, London, on 26 July. Along the way they held indoor and outdoor meetings, spoke out against militant activity and distributed literature, particularly the Society's magazine *The Common Cause*, which was sold to collect money for the society. The Pilgrims of the Land's End contingent arrived in Berkshire on 19 July at Hungerford, where they were met by Mrs Robie Uniacke (president of the East Berks Branches of the NUWSS) who was in charge of the route through the county. No suffrage society then existed in the town, but people were reported as friendly as they passed through on their way to Newbury where, on Monday 21st, a meeting at the lecture hall was organised for 8pm.<sup>77</sup> Many of the pilgrims who had come thus far left to go home, so at the open-air meeting in Theale on the Tuesday only 12 pilgrims were present. However, they were joined by more members from Dorchester, Bracknell, Pangbourne and Wallingford, and together the new group processed along the Bath Road into Reading. The pilgrims stopped for tea and a rest at the Prospect Park tea rooms where they were joined by local people. At 6.30pm 150 made their way into town with banners, and the

wagonette that accompanied them was used as a platform at the meeting in Market Place at 7.30pm. The marchers drew a great deal of attention in Reading and there was a large crowd at the meeting. The chair was taken by Miss Edith Sutton, there was enthusiasm for the speakers, and no rowdy element. Those pilgrims who were not local spent the night in Reading as guests of members of the Reading branch of the NUWSS, now 200 strong, who had been asked to provide board and lodging. From Reading they made their way to Twyford to hold an open-air meeting at mid-day then on to Maidenhead, stopping for lunch at the house of a supporter on the way. They entered Maidenhead through crowded streets, for a full meeting at the Town Hall with various speakers. Outside, a huge crowd had gathered, where speakers were interrupted by a rowdy minority. Overall, it was reported that the pilgrimage created a good deal of sympathy for the cause and was carried off without any windows smashed, no rick or house fired:

'It may be said at once that this orderly pilgrimage has done as much good for the movement as harm has been done by the wild women forming the WSPU'.<sup>78</sup>

With all the meetings of the pilgrims published in advance, it was easy for them to be preceded at each stop by groups opposing women's suffrage. Reading was no exception, and on the Monday evening the Reading branch of the NLOWS held an open-air meeting in St Mary's Butts. Mrs E Thoys, the Hon. Secretary of the local branch, introduced the speaker Mrs Gladstone Solomon. She put forward the often-used anti-suffrage arguments that management of the empire and the country should be left in the hands of men, otherwise there would be a petticoat government, and that only a few women were demanding the vote. A vote at the meeting was carried against giving women votes, with only seven dissenters.<sup>79</sup> The question of whether the electorate wanted the vote was used by Capt. Leslie Wilson, the Unionist candidate for Reading at the forthcoming bye-election, in a letter in which he was firmly on the fence:

'In view of the very grave doubt which exists as to the approval of the electors of this country of so grave a constitutional change such as woman suffrage, I am quite prepared to say that I am not willing to advocate an extension of the Parliamentary Franchise to women until the electors have had an opportunity of expressing their approval in a definite manner on the most important question.'<sup>80</sup>

One wonders whether this was a tactical move to ensure he was elected, as he is reported later as being favourable to the extension of the Parliamentary vote to those women who were municipal voters. He was, it is said, also willing to support it in parliament and urge it upon his party.<sup>81</sup> However, as was the case with George Palmer, much may have come down to the fine detail and the pendulum which swung back and forth dependent on the political climate at the time. At a NLOWS 'drawing room' meeting in March 1914 held at The Wood, Wellington College, Lady Haversham



presided. The usual anti-suffrage claims against giving women the vote were put forward and it was felt that all the suffragettes were trying to obtain could be done just as well by influencing public opinion. The resolution was carried in favour of not giving women the vote, with only three dissenters, and at the close of the meeting new members were enrolled. As the country moved towards war there was still plenty of interest in and support for activity on both sides.

