

WESTON-SUPER-MARE AND THE SUFFRAGETTES

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INTRODUCTION

The Women's Social and Political Union – the suffragettes – was set up in 1903 by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928). She ran the WSPU with her eldest daughter Christabel Pankhurst (1880–1958). They were joined in 1906 by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, who was brought up in Weston-super-Mare, and who was a key figure in the militant suffrage campaign.

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 they joined other groups from around the country to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

Many of the Bristol suffrage campaigners visited Weston-super-Mare to speak on women's suffrage, including women well-known for their involvement in social reform, such as Emily Sturge and the Bristol NUWSS secretary Helen Blackburn. However, the NUWSS did not form a society in Weston-super-Mare until 1910. There was also a branch of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association.

THE WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL UNION

The WSPU did not have a permanent branch in Weston-super-Mare but workers from the Bristol branch often visited. As in other towns and cities, they often met with hostility and even violence. In August 1908, Annie Kenney and other suffragettes from Bristol were speaking from a lorry drawn up on the beach when they were attacked by a group of entertainers who thought the suffragettes were stealing their audience. Fights broke out, and the police had to intervene and help the women down from the lorry.

In March 1909 Annie Kenney was in Weston-super-Mare again. At the end of the talk she had to be escorted to the railway station by the police to protect her from the mob following her.

Emmeline Pethick Lawrence (1867–1954)



Emmeline Pethick Lawrence was born in Bristol, at 20 Charlotte Street, off Park Street – there is now a blue plaque on the house. She came from a wealthy family – her father ran a hide and tanning business. She spent part of her childhood in Apsley Road, Clifton, a few doors from her maternal grandmother, and the family later moved to Weston-super-Mare. Their home there was Trewartha, which was surrounded by extensive grounds. It is now called Lewisham House and has been divided into seven flats, though many original features have been retained. It is on the Bristol Road.

In 1890 Emmeline escaped from what she called “the petty life of a second-rate seaside resort”. She went to London to do social work amongst working class girls at a Methodist Mission. Through her work she met Frederick Lawrence, a wealthy barrister and newspaper owner. They married in 1901. Although men could not be members of the WSPU, Frederick was a keen supporter; he donated money, time and his legal expertise, giving advice to arrested suffragettes about police court procedure. The couple were key figures in the organisation for many years.

When Emmeline was first approached to join the WSPU as treasurer in 1906 she refused because of her other commitments, and it was Annie Kenney who persuaded her to reconsider. The Pethick Lawrences provided the WSPU’s first national headquarters – a room in their flat in Clements Inn. When the organisation’s finances improved they moved to two rooms in the same building; the office later expanded to occupy over twenty rooms. The Pethick Lawrences’ flat was always at the suffragettes’ disposal for rest and recuperation, and Christabel spent a great deal of her time there. It was here in 1908 that she and her mother hid from the police who were in the offices below with a warrant for their arrest.

Emmeline endured six imprisonments, and was forcibly fed once. Her first imprisonment was in October 1906 following a demonstration in the lobby of the House of Commons. It caused her to have a nervous breakdown and the prison doctor had to arrange for her to be released. She coped better with subsequent imprisonments. During one of these her husband, Frederick, pledged to pay £10 a day to the WSPU for every day she was kept in prison. Unfortunately, the newspapers got hold of this and it became something of a joke, with verses like: “Ten pounds a day/He said he’d pay/To keep this face/In Holloway.”

Emmeline was an enormous asset to the WSPU. Before she took over they had, she said, “no office, no organisation, no money – no postage stamps even”. Under her guidance the WSPU grew to be a national organisation with an annual turnover of thousands of pounds.

With her husband Frederick, Mrs Pethick Lawrence established and edited the suffragette newspaper *Votes for Women*. She also introduced the suffragette colours – purple white and green – in 1908.

