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## A POINT OF JUSTICE – GRANTED OR FOUGHT FOR? WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGNS IN PLYMOUTH AND THE SOUTH WEST

*Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

The release of the film *Suffragette* in October 2015, surprisingly the first major feature film on the women’s suffrage movement, has raised public consciousness about the issue of women’s rights and the role of the suffragettes in demanding votes for women with their call to arms of ‘deeds, not words’. But decades before the Women’s Social and Political Union was created in 1903 campaigners across the country had begun the struggle for emancipation for women. We argue that the film therefore needs to be seen in a wider context including the high level of male support for the cause and the fact it was not just a London or large city-based phenomenon. To support our claim this paper reviews the campaigns for women’s suffrage in Plymouth and the South West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We conclude with reference to the ‘clever’ arrest by Plymouth’s Chief Constable, Joseph Davison Sowerby, of Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst as she attempted to land at Plymouth having sailed from New York on the liner *Majestic*.

**Keywords:** suffragette, suffragist, votes for women, franchise, Women’s Social and Political Union, Emmeline Pankhurst

### Introduction

The release of the film *Suffragette* has successfully put part of the history of the campaign for women’s rights back on the public agenda, by presenting a view of the most famous aspect of the fight for women to have votes in parliamentary elections. But it provides only a very partial view of the history of that campaigning. Decades before Mrs Pankhurst launched the Women’s Social and Political Union (whose members were popularly called suffragettes), campaigners across the country had begun to argue that women (at least *some* women) should have the vote. One omission of importance is that the film does not reveal the high level of male support for the women’s suffrage cause in many places: that is problematic because it does create an impression of a very simplistic divide in society that is based on gender. Yet as an examination of provincial involvement in the campaign for votes for



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women shows, there was, in many locations, a high and active involvement of men.

What makes this a topic for a *Law Review* article, however, is the fact that - as the film could not reasonably be expected to portray - the campaigning for the cause was overtly legal in its rhetoric from the start. Even when the suffragettes emerged as a campaigning element, the legal dimension (in terms of deliberate law-breaking) was rooted in the arguments about the 'legal disabilities of women'. The question of whether women, as well as men, could be citizens was a debate that had started back in the eighteenth century. It had evolved, by the middle of the nineteenth century to a level where within a wider debate in Britain about franchise reform, the question of women's active participation in the democratic process was a topic for debate that interested many reformers across the classes. It had been actively raised as a national issue by the Chartists, as well as by individual women from Mary Wollstonecraft on.<sup>2</sup> In 1854, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon published her commentary on the legal disadvantages faced by women under current English law and from the 1860s, a substantial body of literature in pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers emerged.<sup>3</sup>

It must also be remembered that this was a period when the issue of franchise reform for men - the question of whether or not to expand or even remove a property qualification for having the vote - was consistently on the political agenda. Speeches in Parliament over the nature of citizenship and participation in the democratic process for men were made throughout the century, while the Chartist movement and its memories continued to keep the issue of universal (male) suffrage on the agenda.<sup>4</sup> However, the first speech in the House of Commons in favour of women's suffrage was not made until 1867, when John Stuart Mill took up the issue in the context of the campaign for what became the Reform Act 1867. This piece of legislation extended the vote considerably amongst urban male heads of household but while it enfranchised numbers of the working classes, the arguments for inclusion of women were rejected.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Jane Rendall, *Origins of Modern Feminism. Women in Britain, France and the USA* (London: Macmillan, 1985); Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds) *Women in British Politics 1760-1860* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women; together with a Few Observations Thereon* (London: John Chapman, 1854); see also C.C. Nelson (ed.), *Literature of the Women's Suffrage Movement in England* (Peterborough, ON: Broadsword Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Malcolm Chase, *Chartism. A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth consideration of this statute, see Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendell, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