In February 1914 the NUWSS undertook a vigorous propaganda campaign in south Buckinghamshire during the bye-election there. At a meeting in Slough, where Mrs Robie Uniacke was in charge, a crowd of 700 attended a meeting to hear Mr Bailey Weaver, a long-time supporter, and Miss Helen Ward of the London Society for Women's Suffrage speak. Between 200 and 300 were enrolled by the society in the town and a local branch was formed.<sup>82</sup> There were now twelve societies in Berkshire including Slough, Ascot, Bracknell, Crowthorne, Maidenhead, North Berks, Pangbourne, Reading, Windsor and Wokingham and the two new branches at Newbury and Hungerford formed after the 1913 Pilgrimage. The Society had also been busy amongst trade unions, and by 1914 had succeeded in obtaining resolutions from 54 unions within the area, 13 from Reading. Elsewhere, belief in the cause was still driving the debate and a new group of 12 of the Free Church League Women's Suffrage was formed in Abingdon in May.

One Sunday in March 1914, at least two church services in Reading were interrupted when a suffragette stood up to offer a prayer for Mrs Pankhurst who was in prison again. On both occasions the women were allowed to proceed, but whether this would have been the case a few months later, after certain events had occurred, we do not know. Locally one of the most drastic acts of the suffragettes was the fire that took place in Wargrave Church on the night of 31 May and morning 1 June 1914. The arson was linked to the suffragettes because of the banner and postcards that were discovered underneath the window on the north side of the church by Mr Percy Hermon. Written on the cards were the words:

'A reply to torture. To the Government hirelings and women torturers. A retort to brutality and torture. Let the church follow its own precepts before it is too late. No surrender. A sample of the Government's boasted suppression of militancy. Defiance !!! Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.'<sup>83</sup>

Such was the damage that nothing was left of the interior, only the ruined walls and tower remained. It was fortunate for the church that since the commencement of the suffragette outrages the church plate had been kept at the vicarage. Neither had the altar frontal to be used for Trinity Sunday service been taken to the church. Rev. Batty, the vicar of Wargrave, said:

'There is very widespread indignation at the burning of the church, and at all the churches in the neighbourhood, special precautions are being

taken. I think it is established that the people who set fire to the church came from an outside district. If the women of Wargrave had caught them they would have been torn to pieces.’<sup>84</sup>

A number of letters were received by the vicar in support of the cause. One stated that the next church to be destroyed would be St. Mary's in the Butts, Reading. The letter was forwarded to Captain Henderson of Reading Borough Police. There were also hundreds of letters received expressing sympathy with the vicar and the people of Wargrave over the destruction of their church.

It seems that violent acts did not end at Wargrave and later in the morning, perhaps on their way back to London, an indiscriminate attempt was made on 'The Willows' a riverside mansion near Windsor. The house was vacant and up for sale at the time of the attack and perhaps this was the reason it was targeted. However, for many years Sir Albert Rollit and the late Dowager Duchess of Sutherland had resided there and it is somewhat ironic that it was Sir Albert who had put forward a private members Bill in 1892 in favour of women's suffrage which was only narrowly defeated. The head gardener noticed smoke coming from the roof between 5 and 6 am and he discovered the drawing room on fire. With other garden hands and the



*After the fire at Wargrave church: an open-air service*

stableman, they succeeded in getting the fire under control before the Windsor Fire Brigade arrived. On the lawn near the house were two postcards. On one was written:

'Addressed to Asquith, McKenna and Co. Deputation to the King. Police raid on women. Social Political Union Headquarters. As the Government wants to kill our constitutional work militancy must continue. Asquith and Co., beware.'<sup>85</sup>

The other bore the words:

'A protest against the Cat and Mouse Act and forcible feeding.'<sup>86</sup>

The unfortunate effect of the fires was to ensure that churches throughout the county were kept closed and only opened for services. On the following Monday a notice was posted on the gate of Mortimer Church:

'Owing to dastardly outrages by frenzied criminals who have no regard for God or man, this church will for the present (though with the greatest regret) be kept closed except at the hours of divine worship. 1st June 1914.'<sup>87</sup>

Those organisations who were not militant – by far the vast majority – were continually having to deal with the fall-out of this militant activity. The Wargrave incident was the reason for a particularly rowdy meeting in Pangbourne Square, chaired by Miss Margaret Jones. On the following Wednesday 'Rowdism Rampant' ran the local headline. Organised by the NUWSS, the speakers were Miss Hilda Jones and Miss Mather who, answering queries on the recent incident, said:

