

Votes for Women-Background History

One hundred years ago on the 6th February 1918 an important Law was passed that changed our Country forever.

After many decades of dedicated campaigning, The Representation of the People Act 1918, added 8.5 million women to vote (suffrage) in the UK parliamentary elections for the first time. About 2 in every 5 women could now have their say over who was in Government. But this did not include all women. To qualify, women had to be over 30, own their property or be married to someone who did or were graduates voting in a university constituency. This paved the way for universal suffrage 10 years later. It also gave the vote to 5.6 million more men after their voting age was lowered to 21, regardless now of whether or not they owned property - and men in the armed forces could vote from the age of 19. The number of men who could now vote went from 8 million to 21 million. The general election in December 1918 consulted an electorate three times the size of the one before it.

The Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act followed the same year that also allowed women to now be able to stand as Members of Parliament

In a democracy, like the UK today, members of the public over 18 years get to vote for who they want to lead them and have more say in how the country is run. But this has not always been the case. In the past, the King or Queen (Monarchy) had huge powers and there was very little that ordinary people could do to have a say in how they were governed. In the early 1800s, there were still very few people who could vote and the ones that could were all men. Women didn't have a say at all. But around this time, things started to change. Throughout the 19th Century, groups like the Chartists (Newport history), campaigned to allow *all* men to be able to vote.

From the late 18th century, some people advocated rights for women as citizens equal to that of men. Women played a part alongside men in general agitation for political reform in the early 19th century

In 1832 and 1867, laws were passed which did allow more men to vote than could before, but they still did not apply to all men. For example, men still had to be quite rich to have their say. The Reform Act 1832 extended voting rights to adult males who rented propertied land of a certain value allowing 1 in 7 males in the UK voting rights.

Approximately 58% of adult males were able to vote by 1900. This included some working class men. Many women who were denied the vote were in similar circumstances to these men, being tax and rate payers and subject to the laws of the land. These laws concerning women could change without their say.

There was a growing sense of injustice.

Up until Victorian times (1837-1901), women had very few rights at all, especially once they were married. For example, anything they owned became their husband's property.

In the nineteenth century it was traditionally thought that women had no place in national politics as women weren't educated and informed, and lacked enough understanding of politics to be able to vote. It was also assumed that women did not need the vote because their husbands would take responsibility in political matters. Even Queen Victoria agreed!

The majority of opinion in the UK was against women having a vote. This also made it hard for women to reach out to other women. Women were not allowed to speak in public or be seen unescorted which was frowned upon. Women had to be persuaded what a difference a vote would make to households (such as those of widows with no protection), to often horrendous working conditions and on the streets.

It was felt a woman's place was at home, raising children and running the household.

Since the Industrial Revolution, more and more women were working in full-time jobs, for example in Mills and domestic service. This made it easier for them to get together to discuss politics and social issues which affected their lives - and many of them weren't happy about how society treated them so differently to men.

It was time for change. Nineteenth century feminists talked about "The Cause". This described a movement for women's rights generally. It had no particular political focus. But by the close of the century the issue of the vote became the focus of women's struggle for equality. Although some men supported their cause, it was deeply unpopular. Men were even put out of business for supporting the cause'. Women became cruelly portrayed in popular postcards of the day as plain, unfit to marry, (old maids), home wreckers, neglectful

mothers, irresponsible, in fact quite ugly: Women were depicted as frightening and dangerous, domineering and abusive, with very big feet and huge buck teeth, having hair pulled back in a bun and with glasses - so much prejudice. This stereotype was later challenged by posters of the movement portraying very feminine woman as well as showing women being force fed whilst on hunger strike, as torture and inquisition by the Government. This softened the prejudice.

The love of postcards, invented in the 19th Century, were also seized upon by the Edwardians as a medium for both sides in the pro and anti-suffrage campaigns. Men and children were seen as the victims, with men portrayed performing what they considered women's roles in the house, like cooking and cleaning and caring for the children.

Cambridge University was far from progressive. A vote in 1897 to grant women full degrees was not only lost, but effigies of women were torched by jeering crowds of male onlookers.

