UNIVERSITY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

University of Bristol students' revenge on the suffragettes' headquarters

A IS FOR ARSON

Lucienne Boyce explains why suffragettes targeted the University in 1913.

At five pm on Friday 24 October 1913 a mob of about 300 young men armed with bricks, sticks, hatchets, chemical bombs and inflammable materials converged on a shop at 37 Queen's Road.

They smashed their way in, looting and wrecking all the way to the office upstairs, where they threw a typewriter out of the window, sending the roll-top desk after it. Within eight minutes the shop was a wreck, traffic was at a standstill, and a bonfire, fuelled by books, furniture and papers taken from the premises, blazed in the street.

It must have been a terrifying ordeal for the two women who were inside, one of whom later wrote that the attackers were 'like a band of Wild Indians anxious for scalps'. She managed to escape through the back door, but for her companion the only way out was by jumping from a first-floor window. Luckily she landed without injury and both women got away.

The mob was composed of University students, and the building they attacked (now a student travel office opposite Brown's restaurant) was the Votes for Women shop of the local branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the organisation of militant suffragettes founded in 1903 by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

Why did the students do it? The local press was in no doubt: revenge. In the early hours of Friday the University Sports Pavilion, completed only two years previously, had been destroyed by fire. Suffragette literature found nearby indicated that the WSPU was responsible. Frustrated by the Liberal government's refusal to enfranchise women after years of campaigning, and goaded by the ill treatment of suffragettes in prison (hunger-striking women were being forcibly fed in Horfield), the WSPU launched its arson campaign in February 1913.

While the intention was to increase pressure on the Government, the WSPU stipulated that targets must be empty so that no life was endangered, and they must be remote so the arsonettes could escape. The University Pavilion in the middle of the sports fields at Coombe Dingle fitted these criteria perfectly.

The students themselves corroborated the revenge motive. In the December 1913 issue of *Nonesuch* a cartoon 'University Alphabet' included 'A is for Arson' and 'R for Revenge'. Satirical articles lampooned the suffragettes, and the students' attack was celebrated in verse and drawings.

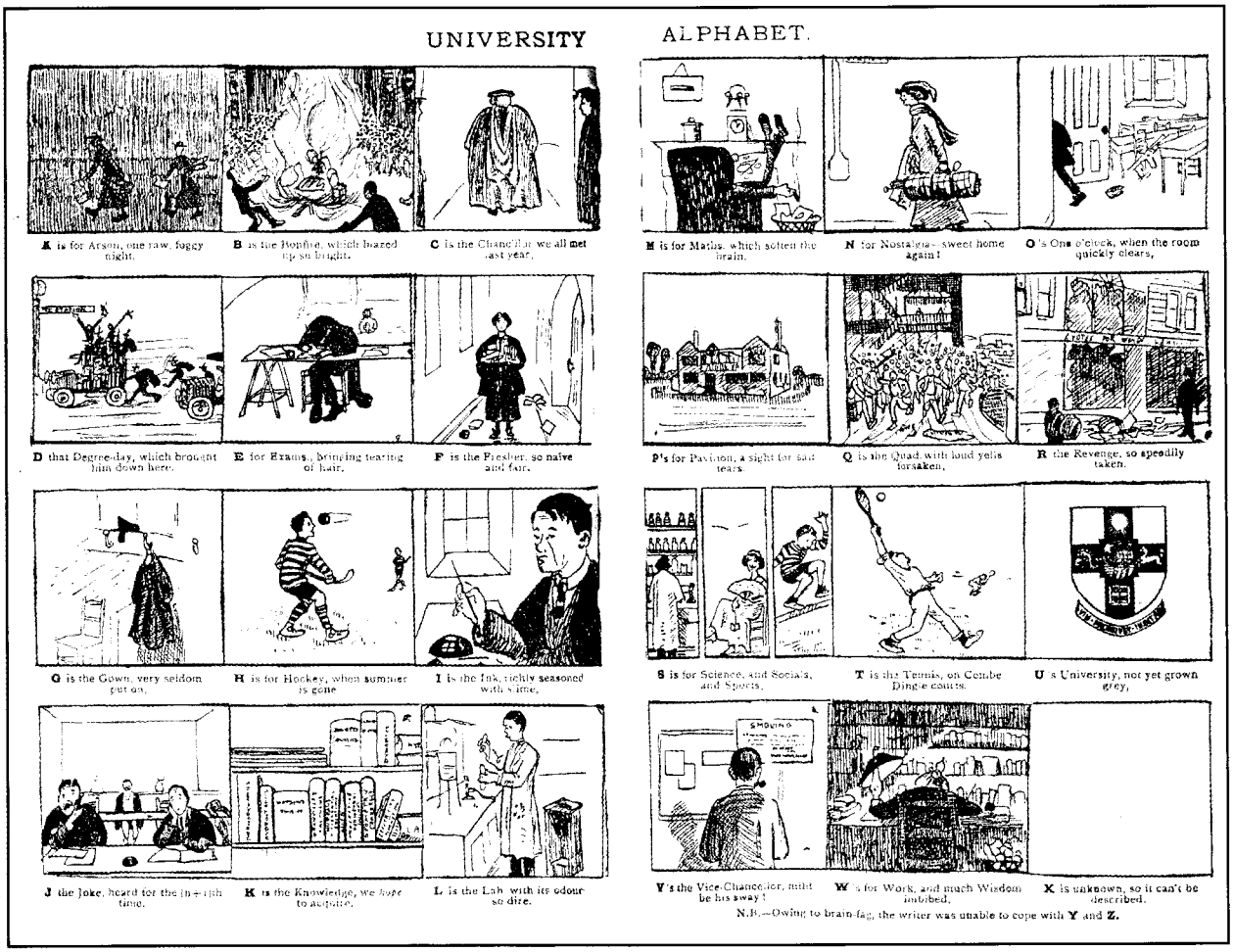
On 3 November 1913 the *Bristol Times and Mirror* (BTM) published a poem by a Bristol undergraduate: 'But we'll be even with them yet/Lest they forget, lest they forget . . .' In a letter to the BTM on 29 October 'two undergraduates' even suggested that they had performed a public service: 'An attack upon a nest of suffragettes is a phase of pest extermination.'