What the film inevitably also failed to emphasise was that involvement in the women's suffrage cause was, like the arguments for extending the basis for male suffrage, not just a London or big city-based phenomenon. It affected provincial towns and smaller cities, as well as rural areas. In the South West, for example, the Three Towns: Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse demonstrated their support, along with other places in the West Country, including Exeter, Truro, Barnstaple, Launceston, Liskeard and Tavistock. About the only exception seems to have been Taunton. Support in North Devon was also to be found in more rural locations like Appledore, and it also spread across Cornwall. It is highly likely that details of such support - from male and female activists - in more West Country rural communities is to be found, but has yet to be uncovered by researchers.<sup>6</sup> Nor was the South West unusual in showing such levels of support, as a glance at areas like Nottingham and Nottinghamshire or Derby and Derbyshire underline.<sup>7</sup>

## **1 Women Activists and Activism in the Nineteenth Century**

The coherent and active campaign for votes for women assumed a national profile with a wide appeal in the mid-Victorian period. At first, the struggle for the vote was conducted politely, with the regular submission of increasingly large numbers of signatures on petitions to Parliament for an extension of the franchise to include women.<sup>8</sup> But the objective was always unequivocal and clear: it was only democratic and just for women to be able to vote, so that they could help to elect representatives who would address the key social and moral problems of the day. A key argument for many was that women householders paid taxes and were subject to the same laws as men, and therefore, their exclusion from the franchise was perverse.<sup>9</sup>

While there were supporters amongst all classes, it has to be admitted that the majority of those actively involved in campaigning for women's suffrage (women and men) were middle class. One reason for this was that with the exception of the artisan and shop-keeping

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<sup>6</sup> Pamela Vass, for instance, is working on suffrage activity in North Devon, and has found evidence of activity in a wide range of small towns and villages, as well as bigger centres like Ilfracombe: 'Littleham Woman Tries to Piece Together Suffragette Movements in North Devon', *North Devon Journal*, 2 January 2014, <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/Littleham-woman-tries-piece-suffragette-movements/story-20388374-detail/story.html>

<sup>7</sup> For example, the men as well as the women of the Brownsword family in Nottingham were active through three generations in the suffrage cause, starting with Anderson (and wife, Janet) Brownsword in the 1850s, and including the first Anderson's grandson, another Anderson, who was Lord Mayor of Nottingham in 1892.

<sup>8</sup> For more detail on the history of petitioning in general, see Krista Cowman, *British Politics c1689-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> The issues of payment of taxes and subjection to the law without access to the franchise were, of course, the same issues which had provoked North American colonists into rebellion and cession, and this was something which was regularly referred to in the discussions.

elements amongst the working classes, there was little likelihood that extending the franchise to include women would directly affect them. Throughout the pre-1914 campaign, the majority of arguments in favour of enfranchising women were made on the same property criteria as operated for men. Thus the main arguments were made on the basis that women householders, with the same qualifications as male counterparts, deserved to be enfranchised. The women's suffrage campaigners did not, generally, form part of the campaign for universal suffrage which continued to be advocated by the heirs of Chartism.<sup>10</sup> The thinking was that enfranchisement of women householders of social standing would benefit their still unenfranchised sisters because of the improvements to laws and political policy that would result from an active participation of women in the electoral process.<sup>11</sup>

The middle class women activists in particular were likely to be educated to levels that were uncommon for women, certainly in the mid-Victorian period.<sup>12</sup> Equally, it has to be said that another practical reason why the majority of activists were likely to be found amongst the middle and upper classes was because it was women, and men, from these levels of society who had more resources - and time - to devote to thinking about, as well as working for, the suffrage campaign. Many of the women activists were also involved with other morally improving campaigns from temperance to slum clearance. It helped that while debarred from participation in national elections for Parliament, women in England and Wales were allowed to become involved in local politics under the terms of the Municipal Franchise Act 1869. This important statute removed the gender distinction for rate-payers so that women who did, as heads of household, pay their own rates were permitted a vote. Equally, women were also allowed to stand for certain offices reserved for rate-payers, including being elected as Poor Law Guardians. A number of women, including Emmeline Pankhurst, took advantage of this, along with various 'female burgesses' in the West Country both who voted and stood for office.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Hall, McClelland and Rendell, *Defining the Victorian Nation*.

<sup>11</sup> See Rendell, *Origins of Modern Feminism*.