'It was not fair that they should be held responsible for the ill-advised activity of a society to which they neither belonged nor subscribed, and with which they had nothing to do.'<sup>88</sup>

War is often a catalyst, and so it was that a foe greater than the British Parliament played a key role in the final act for women's suffrage. When war was declared on 4 August 1914 there was an end of militancy by the WSPU. Christabel Pankhurst came out in support of the British Government and female suffrage prisoners were released on 10 August. Emmeline toured the country encouraging men to sign up with all the conviction she had shown in the fight for women's suffrage. Not all WSPU members were in favour of the new devotion to Government, including Adela and Sylvia Pankhurst, and two groups split away from the main Union. Likewise, the NUWSS was split between the majority that supported the war and the minority who were opposed. It formed the Women's Active Service Corps and set up an employment register so that the jobs of those who were serving could be filled by women. The Reading and Theale members of the WFL held an open-air meeting in June 1914 addressed by Miss Monro, who by December 1915 was the newly elected president of the Reading Branch. In early 1915 Mrs Despard had attended a meeting of the Reading Branch 'to keep the suffrage flag flying' and there were numerous other meetings in the town, often in Hickies' lecture hall. The WFL continued in their work for women's suffrage throughout the war and were supporters of the Reading Day

Nursery that had been set up by the Reading NUWSS. It had opened on 7 September at 229 Kings Road, and on the committee were Pangbourne NUWSS members Miss H Jones and Miss M Jones. It was possibly their involvement that led to women and girls from Pangbourne making clothes for the nursery.

In 1916, amidst rumours that a franchise Bill was to be introduced, Mrs Pankhurst called the Suffrage Societies together on a number of occasions to establish the grounds for women's suffrage in such a Bill, with little success. In August 1916 Asquith was forced to acknowledge the contribution of women to the war effort and acknowledged their claim to suffrage:

'...a new class of electors, on whatever ground of State Service is formed when women who have rendered as effective service in the prosecution of the War as any class of the community also have a claim.'<sup>89</sup>

In October 1916 a Speaker's Conference drew up a report on electoral reform and its recommendations were delivered in 1917. Many suffrage organisations, including the NUWSS, accepted these terms even though it did not grant equal suffrage for which the organisation had campaigned. On 7 December 1917 the Franchise Reform Bill passed its third reading and there was cross-party unanimity in the debates in both Houses of Parliament. The Home Secretary of the governing coalition, George Cave, had this to say when he introduced the Bill:

'War by all classes of our countrymen has brought us nearer together, has opened men's eyes, and removed misunderstandings on all sides. It has made it, I think, impossible that ever again, at all events in the lifetime of the present generation, there should be a revival of the old class feeling which was responsible for so much, and, among other things, for the exclusion for a period, of so many of our population from the class of electors. I think I need say no more to justify this extension of the franchise.'<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, later in 1918, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act gave women over 21 the right to stand for election as a Member of Parliament.

For the purposes of the 1918 election new arrangements were introduced and three new Berkshire county constituencies – Abingdon, Newbury and Windsor – were formed. The one borough constituency was Reading. Wokingham municipal borough was included with Windsor, with other parts of the Wokingham area included with Newbury. The Reading electorate in 1918 was 45,379, up from 11,200 – one of the greatest increases in the country, thereby, it can be said, adding even greater significance to its now 18,305 women voters.<sup>91</sup> Women voters in the county constituencies numbered: 10,500 out of 26,280 in North Berkshire or Abingdon; South Berkshire or Newbury had 11,833 women voters out of a total of 29,377; for East Berkshire, Windsor, the total of the electorate was 33,377, and it was reported that women in Windsor were waiting for the polls to open and were more numerous than men in the first three hours.

Polling day was Saturday 14 December and schools had been closed on Friday to allow for stations to be organised. The average turnout for the country was reported as low, 57 per cent, a result, it was felt, of the many men still serving and a high number of uncontested seats.<sup>92</sup> It was also a wet day and there appears to have been a general apathy towards an election coming so soon after the Armistice when things were still far from normal. However, in Reading the turnout was 62 per cent, reflecting an eagerness perhaps among the supporters of the female franchise. The Windsor turnout was 44 per cent, considerably lower despite the early eagerness.

