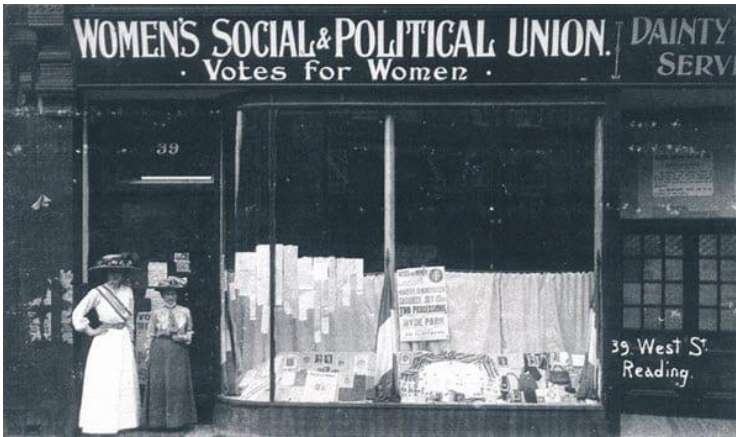


The Suffragette Movement in Reading

A talk by Dr Margaret Simons at the Society's Open Meeting on 19 June 2024



A very well attended meeting was treated to a meticulous and detailed account of the history of the long fight and tribulations to secure the vote for women. Dr Simons is an experienced adult education tutor who is the Secretary of the Berkshire History Society and a trustee of the Mills Archive. Dr. Simons gave an insight into the progress of the demand for woman's suffrage from 1866, when a national petition was signed by just one supporter in the town, through the growth of political support in the late 19th century to mass demonstrations and direct action in the 1910s, culminating in equal representation in 1928.

Many well-known and familiar names were mentioned from historical, political and local interest perspectives – including George Palmer of Huntley & Palmers biscuits, John Heelas of the Reading and Wokingham department stores. William Gladstone, Reading MP Charles Murdoch, Herbert Asquith, Lloyd George and Edith Sutton (of the Sutton Seeds family) It is important to note that support for the suffrage movement included men as well as women.



Edith Sutton, later Mayor of Reading 933-94

Reading was a location with significant support for the suffrage movement, with many public meetings taking place across the area – including one in Wokingham! It was also on a key route to London for the protest marches that took place. Reading was far from silent.

Between 1886 and 1911 women's suffrage bills were repeatedly introduced and defeated in the House of Commons. Suffragettes were active across the county in their demand for 'votes for women'.



Progression of the right to vote for women was slow and much compromise was required in order to ensure legislation was finally passed. A key argument for the vote was that women could be responsible for their financial estates including businesses and pay taxes, but could not have a say in how these taxes were spent.

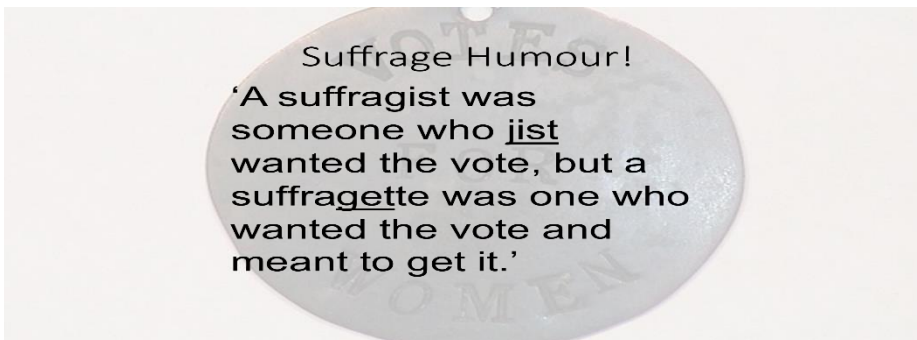
The National Society (or Union) for Woman's suffrage, NUWSS was founded by Millicent Fawcett in 1897. She adopted a peaceful and non-violent approach which included

lobbying and petitioning in pursuit of the equality and fairness being sought. These were known as 'Suffragists'.

Emmeline Pankhurst became frustrated by the lack of progress and decided that more direct action was needed. She founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) with the motto 'Deeds not Words'. This pioneered a campaign of civil disobedience and vandalism - including smashing windows, attracting much publicity. These were known as 'Suffragettes'.

Some members of the WSPU were imprisoned for acts of vandalism in support of women's suffrage. In protest at being imprisoned, a number of the suffragettes went on hunger strike – hunger strikers were force-fed by prison staff which led to a significant public outcry. This risked undermining the moral authority of the government.

There was also a strong "anti" suffrage movement from women who were concerned that their roles in the home would be undermined. They also held public meetings to voice their feelings and frustrations.



The Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act 1913 (commonly known as The Cat and Mouse Act) against the inhumane treatment of women was a response to this. It enabled women who were hunger-striking to be released when they became seriously ill and then re-arrested when they recovered. The government were keen to avoid any negative publicity associated with

force feeding – as such action was traditionally only used in mental institutions – and also to avoid the death of any suffragette in prison.

There was a fire in Wargrave church in 1914 which destroyed it. It was alleged that the suffragette movement was responsible for this act of arson - although this was never proved.

During the spring and summer of 1914 militant suffragettes staged further protests in favour of securing the right to vote for women – although activities were suspended at the outbreak of the 1st World War in favour of the war effort.

It was clear that the "Great War" had changed the dynamics of society, with women taking on new roles as a result of men being called up to fight, and in 1918 a vote in parliament extended the vote to some women. Under this act, all women aged 30 or over received the complete franchise. An act to enable women to sit in the House of Commons was enacted shortly afterward. In 1928 the voting age for women was lowered to 21 to place women voters on an equal footing with male voters.