<sup>12</sup> It is not coincidental that many suffrage activists such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Emily Grey were also active in promoting the cause of women's education. See for example Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> See Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). This move in 1869 cannot be taken too far in terms of assessing it a 'victory' in the cause of women's suffrage. It did enfranchise a number of women householders, but excluded married women of course. While the County Council Act 1888 also permitted women to vote in county council elections, women were not allowed to stand for election to county or borough councils until 1907. Equally, the effect of the 1894 legislation was diminished by the Education Act 1901, which removed education from the hands of School Boards.

What this indicates is that women were very self-consciously constructing themselves as active citizens, making a substantial contribution to Victorian society.<sup>14</sup> There is here also a very powerful link which developed between philanthropic activity amongst women and activism in the suffrage movement, as the life-history of Emmeline Pankhurst underlines. When the Local Government Act 1894 enabled women to vote in local elections and stand for election to School Boards as well, women seized upon that opportunity.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it is far from surprising to find that Victorian Plymouth - establishing itself as a particularly active town in terms of a wide range of philanthropic enterprises - was also interested in the cause of woman's suffrage. A key argument put forward by numbers of women for having the vote was that, as duly enfranchised citizens, they could ensure a higher profile for domestic philanthropic enterprises on the parliamentary agenda.

The initial problem facing women in arguing for the vote in the nineteenth century was that the vote was conceived of as a form of property - after the Great Reform Act 1832, the vote was 'earned' by owning property that had a particular value. The law in mid-Victorian days took the position that a woman was not competent to look after her own interests, and that therefore men took on the responsibility for them - to quote Blackstone, this was because 'So great a favourite of the laws of England is the female sex' that even the legal disabilities in place for women were intended for their 'protection and benefit'.<sup>16</sup> So when, in the middle of the century, women began to argue they should have the vote as householders and rate-payers, there were many who believed that married women had to be automatically excluded by law. This was because a married woman could not own property in their own right as they were part of their husband's legal personality. So until the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts in 1870 and 1882 reform of that legal presumption was one key focus for the fight.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, the exploration of women's citizenship addressed in Andrea Geddes Poole, *Philanthropy and the Construction of Women's Citizenship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Mrs Pankhurst 'cut her teeth' as an activist in Manchester-based philanthropy, though even then she was not always willing to work with the established traditions of such charitable activity. See Paula Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.49.

<sup>16</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Book 1, chapter 15, <http://lonang.com/library/reference/blackstone-commentaries-law-england/bla-115/>, accessed 8 December 2015.

<sup>17</sup> For further detailed discussion on the legal dimensions to this, see Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983). It should also be noted that one egregious error in the film *Suffragette* relates to a scene set in 1912 where a husband stops his wife from putting up bail for other women arrested with her. This is completely ahistoric, unfortunately, as by then married women had been able to control their own property, having bank accounts in their own names, for some 30 years.

Typically, many male as well as female supporters came from a Nonconformist background, because they were often more likely to be radical thinkers who supported changes to a number of traditional beliefs and ideas which translated themselves into campaigns for a variety of legal reforms. This also meant that many identified themselves as members of the Liberal party, something which certainly seems to have affected the shape of male and female support for the suffrage cause in the South West. Exeter, for instance, was a cathedral town, and the Anglican establishment there was generally innately conservative.<sup>18</sup> However, there was also a strong tradition of non-conformity in the region. Consequently in towns like Barnstaple, Bideford and South Molton amongst others Methodism and other non-conformist denominations flourished, and the county seat of Exeter also had a solid community of non-conformist families. They were to be found predominantly (but not exclusively) amongst its shopkeepers, small traders and artisans.<sup>19</sup> This helps to explain why, quite regularly, Liberal MPs were returned for the two constituencies.

## **2 Petitioning in Plymouth and the South West**

Unsurprisingly, nonconformity was strong in Plymouth and it too was also something of a Liberal stronghold at least up to 1871, returning to that loyalty in 1906. Apart from the 18 years between 1873 and 1892, Devonport was solidly Liberal in the post 1832 period. Equally unsurprisingly, it was Plymouth families associated with both Nonconformity and the Liberal interest, such as the Ramsays, the Latimers and the Braggs, who first took up the women's suffrage cause in the 1860s. But the women of these and other local families had 'form' when it came to activism: they had been members of the Plymouth branch of the Ladies Anti-Slavery Auxiliary, which had long argued that one reason why slavery had survived so long was because women were excluded from Parliament. Numbers of them were also active in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, which of course applied to Plymouth.<sup>20</sup> So, while the number of Plymouth signatories was not huge, it was predictable that as the national campaign gathered force, a Plymouth petition in favour of women's suffrage was sent to London in 1869 to form part of the grand petition submitted to Parliament in June that year.