From those early petitions and the failure of various Bills, to the forthright campaigning of the marches and rallies and the later controversial militant activity, the suffrage cause was no stranger to Berkshire. County-wide coverage from ten local newspapers shows that Berkshire was far from acquiescent on the subject. They publicised the issue of women's suffrage from the very beginning and, as the subject garnered increasing interest, the reporting of events became more localised. They received copy from other papers, reported themselves, and most, but not all, accepted copy from the various suffrage organisations. We have a good example of how suffrage organisations came to manage press activity from the 1914 annual report of the Oxon, Berks and Bucks Federation of the NUWSS. There were 17 press secretaries for this area who between them were in contact with 33 newspapers. With each paper they probably established a working relationship of sorts and only one paper refused to print anything they submitted. Of the others, four were unwilling and needed pushing, another four would print anything, and most inserted local suffrage news and would advertise and report on meetings. It said of the three Reading papers that they were most useful, the *RO* printed a weekly column, the *RM* weekly notes and they reported that the *RS* was very favourable. Perhaps the willingness of the papers was down to a good press secretary; Miss Eustace was in charge of the Reading and Wokingham area until she resigned the post, when Reading was taken over by Miss M. Jones and Wokingham by Miss A. Powell. Whatever the particular stance taken by any of the newspapers, there is plenty of detailed coverage to ensure a comprehensive picture of women's suffrage activity in the county.

It is clear that there was interest in the subject across the county and all social classes were involved, although this is not equal across all levels. Working-class involvement in women's suffrage appears slim at this point though not absent. There were meetings at institutes set up for working people, at debating societies the subject had a regular airing, and the same can be said amongst church organisations. Furthermore, the NUWSS had worked hard in the twelve months before the war to secure the support of many trade unions. However, it is clear that involvement in the county was greatest amongst the middle and upper classes. Both single and married women were involved, and Crawford concludes that there was a good deal of support for women's suffrage in provincial towns and villages from men.<sup>93</sup> There was certainly no shortage locally of councillors, aldermen and mayors prepared to chair meetings.

Likewise, clergy, local businessmen and professionals were often out in number on platforms with the speakers to oversee proceedings or ready to second a proposal to send another petition to Parliament. While visiting speakers often toured the country giving the same lectures many times, the presence of local speakers both men and women would undoubtedly have added weight and influence – for example, Miss Edith Sutton, the first female councillor in Reading, and Lady Wantage, local benefactor and landowner in the north of the county. There were networks of support, often family oriented, involving husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, sisters, aunts and nieces. Families did not always agree or hold the same values and we see Mrs Martin Sutton (related to Edith Sutton by marriage) and Mrs G.W. Palmer (George Palmer's daughter-in-law) giving support to the anti-suffrage movement. The anti-suffrage movement had a particularly well-heeled list of supporters who often frequented the drawing rooms of many of the county's larger houses.

Women's suffrage was a cause that had supporters from all political parties and this was also county-wide. That support waxed and waned in popularity is evident, dependent as it was upon the politics of the day, the timing of the various Bills and the views of the different Prime Ministers. In 1872, George Palmer said he preferred an 'abstract point of view' on the matter, one that considered women's suffrage on its own merits and not as a political tool, which it invariably became.<sup>94</sup> The argument often used by MPs as a reason for not supporting a Bill or for sitting on the fence was that the majority of women did not want the vote. However, even without the statistics of a national referendum on the matter and the efforts of the anti-suffrage movement, women's suffrage could not have grown to the size it did without sizeable support from women, from the local activists who were prepared to set up branches, organise shops and arrange meetings to the hundreds and thousands of women who lent their support to the rallies and marches in London and elsewhere, particularly the NUWSS pilgrimage in 1913. While the militant activities of the suffragettes did undoubtedly alienate many, they paid the price and did make headlines.