In 1912 the Pethick Lawrences and Mrs Pankhurst were all sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment for conspiracy to cause criminal damage arising out of suffragette militancy. They went on hunger strike and although Mrs Pankhurst was not forcibly fed, Emmeline was forcibly fed once and then released. Frederick, however, was subjected to forcible feeding for several days – one of many male supporters who were forcibly fed during the suffragette campaign. The Pethick Lawrences were also bankrupted after refusing to pay the costs of the case.

But the three leaders’ shared suffering could not mask the growing rift between them, and in 1912 the Pethick Lawrences left the WSPU after a disagreement with the Pankhursts over escalating militancy. It was a painful break with her former friends and colleagues, but Emmeline Pethick Lawrence remained devoted to women’s suffrage. In July 1913 she was arrested during a deputation to the House of Commons protesting about the treatment of suffragette prisoners.

The Pethick Lawrences continued to publish *Votes for Women* while the WSPU produced its own newspaper, *The Suffragette*. The Pethick Lawrences founded a group called the Votes for Women Fellowship which aimed to appeal to militant and non-militant campaigners, but in 1914 joined the United Suffragists, an organisation formed in 1914 with the same aim of uniting militant and non-militants. The couple donated *Votes to Women* to the new organisation.

Emmeline Pethick Lawrence remained friendly with Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960), to whom she gave financial support. She was treasurer of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom from 1915–22, stood as a Labour candidate for Rusholme in 1918, and was President of the Women's Freedom League from 1926 to 1935.

Dorothy Pethick 1881–1970

When Winston Churchill went to Bristol in 1909, a number of women went to the city to help Bristol organiser Annie Kenney organise protests during his visit. Actions included window breaking, heckling at meetings, and Leeds suffragette Theresa Garnett's assault of Churchill at Temple Meads Railway station. Amongst the women who went to help was Dorothy Pethick, younger sister of Emmeline Pethick Lawrence.

Dorothy Pethick was educated at Cheltenham Ladies' College, and then worked in a Women's University Settlement in Blackfriars Road in London. She had been working with Annie in Bristol and the west country since at least 1908. When Annie Kenney went to speak in Weston-super-Mare in August 1908, Dorothy went on ahead to make arrangements for the meeting and advertised it by chalking the pavements.

Dorothy was one of many suffragettes who sometimes stayed with the Blathwayt family in Batheaston; Mrs Blathwayt described her as "an educated lady". On 15 February 1911 Dorothy planted a fir tree in the Blathwayts' Suffragette Arboretum. Colonel Blathwayt photographed most of the planting ceremonies, but unfortunately no photograph of Dorothy survives, although you can see a copy of the commemorative plaque on the Bath in Time website (<https://www.bathintime.co.uk>)

Dorothy was arrested during a WSPU deputation to the House of Commons on 29 June 1909. In October 1909 she and actress Kitty Marion were in Newcastle for the visit of David Lloyd George, and were arrested for breaking the windows of Newcastle General Post Office. Kitty, who succeeded in breaking glass after two attempts, was sentenced to one month in prison, while Dorothy, whose stone failed to do any damage, pleaded "not guilty of smashing, but guilty of trying to" and got fourteen days. In all eight women were arrested in Newcastle, including Lady Constance Lytton, and they went on hunger strike.

From 1910 to 1912 Dorothy was WSPU organiser in Leicester, where she worked on the 1910 election campaign. She was sentenced to fourteen days' imprisonment for taking part in the "Black Friday" demonstration in London on 18 November 1910, but released when her fine was paid. In April 1911 she organised a local census protest: twenty census evaders spent the night at the WSPU shop and office at 14 Bowling Green Street, Leicester. She left the WSPU in 1912 when her sister Emmeline Pethick Lawrence was ejected from the organisation by Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst.

Early in 1914 Dorothy was in America giving talks about women's suffrage. Speaking in New York, she declared that the suffragettes were prepared to hunger strike to the death for their cause. She also said that she and her sister were still in sympathy with Mrs Pankhurst and their only disagreement was about methods. Mrs Pankhurst believed in arson, but Emmeline Pethick Lawrence did not.