Plymouth women activists were certainly interested in recruiting working class women, but usually as supporters rather than leaders in the local campaigns, though women who were either respectable tradeswomen in their own right (like successful milliners and dress-

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<sup>18</sup> Even so, in 1871, it was the Bishop of Exeter who presented Jacob Bright's Bill to the Lords.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Allan Bocket, *Nonconformity in Exeter 1650-1875* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> See Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

makers) or wives of leading tradesmen were actively encouraged. These women were all felt to have something in common in terms of the legal injustices facing women, which had to be tackled before it was likely the vote would be granted. But it was, in these early days of the struggle at least, never seen as just a woman's fight. A large number of merchants in the Three Towns, including William Collier and Eldred Roberts Brown, along with local clergymen like Reverend Franklin Bellamy of St Mary's, Devonport, were active supporters as well as their womenfolk.

The activity in the interest of the women's suffrage cause in 1871 in the South West, including Plymouth, is particularly telling about the ways in which the suffragists operated outside London and the other big cities. That year, the prominent radical MP Jacob Bright had agreed to introduce proposed legislation bearing the title of 'Women's Disabilities (Removal) Bill'.<sup>21</sup> It seems to have been accepted that the high-profile activists based in London or Manchester, or from overseas, needed to visit the provinces in order to maximise the impact of the campaigning there, if useful numbers of signatories were to be added to the petitions. This was important in order to make the argument that this was a national cause, and not just a metropolitan one. Thus, as part of an initiative to galvanise the West Country, two prominent London-based speakers, Mrs Henry Fawcett (better known now as Millicent Garrett Fawcett) and Mrs Ronniger<sup>22</sup> toured the South West in February and March 1871. Some towns including Plymouth, Exeter, Bristol and Bath were visited by both. Mrs Ronniger also included Cornwall in her visitation. There, she is reported as addressing a women's suffrage meeting in Falmouth, chaired by Jacob Olver JP, where the parliamentary petition was 'numerously signed'.<sup>23</sup> Truro Town Hall was reported by the same paper as hosting the meeting she addressed there, chaired by prominent Truro citizen Mr T Solomon, where 'around 50 to 60 signed the petition'.<sup>24</sup> At the Bodmin meeting in the Guildhall chaired by Reverend James Roberts, she was enthusiastically received, 110 signed the petition and the paper also reported that she had spoken and gathered support at Liskeard, Helston and Launceton.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This was the preferred title for the Bills that Bright subsequently presented in 1872, 1873 and 1874, and for later Bills presented in 1875 by William Forsyth, MP, and in 1878 by Leonard Courtney, MP.

<sup>22</sup> Mrs (or Madame) Jane Ronniger was of French origins, an artist and performer and a teacher of voice and recitation, and apparently a very pretty woman. That, according to John Stuart Mill, was a great help in swaying the male portion of her audiences. See Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement. A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London: Psychology Press, 2001), p.606.

<sup>23</sup> 'Women's Suffrage Meeting, Falmouth', *Royal Cornish Gazette*, 18 February 1871.

<sup>24</sup> 'Truro News', *Royal Cornish Gazette*, 21 February 1871.

<sup>25</sup> 'Women's Suffrage - Bodmin', *Royal Cornish Gazette*, 4 March 1871.



