

THE CHELTENHAM SUFFRAGETTES

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INTRODUCTION

In both Bristol and Cheltenham there were active branches of the main non-militant organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, which was founded in 1867. Militant suffragettes were also active in both locations but in Cheltenham militant women had a choice of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) or the Women's Freedom League (WFL). The WSPU was set up in 1903 by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928), and she ran the organisation with her eldest daughter Christabel (1880–1958). The Women's Freedom League was a breakaway group from the WSPU formed in 1907 (see below). In practice, there was a great deal of movement between the organisations, with women drifting from the NUWSS to the WSPU or WFL, and back again, notably when WSPU militancy escalated.

Both locations were also home to branches of the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage.

THE NUWSS

A women's suffrage society was founded in Cheltenham in 1871. In 1896 it affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. The NUWSS also had branches in Gloucester, Cirencester, Tewkesbury and Forest of Dean.

Mrs (Rosa) Frances Emily Swiney (1847–1922)

Mrs Frances Swiney was one of the founders of the Cheltenham Suffrage Society and President of the Cheltenham NUWSS from 1896 to 1920. She was born in India. She studied art but gave up her ambition to be a painter when she married. She settled in Cheltenham in 1877, and was involved in many political causes including the Malthusian League (which campaigned for access to birth control), the Secular Education League, the Women's Emancipation Union and the Eugenic Education Society. She contributed to a number of feminist magazines and also wrote about the women's franchise, Russian politics, and the trafficking of women. Despite all these activities, she found campaigning in Cheltenham frustrating, and described it as “the town of no ideas”.¹

Like many suffrage campaigners, Mrs Swiney joined more than one suffrage organisation and was also, at various times, a member of the WSPU and the WFL.

Harriet McIlquham (1837–1910)

One of the founding members of the Cheltenham Suffrage Society, Harriet McIlquham was born in London and moved to Cheltenham 1858, then to an estate in Staverton which she managed as a working farm.

Mrs Harriet McIlquham had been involved in the franchise campaign as a speaker and organiser since the 1860s, and in the 1870s was a member of the Bristol and West of England Society for Women's Suffrage as well as the Manchester National Society for Women's

¹ Quoted in David Doughan, ‘Swiney, (Rosa) Frances Emily (1847–1922)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com>]

Suffrage. She was a pioneer in women's involvement in local government. Her appointments included Poor Law Guardian at Boddington and Tewkesbury; overseer for the parish of Staverton; rural district councillor in Boddington; board member of the education management committee after the 1902 Education Act. In 1888 she was one of four candidates selected to test women's eligibility to serve on the newly-formed county councils in Cheltenham Central Ward.

Harriet McIlquham also joined the WSPU and later the WFL. On 21 February 1905 she accompanied Mrs Pankhurst's younger daughter Sylvia to the House of Commons to lobby MPs, and she attended the WSPU's first meeting in Cheltenham. After her death Christabel Pankhurst recalled her admiration for Harriet, and remembered her kindness on the occasions when they met.²

Mary Theodora Mills (c1870–1958)

Theodora Mills was president of the NUWSS in Cheltenham in 1902 and 1913. She wrote a number of suffrage songs, including *Forward Sister Women*, set to the tune of *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

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 Suffrage Pilgrimage (Watling Street route)

On 15 July, the Cheltenham pilgrims formed up in Lansdown Road ready to set off on the march to London. They were led by a wagonette in which Mrs Frances Swiney, Mrs Theodora Mills and others were seated. Pilgrims from Gloucester followed in two char-a-bancs. The mob rushed the vehicles as they made their way to their meeting place under the Lamp in Clarence Street, and made off with the Gloucester banner. When Mrs Swiney tried to address the pilgrims from the wagonette she was drowned out by yells, hand bells, and further attempts to rush the vehicles.

² Quoted in Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, p 396.

The women were pelted with eggs and as the disturbances increased the police told them to end the meeting. A howling mob ran after the vehicles, but the police managed to put up a barrier in Wellington Street and hold them back. Meanwhile, women attempting to leave Clarence Street on foot were mobbed and forced to take shelter in the police station until things calmed down.

When the Cheltenham and Gloucester pilgrims reached Cirencester, they gathered in the Market Place, where a mob interrupted them by shouting, banging drums and ringing bells. The women were pushed about and had their clothes torn, and a group of male students from Cirencester Agriculture College, some dressed as women, marched up and down jeering and heckling. When the pilgrims tried to move to another site, the hooligans followed and Mrs Swiney and other women were forced to hide in a nearby house. They were besieged there for several hours. Meanwhile any women wearing suffrage colours found near the Market Place were mobbed. The disturbances went on until late into the night.

THE WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION

The WSPU opened a branch in Cheltenham in 1906 and held its first meeting on 28 September. A Miss E L Andrews of 2 Vittoria Walk was the Cheltenham WSPU secretary in 1913. The WSPU also opened a branch in Gloucester.

Edith How Martyn (1875–1954)

Edith How Martyn was the speaker at the first Cheltenham meeting on 28 September 1906. She was educated at University College, Aberystwyth, and was the first woman associate of the Royal College of Science in mathematics and physics. She spent a month in prison in 1906 after a WSPU demonstration in the lobby of the House of Commons.

