

SWINDON, WILTSHIRE AND THE SUFFRAGETTES

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INTRODUCTION



Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst

The militant suffrage organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union, was set up in 1903 by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928). Mrs Pankhurst ran the WSPU with her eldest daughter Christabel (1880–1958). In 1906 Bristol-born Emmeline Pethick Lawrence (1867–1954) joined them as treasurer, and she and her husband Frederick (1871–1961) were key figures in the movement until they left in 1912 after a disagreement with the Pankhursts over increasing militancy.

THE NUWSS

The main non-militant organisation was the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies which had its roots in groups like the Bristol and West of England Suffrage Society which was established in 1868. In 1896 the Bristol suffrage society joined other groups from around the country to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

Under the umbrella of the Bristol NUWSS, Swindon suffragists sent a petition to Parliament in 1869, and in 1875 hosted meetings organised by the Bristol branch – these were held in the New Swindon Mechanics' Institute in Milton Road. The Bristol branch also sent speakers to Marlborough, Westbury, Chippenham, and Devizes.

By 1909 there was a Swindon and North Wiltshire branch of the NUWSS, with other branches in Salisbury, Devizes, and a branch in Trowbridge which was a sub-branch of the Bath NUWSS.

THE WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION

The Bristol WSPU sent speakers to Wiltshire – Lillian Dove-Willcox was one of these in 1909, when she visited Chippenham and Trowbridge. The WSPU opened a branch in Devizes in 1911 which was run by a local woman, Katharine Abraham. That year, a branch was also established in Trowbridge, and Lillian Dove-Willcox came to help run it for a while.

WSPU organiser and militant Miss Barbara Wylie spoke in Trowbridge and Bradford on Avon in 1912, but didn't meet with a very friendly welcome in either place. In Bradford on Avon she and other women – including Batheaston suffragette Aethel Tollemache – who spoke from the Town Hall steps were howled down by young men, who then rushed at them. The police had to escort the women to the railway station to protect them from the mob.

Militancy

Arson came to Wiltshire in June 1913 when a mansion in Westwood, two miles outside Trowbridge, was targeted. £15,000 pounds worth of damage was done to the house, which had been built five years previously but had never been occupied. The attack followed a meeting in Trowbridge by Walter Runciman, the Agriculture minister, which a number of women dressed as market women tried to interrupt. It's possible that two of those women

were sisters Grace and Aethel Tollemache of Batheaston, but I haven't been able to corroborate the story. Suffragette literature was found at the blaze, with a note: "For damages, apply to Runciman, Trowbridge".

The Government and non-militant campaigners claimed that WSPU militancy had put back the cause. When David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, visited Swindon in October 1913 he received a deputation of the non-militant NUWSS. He told them that he thought women would get the vote eventually, but not in the current Parliament, and he blamed the suffragettes for the delay. He said he had supported votes for women for years and he thought the NUWSS Suffrage Pilgrimage was "one of the best political moves in recent years".

On the other hand, he said, militancy had only created hostility and antagonised Parliament: "It is no good burning down churches, pavilions, and railway sidings, and menacing the lives of poor workmen, who after all are not responsible for the present condition of things. You don't gain anything by that." It was his view that suffrage campaigners should do "something dramatic, but not repellent".

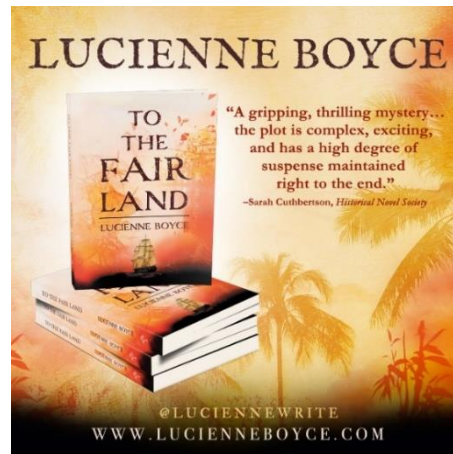
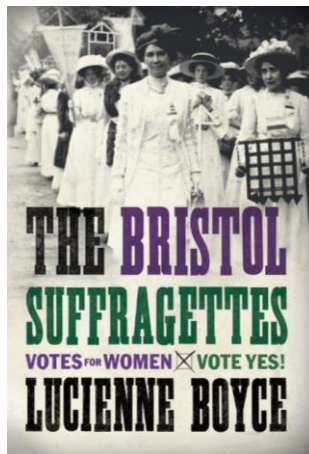
THE SUFFRAGE PILGRIMAGE

In 1913 the non-militant NUWSS organised a Suffrage Pilgrimage. Starting in June, women marched to London from all over the country along six main routes to converge in a mass meeting in Hyde Park on 26 July. The south west route started in Land's End.

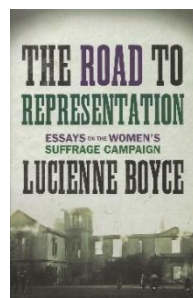
The pilgrims met with a friendly welcome in Corsham on 16 July, but trouble began when they reached Chippenham that afternoon. They attempted to hold a meeting in the Market Place, with Councillor Walters of Swindon in the chair. When Frances Sterling, a key speaker for the NUWSS, rose to speak the booing crowd stormed the platform.

Most of the interrupters were working-class women, who were immune to Walter's reminders that he had supported "the factory girls of Chippenham" in a recent strike. It was also said that an anti-suffrage meeting had been interrupted on the previous evening and they were paying the suffragists back in kind. The police had to rush the suffrage pilgrims away in a motor car to protect them from the mob. The next day a pilgrims' meeting outside Calne Town Hall was also interrupted and the mob tried to drag the cart from which the women were speaking into the river. Again, the police had to provide an escort to get the pilgrims safely out of town.

In a non-militants' meeting in Swindon a few days before the suffrage pilgrims were expected to reach the town, Miss Blackstone from Bath and Miss Mills from Cheltenham were forced to take shelter from the crowd in the Post Office, and once again women had to be escorted to safety by police. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* (19 July 1913) said "such a violent scene has not been witnessed in Swindon for many years". Swindon was clearly in the mood for violence because when the suffrage pilgrims arrived, it was the usual story and the speakers needed police protection.



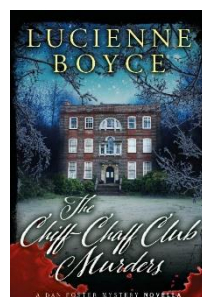
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