During the First World War Dorothy joined the Women's Police Force. In 1916 she joined the United Suffragists, and was also treasurer of the British Dominions Woman Suffrage Union. She later worked at the Rudolf Steiner school in Hampstead.

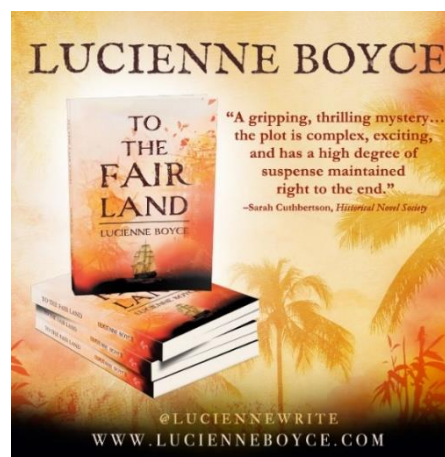
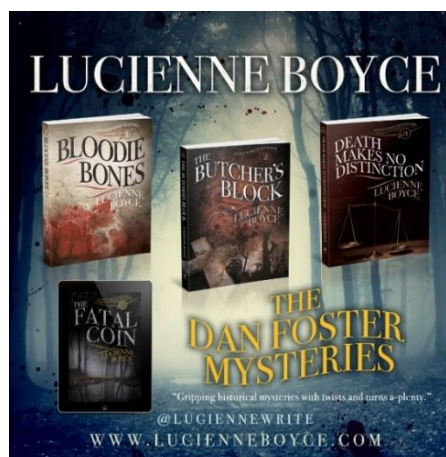
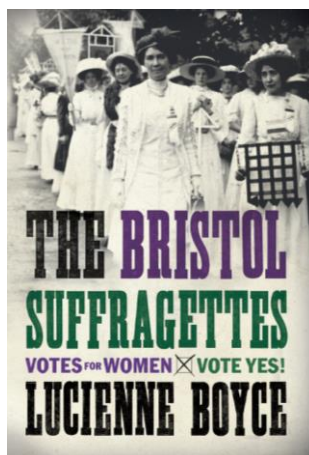
WESTON-SUPER-MARE AND THE NUT

In 1913 the National Union of Teachers held its annual conference in Weston-super-Mare. When Lord Haldane, lord chancellor and chancellor of the University of Bristol, came to address the conference at the Weston-super-Mare Pavilion in 1913 he was heckled by suffragettes. Many of these women were delegates to the conference, during which the question of the female franchise was hotly debated. As at previous conferences, the National Federation of Women Teachers, which adopted women's suffrage as one of its main aims, had moved for an NUT resolution in support of votes for women, but after days of rancorous debate the resolution failed. Although many agreed that women should have the vote, the feeling of the majority of NUT delegates was that the issue was not part of the NUT's educational remit.

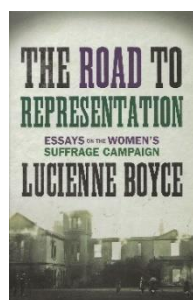
Lord Haldane later received deputations of suffragists and anti-suffragists in the Grand Atlantic Hotel. He remarked that it was suffragette militancy that was hindering the cause – an opinion voiced by many of the politicians who, as far as the WSPU were concerned, had been dragging their feet about the issue for years.

Further Reading

Crawford, Elizabeth	<i>The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928</i> (London: Routledge, 2001)
Crawford, Elizabeth	<i>The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: A Regional Survey</i> (London: Routledge, 2006)
Pankhurst, E Sylvia	<i>The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals</i> (London: Virago, 1977)
Pethick Lawrence, Emmeline	<i>My Part in a Changing World</i> (1938)
Pethick Lawrence, Frederick	<i>Fate Has Been Kind</i> (London: Hutchinson & Co, ?1942)



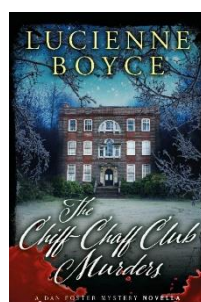
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