The movement to gain votes for women had two wings, the suffragists and the suffragettes.

The suffragists had their origins in the mid nineteenth century, while the suffragettes came into being in 1903.

Suffragist Mary Smith was behind the first petition to Parliament asking for women to get the vote. This was presented by Henry Hunt MP on 3 August 1832, but it was not successful. In the same year, the Great Reform Act confirmed the exclusion of women from the vote.

The Ladies Gallery was created in the new Palace of Westminster, after the fire in 1834, for women wanting to watch proceedings in the House of Commons. The Gallery had windows covered in heavy grills making it hard to see and hear. Before that, well-connected women had restricted and uncomfortable viewing of debates via a ventilation shaft. The grills became both a physical and metaphorical symbol of woman's exclusion from Parliament, and later a target of suffragette agitation. One supportive lady from Australia, where women were already given the vote, had to be cut down still handcuffed to a grill and removed from it outside parliament.

Then, in 1867 the Second Reform Bill women's petition was presented in the House of Commons by John Stuart Mill MP. He suggested to Parliament that the law should be changed to give women the same voting rights as men. His proposal was also rejected by 194 votes to 73 - but it got the campaign going.

The National Society for Women's Suffrage was formed. Started in Edinburgh, London and Manchester.



Make way: in this 1866 cartoon, John Stuart Mill asks an indignant John Bull to let women cast their vote. John Bull is the personification of Great Britain

In 1881 The Isle of Man granted votes to women.

Again in 1884, an amendment to the Third Reform Bill, to include women in the vote, was rejected.

Changes to the law in favour of women getting the vote were presented in Parliament almost every year from 1870 onwards. But they weren't successful, so some women felt the campaign needed to be turned up a notch!

In 1897, more than 20 local and national women's suffrage societies formed the **National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)**, under the leadership of Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929). Lydia Becker was another notable leader. They were called the *suffragists*

Millicent Fawcett published widely on women's issues and was a frequent public speaker on women's rights. She was married to MP, Henry Fawcett, and sat regularly in the Ladies Gallery of the House of Commons to watch the debates. The NUWSS wanted the vote for middle class property-owning women. They believed they would achieve their end using peaceful tactics - non-violent demonstrations, petitions and the lobbying of MPs. Fawcett believed that if the organisation was seen to be intelligent, polite and law-abiding then women would prove themselves responsible enough to participate fully in politics. There was criticism that concentrating so heavily on activities in Parliament sacrificed opportunities to mobilise mass support in the

rest of the Country. But the Suffragists were instrumental in building up the legal and constitutional support for the enfranchisement of women. However, their contributions were often overshadowed by the high profile actions of the Suffragettes.

The leadership of the suffragists was exclusively middle class but some of the more radical members recognised early on that the movement needed the support of working class women. These women worked in horrendous conditions managed by men. The issue of the franchise (meaning a statutory right granted to a person or group by a Government; especially like the right to citizenship and the right to vote), was drawing women of various sections of society together and giving them an identity which they had lacked until that time.

By 1900 there was already evidence that many Members of Parliament had been won over. Several Bills in favour of women's suffrage gained considerable support in Parliament, though not enough to pass. Some believed it was only a matter of time until women would gain the vote.



Leading light: Millicent Garrett Fawcett of the British women's suffragist movement. Her statue has just been unveiled in 2018 as the first female representation of woman's suffrage in Parliament Square

One woman in particular who was very important in the fight for women's right to vote was Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928). Originally a member of the Manchester suffragist set frustrated with the middle-class, respectable wait-and-see tactics of the NUWSS, formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), in 1903 with her daughters Christabel and Sylvia. Membership of the WPSU was limited to women only.

Members of this group became the first *suffragettes* – a name given to them by The Daily Mail—a group of women who fought hard for women's votes. They got their name from the word *suffrage*, which means *right to vote*.

In 1905 militant campaigning begins. Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney were arrested and imprisoned. “Deeds, not words” and “Votes for women” were adopted as campaign slogans.