Mrs Ronniger certainly addressed meetings in Plymouth and Devonport but it is possible that the Plymouth one at least was not a public meeting but rather what was usually dubbed, in the press, as a 'drawing room meeting'. This meant that the audience was likely to be invited, rather than the meeting being widely advertised and open to all who were interested. The meeting addressed by Millicent Garrett Fawcett on 14 March 1871, however, was a public meeting, held in the Guildhall. It was chaired by a local Plymouth dignitary, William F Collier (from the local merchant family), who apparently remarked that this was the first public meeting in Plymouth on the topic. The meeting was 'numerously attended' but Mrs Ronniger had already been successful in gathering around 100 signatories from the Three Towns, in that the Plymouth parliamentary petition was actually submitted to Parliament on 13 March, the day before the first public meeting there. The bulk of Mrs Fawcett's talk essentially stressed the legal dimension to the campaign, focusing in particular on the injustice of the current legislation affecting married women's rights to own and manage their property, and to have a voice in their children's fate. She directly challenged Blackstone's insistence that the legislative realities 'protected' women, by pointing to recent local cases in Torbay which highlighted the failures of such protection.<sup>26</sup> Inspired by this rhetoric, the entirely male Plymouth Town Council subsequently voted to support the women's suffrage bill being presented to Parliament that year by Jacob Bright MP.<sup>27</sup> According to the *Standard*, Mrs Fawcett also addressed meetings in Tavistock, Exeter, Frome, Bristol and Bath, even though these had also been visited shortly before by Mrs Ronniger. Interestingly, resolutions of support from borough and parish councils, and signatures on the parliamentary petitions were added in all the places where the two women spoke apart from Taunton.<sup>28</sup>

### **3 Militant Activism**

This willingness on the part of the metropolitan activists to invest in the West Country in terms of providing speakers for meetings there certainly worked to encourage a consistent level of support for women's suffrage in most areas of Devon, Somerset and Cornwall. On 25 November 1873, Plymouth held a grand meeting, addressed by the indefatigable American suffragist Miss Beedy and the equally formidable Miss Caroline Biggs. Miss Beedy came back, to a meeting hosted by Reverend Bellamy in Devonport, the following year. Over the following decade, up to the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts, regular meetings in either Plymouth or Devonport (more occasionally in Stonehouse) took place.

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<sup>26</sup> 'Meeting', *Western Daily News*, 15 March 1871; 'Meetings and Lectures: women's suffrage', *The Examiner*, 18 March 1871; Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: a regional survey* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.146.

<sup>27</sup> Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, p.147.

<sup>28</sup> 'Women's Suffrage', *Standard*, 18 March 1871.

1882 was particularly busy - with speakers such as Helen Blackburn visiting and addressing groups like the Plymouth Working Men's Association. Debates and meetings took place, including at the Borough Arms coffee tavern underlining the links with local temperance activism. In October that year, the Plymouth Debating Society invited women to attend its debate on whether or not women should have the vote and the motion was carried. In 1884, a branch was established in Plymouth of the Women's Liberal Association, which affiliated itself in 1889 to the Central National Association for Women's Suffrage, the forerunner to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society.<sup>29</sup> Members of the NUWSS were known as suffragists and they abhorred any use of force or violence.

Once the battle for women's property legislation was won in the 1880s many women across the country became impatient at the continuing slow progress of the cause and the reluctance of the NUWSS to use more attention grabbing and militant tactics. Plymouth's activism never died, but its public face dwindled until opinion was stirred up again by Mrs Pankhurst's founding of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903.<sup>30</sup> The *Daily Mail* labelled them 'suffragettes' as a derogatory term in 1905, the WSPU had the wit to see what a useful label it was and began to use it to distinguish themselves from their non-militant sisters, along with the use of violet, instead of red, for their colours.



Enthusiastic young Maud Watts – the heroine in the film  
*Image reproduced with kind permission Plymouth Arts Centre*

The threat posed by the suffragettes lay in the fact that from the start, Mrs Pankhurst announced that violence would be a deliberately used tactic to win the fight for votes, justifying this by saying that history showed that the only way men had won the fight to

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<sup>29</sup> Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