Why it took women so long to obtain the vote can seem a little perplexing from our twenty-first century perspective, but it was a far from simple issue. Such was the size of the problem that no amount of lobbying of Parliament would succeed until attitudes towards women and their role in society changed, particularly that they had a fundamental right to have their say in how the country was governed. When only 58 per cent of men had the vote in 1900, it is no surprise that women should have to wait their turn. That the First World War proved a catalyst is undeniable, but by setting the qualifying age at 30, the majority of those women who did their bit during the conflict did not qualify.<sup>95</sup> It was a clear sign that even after 60 years of campaigning those in power were still not quite ready for anything more radical, and whilst all men over the age of 21 could vote, women would still have to wait for equal suffrage.

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1 Providing they met the £5 property qualification.

2 The research is in the most part based on those newspapers that have been digitised. The search engine used for the purpose is Findmypast.

3 <https://www.parliament.uk/1866>. Accessed 19 November 2019.

4 An earlier society, the Manchester Committee for the Enfranchisement of Women was formed in 1865 by Elizabeth Wolstenhome-Emly.

5 Only includes those societies that joined together in 1897 to form the NUWSS, there may have been others that did not join.

6 *Newbury Weekly News and General Advertiser (NWN)* 23 May 1867. Professor Fawcett was Henry Fawcett, husband of Millicent Fawcett (nee Garrett).

7 *NWN*, 5 Dec 1867

8 *Berkshire Chronicle (BC)* 9 March 1867, 18 December 1868; *Reading Mercury (RM)* 16 May 1868.

9 *RM*, 23 May 1868; *BC* 20 Feb 1869.

10 E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland* (2006) p. 101.

11 *BC*, 7 December 1872.

12 *Ibid*, 14 May 1874.

13 Suffragists Rhoda and Agnes Garrett were cousins, Agnes was a sibling of Elizabeth Garrett and Millicent Fawcett. Lilia Ashworth was an influential speaker and funded suffrage work, she became a member of the WSPU.

14 *NWN*, 23 May 1872.

15 *BC*, 7 December 1872.

16 *RM* 14 December 1872.

17 *Ibid*.

18 *Ibid*.

19 *Ibid*.

20 Miss Beedy was an American suffrage lecturer and travelled around the UK for five years from about 1871. Caroline Biggs came from a family of activists. An advocate for women's suffrage, she toured the country giving speeches.

21 *BC*, 4 May 1878.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 T. A. B. Corley, *Quaker Enterprise in Biscuits Huntley and Palmers of Reading 1822-1972*, p.117.

25 *BC*, 22 June 1878.

26 Lydia Becker was a leading light of the early suffrage movement and founded and published the *Women's Suffrage* journal.

27 Corley, *Quaker Enterprise*, p.117.

28 *BC*, 14 June 1884.

29 *RM*, 12 September 1885.

30 *Reading Observer (RO)*, 17 October 1885.

31 *Farringdon Advertiser & Vale of White Horse Gazette (FAVWHG)*, 20 March 1886.

32 Florence Balgarnie was a supporter of the suffrage movement from the age of 17 and an active speaker.

33 *RM*, 29 January 1887.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 *RM*, 14 April 1894.

39 *Windsor and Eton Express (WEE)*, 31 May 1902.

40 The Women's Franchise League had broken up in 1903.

41 *BC*, 12 December 1908.

42 Ibid, 3 November 1906.

43 *RO*, 29 December 1906.

44 Rufus Isaacs became MP for Reading in 1904 and lived locally in Reading at Foxhill House.

45 *Berks and Oxon Advertiser (BOA)*, 26 June 1908.

46 *BC*, 25 January 1908.

47 Ibid, 19 December 1908.

48 *BOA*, 13 November 1908.

49 *WEE*, 5 December 1908.

50 *BC*, 15 December 1909

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid, 7 October 1908.

53 Ibid, 28 October 1908.

54 E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland* (2006) p. 102.

55 *RO*, 29 October 1910. Miss Margesson was daughter of Lady Isabel Margesson, one of the most influential suffragettes in the area.

56 *BC*, 18 December 1909.

57 *Reading Standard (RS)*, 8 January 1910.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Three Conciliation Bills were passed, one each year between 1910 and 1912. The idea was to give a limited number of women the vote in order to quieten down the more militant members of the suffrage movement.