However, in 1907 she was one of a number of women who left the WSPU to form the Women's Freedom League after a dispute about the WSPU constitution. Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst refused to run the WSPU on democratic lines, as they thought this would weaken the militant campaign. The women who preferred a democratic organisation formed their own group, the Women's Freedom League (WFL), with an elected committee.

In September 1908 at an outdoor meeting of the Cheltenham WFL, Edith How Martyn and half a dozen other women were shouted down by a crowd of boys and men, and pelted with fruit. A fight broke out when another man tried to defend them, while a police constable stood by and watched. When the brawl ended, the constable stepped in to tell the women they were breaking the law by causing an obstruction.

Edith resigned from the WFL in 1911. She also campaigned for women's access to birth control.

Florence Earegey (1877–1963)

Mrs Florence Earegey was Edith How Martyn's sister. She lived in Cheltenham and joined the WSPU, but in 1907 she worked for the NUWSS and then in 1908 joined the WFL. She became secretary of the Cheltenham WFL in 1911. She was educated at the University of London, and later became a barrister.

THE WOMEN'S FREEDOM LEAGUE

Like the WSPU, the WFL was also a militant organisation, but their civil disobedience did not extend to attacking people or property. Some of their demonstrations included the incident on 28 October 1908 when WFL members chained themselves to the grille covering the Ladies' Gallery window in the House of Commons, while others demonstrated outside. Fourteen women were arrested.

In the following year, the WFL organized a picket of the House of Commons that lasted from July to November 1909. A number of women were arrested for obstruction and sentenced to seven days in prison.



Women's Freedom League banner

ANTI-SUFFRAGISTS AND CHELTENHAM LADIES' COLLEGE

One other organisation with branches in Bristol and Cheltenham was the National Anti-Suffrage League. Cheltenham Ladies' College was amongst education institutions accused by anti-suffragists of being "hotbeds of feminism", prompting the principal, Lilian Mary Faithfull (1865–1952), to write a letter of protest to *The Times* on 18 April 1912.

Interestingly, however, some Cheltenham Ladies' College alumni did go on to be involved in the suffrage campaign, including:-

Dorothy Jewson 1884–1964

Dorothy Jewson was born in Norwich. She spent a year at Cheltenham Ladies' College, studied at Girton, and then trained as a teacher. Back in Norwich she joined the WSPU and organised meetings and events. Though she does not seem to have been involved in militant activities, she and her brother put up bail for another teacher, Miriam Pratt, when she was arrested for setting fire to two empty buildings in Cambridge in 1913.

Dorothy was elected as a Member of Parliament for Norwich in 1923. In her maiden speech she said the voting age for women should be twenty one. Between 1929 and 1936 she was a member of Norwich county council. She was also a member of the Independent Labour Party and the Workers' Birth Control Group. A pacifist, she joined the Society of Friends during World War II.

Eliza Walker Dunbar 1845-1925

Eliza Walker Dunbar was a medical pioneer, Bristol's first female resident house surgeon in 1873, and a supporter of the suffrage movement.

May Sinclair (1863–1946)



Author May Sinclair lived in Ilford, Cheltenham and spent a year at Cheltenham Ladies' College in 1881. Her novels explored feminist issues. She joined the Women's Freedom League and the WSPU, and was a member of the Women Writers' Suffrage League.

May Sinclair at the Kensington WSPU shop

Dorothy Pethick 1881–1970

Dorothy Pethick was the sister of Emmeline Pethick Lawrence. Emmeline was born in Bristol, and was one of the WSPU's leaders until she left in 1912 after a disagreement with the Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst about escalating militancy.

Dorothy Pethick was arrested twice in 1909. For breaking a window at a Post Office in Newcastle in October she got fourteen days and went on hunger strike. She was in Bristol in November 1909 to help with the demonstrations during Winston Churchill's visit to the city. She was arrested again in London in 1910. She was then a WSPU organiser in Leicester, but left the organisation with her sister in 1912.

MILITANCY

In December 1913 suffragette Lillian Lenton (1891–1972), who lived in Bristol, and another woman burned down Alstone Lawn Manor in Gloucester Road, Cheltenham. In court she and her accomplice gave their names as Miss Red and Miss Black. They were sent to Worcester Gaol, from where they were released on December 28 after a hunger strike. Lillian was still free when war broke out in August 1914.

Some people blamed the suffragettes for a fire at Cirencester Agricultural College in November 1913. This was not surprising: the suffragettes were blamed for nearly every fire in the country at this time. In fact, it the blaze started by accident in a student's room.

On 27 August 1913 what was thought to be a bomb was found on the steps of Cheltenham Town Hall.

In January 1914, there was a fire at St Paul's Teacher Training College which was attributed to suffragettes, although no evidence was found to corroborate this.

Further Reading

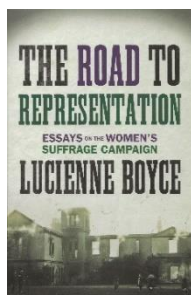
Derek Benson, 'Women's Suffrage Activism in Cheltenham' (article; download from [Suffrage Walks and Talks](#))

Derek Benson, 'Women's Suffrage Activism in Tewkesbury' (article; download from [Suffrage Walks and Talks](#))

Sue Jones, *Votes for Women: Cheltenham and the Cotswolds* (History Press (2018))



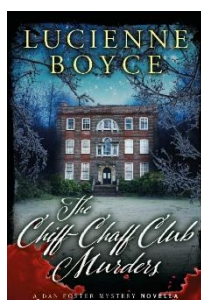
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