Watch



Watch our motion comic animation about the role Emmeline Pankhurst played in the suffrage movement. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p011gygm

Mrs Pankhurst believed it would take an active organisation, with young working class women, to draw attention to the cause. The motto of the suffragettes was *deeds not words* and from 1912 onwards they became more militant and violent in their methods of campaign to get their message heard. Law-breaking, smashing windows, setting fire to politician’s post-boxes and houses, violence with lives lost, chaining themselves to railings and hunger strikes; all became part of this society's campaign tactics. The WSPU were to cause disruption and civil disobedience, such as the ‘rush’ on Parliament in October 1908 when it encouraged the public to join them in an attempt to invade the House of Commons. 60,000 people gathered but the police cordon held fast.

In 1907 the Women's Social and Political Union itself split into two groups after Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel came into conflict with other members of the WSPU's executive body. Those who left formed the **Women's Freedom League**, while the Pankhursts and their supporters established an even tighter grip on the workings of the WSPU.

The three groups disagreed over tactics but their message was consistent and they regularly worked together. Despite opposition, the argument for women's suffrage seemed to be winning support. By 1909 the WSPU had branches all over the country and published a newspaper called, ‘*Votes for Women*’ which sold 20,000 copies each week. The NUWSS was also flourishing, with a rising membership and an efficient nation-wide organisation.

The rough treatment of many suffragettes arrested and jailed during the course of their protests also won the suffrage cause increasing sympathy and support from the public. The commendable behaviour of the suffrage movement during the war - suspending their protests for the sake of national unity - also proved that the women were far from unreasonable.



Figurehead: Emmeline Pankhurst making an open air speech

In 1906, the Liberal Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, and 400 of 670 MPs favour women's suffrage. Rifts begin to show in the women campaigners' ranks. The NUWSS continues petitions and meetings while the WSPU protests at the Commons. WSPU members are arrested and imprisoned.

In 1907, The NUWSS organises a London march and more than 3,000 women take part. The weather is so bad that it is dubbed the Mud March. The Women's Freedom League (WFL) arises from the WSPU, rejecting the dominance of the Pankhursts. The WFL founded the paper 'The Vote'. Interestingly, the movement engaged many artists who were activists. Wood block printing for the cause was common, especially using the movements' colours of purple, white and green. Or red, green and white.

On Sunday, 21st June 1908 a mass rally took place in Hyde Park, 300,000 to 500,000 activists attend. The Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith does not respond. To get his attention, suffragettes smash windows in Downing Street, using stones with written pleas tied to them. Some protesters chain themselves to railings.

1909 saw the start of hunger strikes and force-feeding. The Scottish WSPU member Marion Wallace Dunlop becomes the first hunger striker. An increasing number of more militant WSPU members were imprisoned.

This led to The Conciliation Bill in 1910, which would give women the vote, succeeding in the Commons but Asquith does not carry it through. The WSPU starts protests, including those called “Black Friday” in which many women are injured, some permanently and later fatally, and are abused by police.

Gwenllian Morgan became Wales' first female mayor in 1910, in Brecon. Although a first for its time, this was local politics - Westminster and the right to vote were still completely barred to women.

In 1911 a new Conciliation Bill passes but is stalled by the general election in November. By 1912 The Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill is introduced and defeated by 222 votes to 208. There is a mass window-smashing campaign in protest.