As an act of vengeance, it undoubtedly had public support. As the students danced around the flames singing 'I don't suppose they'll do it again for months and months and months!', onlookers applauded. In the following days, messages of congratulation poured in. The local press, characterising the incident as an amusing Rag, was fulsome in its praise — an 'exciting scene . . . wonderfully organised,' said the BTM. The bonfire 'made an effective spectacle in the failing light', remarked the *Western Daily Press* (WDP).

Encouragement came from official quarters too. The police did not respond to a telephone call made by the WSPU organiser early on Friday afternoon, who said that she was expecting trouble, and when the police did eventually arrive on the scene they did little more than keep the crowds back. Indeed, the students had so little to fear from the constabulary that the next morning they launched a second attack, pelting women with missiles and once again driving them out through the back door and the upstairs window.

They smashed what little remained, attempted to light another bonfire, and over-painted the 'Votes for Women' sign with 'Varsity'. No arrests were made on either occasion. As for the University, it appears to have let the riots pass without comment.

On the surface, the suffragettes would seem to have targeted one of



'University Alphabet', Nonesuch, *December 1913*

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A cartoon in Nonesuch, *December 1913, celebrating the students' attack*

the few contemporary institutions with a commitment to equal opportunities.

Clause 21 of the General Provisions of the University Charter of 1909 provided that 'Women shall be eligible for any office in the University and for membership of any of its constituent bodies and all degrees and courses of study in the University shall be open to women'. The statute was no dead letter. In 1913 five out of 14 assistant lecturers were women; a woman lectured in history; another was special lecturer in education. Three department heads were women. There were women-only scholar-ships and others, including one for metallurgy, were open to both sexes. Women were awarded BAs, MAs and BScs, and qualified as doctors and dentists. There were female officials on University committees and women served on Court, Council and Convocation.

Nor was the Pavilion itself a male preserve. As the WDP noted, it contained 'various rooms for the ladies'. There was a women's branch of the Hockey Club, and the Tennis Club was open to all.

However, anti-suffragette feeling had been evident among male students long before the arson campaign started. In 1907 a bouncer had to eject heckling students from a suffragette meeting at the Victoria Rooms. There in April 1908 medical students interrupted Mrs Pankhurst's speech.

During a gathering at the Colston Hall in November 1909, students tried to rush the platform and threw flour over speakers Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney. Supporter Mary Blathwayt wrote in her diary that another woman was left 'bleeding badly at the mouth'.

In a letter to the BTM on 30 October 1913, lawyer J W Jendwine described how years 'before [WSPU] violence began' a meeting of Mrs Pankhurst's was 'broken up with the utmost violence by the men of your University, using missiles of all kinds and sulphurated hydrogen'. The Varsity had hardly proved itself a friend to voteless women.

The students' hopes were not realised: the women did do it again. Only two weeks later, a Frenchay mansion was destroyed by fire and in early December a house at Stoke Hill. Meanwhile, WSPU head-quarters were temporarily moved to 16 Berkeley Square (formerly home of the Education Department). The shop reopened in December, and the arson campaign continued. By April 1914 the Eastville Park boathouse, a timber yard and the club house at Failand golf links had all burned.

Thanks to institutions like Bristol University, women had access to education — but they did not have the vote. And relations between unenfranchised women and enfranchised male students were far from harmonious prior to the events of October 1913. Characterising the destruction of the WSPU shop as a 'tit for tat' student Rag is convenient, but it does not tell the whole story of this remarkable episode in Bristol's history.