61 *RS*, 23 December 1911.

62 *BOA*, 4 April 1912.

63 *The Suffragette*, 6 June 1913; 8 August 1913.



64 Ibid.

65 *WEE*, 'Revealing the tale of the Windsor suffragettes' 1 April 2016.

<https://www.windsorexpress.co.uk/news/windsor/82971/FEATURE--Revealing-the-tale-of.html>. Accessed 19 May 2020.

66 *WEE*, 18 March 1911.

67 *RO*, 17 December 1911.

68 *WEE*, 18 March 1911.

69 *RM*, 3 June 1911.

70 *BC*, 17 November 1909.

71 *Lake's Falmouth Packet and Cornwall Advertiser*, 2 July 1909.

72 Marion Wallace-Dunlop was the first suffragette to go on hunger strike in July 1909 and many followed her lead.

73 *BOA*, 3 December 1909; *Votes for Women*, 3 December 1909.

74 <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/five-reading-citizens-and-fight-for-votes-for-women>. Accessed 4 June 2020.

75 *FAVWHG*, 21 December 1912.

76 *Bucks Herald*, 22 February 1913.

77 There was no society in Newbury of the NUWSS according to the press at this point, even though Crawford describes Newbury as a hotbed of suffrage activity by comparison to the rest of the county (p. 103). However, in the NUWSS annual report of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Federation for 1914, a branch in Newbury is listed alongside that of Hungerford, so it is likely both were formed after the pilgrimage.

78 *RO*, 26 July 1913.

79 Ibid.

80 *RO*, 25 October 1913.

81 NUWSS BBO 1914 Annual Report.

82 *RO*, 14 February 1914.

83 *BC*, 5 June 1914

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 *RO*, 14 February 1914.

89 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1916/aug/14/parliament-and-local-elections>. Accessed 31 May 2020.

90 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representation\\_of\\_the\\_People\\_Act\\_1918](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representation_of_the_People_Act_1918). Accessed 8 June 2020.

91 *RM*, 7 December 1918. 8.5m women voters nationally.

92 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7529/>. Accessed 27 February 2020.

93 E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland* (2006) p.277.

94 *BC*, 14 December 1872.

95 Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, often referred to as the 'Flapper Vote'.

# Berkshire Bibliography 2020

## Katie Amos

*Some recent accessions in Reading Local Studies Library*

Brossler, Brown, Guttman, Morris and Webley, *Prehistoric settlement in the Lower Kennet Valley. Excavations at Green Park (Reading Business Park) Phase 3 and Moores Farm, Burghfield, Berkshire.* 2013

Nicola Capon, *John Tweed, sculpting the Empire.* 2013

Bill Dean-Myatt, 'Local Sound recording studios', *Local History News* no 133 – contains a photo of a record cut at Heelas. 2019

Peter Driver, *A Walk for Stanley.* 2019

John Froy, *Ray Atkins – The Reading years.* 2016

Mel Gooding, *Terry Frost colour collage and constructions.* c2009

John Hill, *Slim's Burma Boys.* 2019

Keith James, *Bulbs, Beer and Biscuits; Badfinger in Berkshire parts 1 & 2.* 2020

Dudley Jones, *Caversham Lawn Tennis Club. A history. The first 100 years.*

James Lewis and Steve Preston, *Medieval Boundaries and an Early Post-Medieval Manor House at Beeches Manor, Reading Road, Wokingham, Berkshire.* 2013

John S Partington, *Reading Labour 100. The centenary of the Labour Party in Reading 1918-2018.* 2019

Steve Preston and Andy Taylor. *An Early to Middle Iron Age Settlement at the former Elvian School, Reading, Berkshire.* 2018

*Reading Chronicle, The Heelas rebuild 1979-1985.* A special supplement to mark the 10th anniversary

Andy Taylor and Steve Ford, *Two Iron Age smelting sites in Berkshire and North Hampshire. Archaeological excavations on sites in Riseley and Reading.* 2019

Caroline Wagstaff, *Windsor. Fun, facts, history and legend.* 3rd ed. 2011