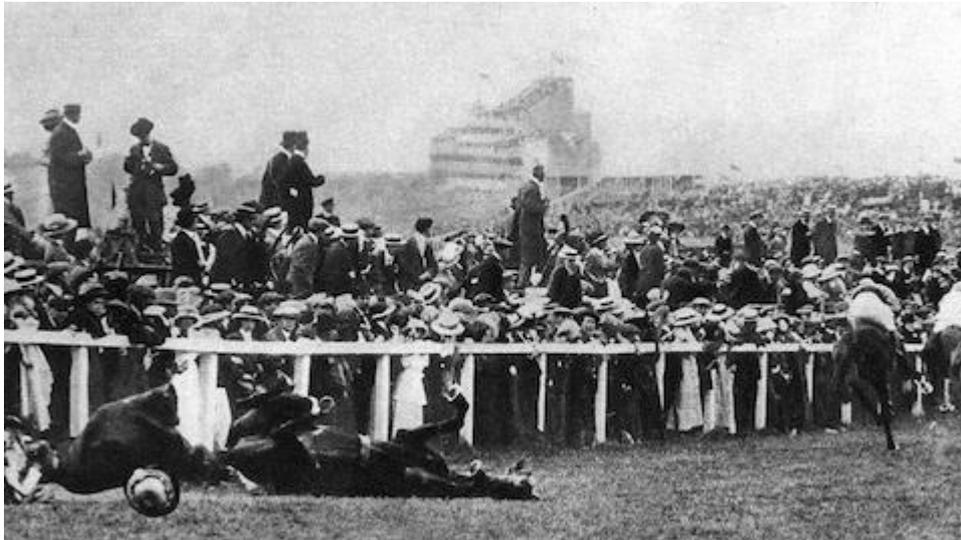


Manhandled: a woman is arrested at a Women’s Social and Political Union protest

A ruling by the Speaker in The House of Commons in 1913, wrecks hopes of an amendment to include women in the Reform Bill. Militant bomb and arson campaigns and increasing arrests culminate in the passing of the “Cat and Mouse” Act, under which hunger strikers are temporarily released then rearrested to prevent them dying in police custody.

In 1913, one suffragette called Emily Wilding Davison even gave her life for the cause. Emily had arrested nine times and force-fed 49 times, decided to draw attention to the suffrage cause and disrupt the Derby. With a return train

ticket and another to a dance that evening in her bag, she steps in front of the King's speeding horse Anmer, possibly to attach a WSPU banner of suffragette colours to its bridle. She dies four days later, still in prison, of a skull fracture and internal injuries. Her funeral is attended by thousands of women and tens of thousands lined the streets of London as her coffin passed by.



Tragic: Emily

Wilding Davison throws herself in front of the King's horse at The Derby in 1913

By 1914, violent actions continue, with suffragettes trying to force their way into Buckingham Palace to petition the King.

By now many people supported women's right to be able to vote, but did not agree with the violent action of the suffragettes. They preferred to hold meetings, parade with banners, write letters or sign petitions.

On August 4th 1914, World War I broke out. Suffrage prisoners are set free. Campaigning stops and suffragette leaders urge women to join the war effort. The NUWSS continues to represent women and to campaign for recognition of their work.

Many women took on jobs that men traditionally did, while they were away fighting on the battlefield.

Emmeline Pankhurst focused her efforts on helping the war effort and encouraged other suffragettes to do the same. She pointed out that there was no point in continuing to fight for the vote when there might be no country in which they could vote!

Doing this gained for the women fighting for suffrage a lot of respect.

During this time, there were no elections to choose a new government - and attitudes to women in society really started to change.

A big reason for this was because of the contributions that women had made to society throughout the war and the huge difference it made in winning the war. It became impossible to ignore demands to give them the vote

Women proved themselves to be every bit as equal as men and the government promised to give women the vote when the war was finished.

In 1917, The Electoral Reform Bill passes in the Commons. It gives votes only to certain women: those over the age of 30, those over 21 who own their own house or those married to householders.

Finally in 1918, after years of campaigning and protesting, women over 30 were granted the vote and some women voted in the general election for the very first time in December that year. The Representation of the People Act is passed in February, this also allowed men over 21 to vote. But many of the women who had worked in the fields and in munitions factories during the war were below that age. Some politicians believed that younger women wouldn't understand the complexities of politics, or that they were more likely to support radical parties and ideas.

The first women to be elected to the Commons was Constance Markievicz, in the General Election of 1918. However, as a member of Sinn Fein, she did not take her seat. **In December 1919**, the first female MP, Nancy Astor, (Viscountess Astor), enters the Commons to take her seat after a by-election after her husband Waldorf Astor MP, was promoted to the Peerage. Ironically, she had never been involved in campaigns for women's suffrage.

