

Votes for women 2018

Lucienne Boyce

On 6 February 1918 the Representation of the People Act ('the 1918 Act') gave women the right to vote in British Parliamentary elections for the first time. The women's franchise came after nearly a hundred years of campaigning, a struggle which in its final, pre-First World War decade, saw a brutal, bitterly-fought battle between militant suffragettes and the Liberal government.

Before 1918, the right to vote was limited to men and based on a property qualification. The 1918 Act did away with the property qualification for men and gave all men over twenty one the vote. In the case of women, however, a property qualification was retained and women had to be over thirty before they could vote. The only other women enfranchised were graduates over thirty in university constituencies.

It was a shockingly unequal piece of legislation that fell far short of the demand of both militant and non-militant campaigners for the vote on the same terms as men. Only 40% of the total female population met the qualifications. Nevertheless, the 1918 Act established the principle of women's right to vote and both supporters and opponents of the women's franchise were confident that full equality would inevitably follow – though they regarded the prospect with very different emotions.

Sylvia Pankhurst called the 1918 Act 'absurd' but noted that campaigners 'knew that now the breach in the sex barrier had been made, the fight for womanhood suffrage had been won'.¹ So it is entirely appropriate that next year, the hundredth anniversary of votes for women, we should commemorate both nationally and locally this giant leap forward in the on-going struggle for gender equality.

Here in Bristol we have a rich radical and social reform heritage, and women's suffrage is well represented in both its branches, militant and non-militant. The West of England and South Wales Women's History Network is working with the Bristol Museums service to organise a number of events to mark the centenary. We're planning a day of activities on 19

May 2018 at Bristol MShed which will include talks, walks, performance, film, gallery tours and activities for children.

Elsewhere in the city, other organisations are planning exhibitions, banner-making sessions followed by a parade, re-enactment events such as meetings and rallies, and projecting suffragette and suffragist colours onto municipal buildings. There will be musical events, art exhibitions, and cultural trails. The commemorations will be linked to contemporary issues, with panel debates and other events related to women's rights and equal opportunities.

There's a lot of excitement around the centenary, and no doubt more ideas will be generated. So what can you do in your area to get involved?

Find out more

- Start by reading some general suffrage campaign histories to get an overview of the campaign. Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Virago, 1977) is a classic – but remember it's written from the point of view of the militant Women's Social and Political Union. (There's no space to include a book list here – but there is one on my website together with a Women's Suffrage Timeline <https://www.lucienneboyce.com/researching-the-suffragette-movement/>)
- For an overview of suffrage activity in your region, the best place to start is Elizabeth Crawford's *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- To find out about individual women, see Elizabeth Crawford's *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- See if there are any reliable local histories of the suffrage campaign for your area. If not, perhaps your local history or writers' group would like to write one.
- Check your local archives for women's suffrage information.
- If you have access to a local newspaper archive, it will be a mine of information. The British Newspaper Archive is a subscription

service but may be available through your local library. <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

- Your local library might also provide access to *The Times Digital Archive* and *Illustrated London News*, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, *Who's Who* and *Who Was Who*.

- BBC Archive has recordings of interviews with suffragettes

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/>

- British Pathe Archive has lots of film footage of suffrage events

<http://www.britishpathe.com/>

Find out what's happening

- Check what your local museums and other institutions are planning and find out how you can help.

- It might also be worth checking the Museum Associations Network for celebrating gender equality milestones in 2018 to see what's happening in other areas

http://www.museumsassociation.org/news/20092016-network-gender-equality-milestones-2018?dm_i=2VBX,BDQ8,27LU0M,13V1C,1

- Vote 100: find out what Parliament is planning and explore a history of the women's vote at <http://www.parliament.uk/vote100>

And here are a few points to bear in mind:-

- The campaign for the vote goes back to the 1832 Reform Act (and arguably earlier) and you may well find information about Victorian women that is relevant.

- Make sure you know the difference between the suffragettes and the suffragists!

- Remember it wasn't just the suffragettes who won votes for women.

- The question of how far the First World War contributed to votes for women is very much open for debate.

- Have fun!

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1 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 607.