Women under 30 did not get the right to vote until 1928 when the voting age was brought into line with that for men the Amendment of the Representation of the People Act that entitled everyone over the age of 21 to vote. It had taken years to achieve change, but even these reforms may not have happened so soon if the war hadn't provided a catalyst for social change.

The general election of 1929 was the first in which all women above the voting age of 21 could cast their vote. Women could now stand for election to Parliament, and out of the three who stood in Wales, the one who succeeded in being elected was Megan Lloyd George.

Daughter of the former Prime Minister, David, she was elected Liberal MP for Anglesey. She could speak many languages, was a keen advocate of the Welsh language and a persuasive public speaker, and was keen to fight for women's rights. Megan won Anglesey for the Liberal Party another three times.

The leading Welsh suffragette was Margaret Haig Mackworth (née Thomas). She later became Lady Rhondda and was a successful business woman and journalist. As a suffragette, she blew up a post box in Risca Road, Newport, to show how strongly she felt about votes for women. This earned her a sentence in prison, but she went on hunger strike and was released after five days.

When Margaret's father, the Liberal MP Viscount Rhondda, died in 1918, she attempted to inherit his seat in the House of Lords - an honour traditionally passed down through the male line of a family. She didn't succeed, but the playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw remarked that her attempt highlighted "such a show-up of the general business ignorance and imbecility of the male sex as never was before."

The nation-wide Women's Freedom League was established in Swansea in 1909, and was formed as a non-violent campaigning body for women's votes.

The league supported peaceful methods of campaigning. The first annual report stated its objectives as being: "To secure for Women the Parliamentary Vote on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men; to use the power thus obtained to establish equality of rights and opportunities between the sexes; and to promote the social and industrial well-being of the community."

There was a big following for votes for women within Wales. The Cardiff branch of the National Women's Union of Suffrage Societies was the biggest outside London. It took an outbreak of war in 1914 to overshadow the debate, but the impact of the conflict led to huge social upheaval.

Women's suffrage in Wales has historically been marginalised due to the prominence of societies and political groups in England which led the reform for women throughout the United Kingdom. Due to differing social structures and a heavily industrialised working-class society, the growth of a national movement in Wales grew but then stuttered in the late nineteenth century in comparison with that of England. Nevertheless, distinct Welsh groups and individuals rose to prominence and were vocal in the rise of suffrage in Wales and the rest of Great Britain.

In the early twentieth century, Welsh hopes of advancing the cause of female suffrage centred around the Liberal Party and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, one of the most important Welsh politicians of the day. After Liberal success in the 1906 Election failed to materialise into political change, suffragettes and in particular members of the more militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), took a hard line stance towards their Members of Parliament, engaging in direct action against them.

Militant action was not a hallmark of the movements in Wales and Welsh members, who more often identified themselves as suffragists, sought Parliamentary and public support through political and peaceful means

The UK has come a long way since then in treating women the same way as men. Before the 20th Century, there had certainly been no female prime ministers. Now, there have been two - including **our current Prime Minister Theresa May** - and there are many female MPs. When a 32 years old pregnant Harriet Harman entered Parliament as an MP in 1982. There was only 17 female MP's. She has been Parliament's leading advocate for women for decades. But there are still more male MPs in Parliament than there are women and **there is still inequality in the UK** between men and women in other areas of life.

The love of sending postcards was the Edwardian equivalent of sharing something on social media. Hundreds of anti-suffrage cards, many of which depicted Suffragettes as unfeminine and a danger to family life, were sold in shops between 1903 and 1917, when they were active. They were used to send death threats and hate mail.

In that respect that is a similarity to social media today: It's very easy to mock or to satirise or to insult someone, but if you put yourself in the position of that person you probably wouldn't do it. They often used to stand in the gutter to campaign so that they couldn't be arrested for public nuisance and obstruction. Their physical vulnerability by campaigning on the street was very different. To be brave enough to stand on a street corner and sell a newspaper in the early 20th century, there was nowhere to hide. They were completely exposed and at the mercy of whoever happened to be passing by. Those women were on their own, they were not protected in any way, and obviously the police weren't going to protect them. They were living in a very different society from today.

Please see attached pdf file for Poster examples from the day