extend the franchise was by using violence.<sup>31</sup> The difference was that previous campaigners like the Chartists had always claimed that any violence was an accidental by-product of demonstrations and peaceful protests: what the suffragettes were planning was to take unequivocally violent action to advance their cause.<sup>32</sup> This was a real challenge to the large numbers of Plymouth and Exeter women who supported votes for women: should they become 'suffragettes' or remain non-militant? More women locally as well as nationally preferred to continue the non-militant campaign, while still having some sympathy for their more militant sisters. The Ramsays, for instance, in Plymouth retained an allegiance to the non-militant cause and like the majority of women suffrage supporters in the Three Towns, Mabel Ramsay wore the green, white and red of the suffragists, not the green, white and violet of the suffragettes.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, inspired by younger enthusiasts, sometime in 1907 or early 1908 a branch of the WSPU was established in Plymouth, initially under the leadership of Miss Elsie Howey. However, militant activism in the women's suffrage cause was not universally welcomed locally, especially by women in the towns and villages around the Three Towns. The committed suffragists established, for the first time, a Three Towns and District branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, to ensure that people locally were reminded that the tactics of the suffragettes were not universally supported by those who campaigned for votes for women. The Ramsay family was one which stayed firm in its allegiance to non-militancy, with Dr Mabel Ramsay becoming the Secretary of this local NUWSS branch. But local hostility to the suffragettes was so strong, including amongst women, that in 1908, a branch of the Women's Anti-Suffrage League opened up in the Three Towns.

This League emerged, nationally, as a response to women's militancy in the suffrage cause and served to coalesce the hitherto unorganised opposition to votes for women that had existed amongst women, as well as men. The League's position was that it supported women having the local or municipal vote, enabling them to take part in local philanthropically-orientated activity (generally, at this time, municipal politics was supposedly non-party-political). However, it opposed the idea of women having votes in parliamentary elections, arguing that it would weaken the power of the state if women became voters and that it was inappropriate in that it would give women a voice in things that were not their proper concern, including military matters. Numbers of well-known women joined the

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Rowbotham, 'Gendering protest: Delineating the boundaries of acceptable everyday violence in nineteenth-century Britain', *European Review of History* 20(6), 2013, 945-66

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*.

League, including the novelist Mrs Humphrey Ward, the traveller and writer Gertrude Bell and Elizabeth Wordsworth, the educationist and Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. It also drew considerable support from the women of the aristocracy and gentry. Locally, underlining this trend, Mrs Spender was President and Mrs Roland Yonge was Secretary – the Yonges were a branch of the county family settled at Newton Ferrars and related to the famous novelist (herself an anti-suffragist), Charlotte Yonge.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4 'Freedom or Death': the Arrest of Mrs Pankhurst**

Despite - or perhaps because of - the local opposition to votes for women, the NUWSS work continued in Plymouth with regular meetings, but there was little reported suffragette activity. In 1913, in reaction to a number of high-profile suffragette activities and mass rallies, the central committee of the NUWSS agreed on the organisation of a 'pilgrimage' to London to demonstrate to the nation both the strength of the suffrage support across the country and their ability to organise and demonstrate peacefully. Plymouth and Exeter were amongst the centres from which women were to march to London, to join in a mass rally in Hyde Park on 26 July, with a service the following day in St Paul's Cathedral. To underline the impact, a small group of women were determined to make the march to London from Land's End and the 13 who did so included Mrs Ramsay, the oldest woman to make and complete the march.<sup>35</sup> Her daughter, Mabel, participated in the rally in Hyde Park but her local duties as a doctor meant that she was not free to leave her patients and so she only accompanied her mother for the part of the march that took place from Plymouth into Dorset.

The biggest suffrage-linked excitement and impact of the suffragettes on the Three Towns also came in 1913. By this time arson and the other tactics highlighted in the film *Suffragette* had become a regular part of the suffragette arsenal, especially in London and other big cities. The film portrays the real life scenario of the main characters, including Maud, setting fire to Lloyd-George's golf-villa at Walton-on-the Hill. Amongst others, the WSPU leader Mrs Pankhurst was sentenced on 3 April 1913 to three years penal servitude at Holloway for inciting her followers to commit the arson. As a result of going on hunger strike she had been released and re-arrested four times during the summer under the 'Cat and Mouse Act'.<sup>36</sup> But

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, see also Judith Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives: guidance for girls in Victorian fiction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) for more comment on Charlotte Yonge.

<sup>35</sup> She apparently did not walk the whole way, but rested from time to time in the accompanying suffrage van which followed on behind. She did however complete the entire route. See, amongst others, 'Women's Rally', *Plymouth Herald* 28 July 1913; Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*.

<sup>36</sup> This was the Prisoners' (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act 1913. Unfavourable popular reaction to force-feeding of those who went on hunger-strike meant that the government had to come up with an alternative to letting the suffragettes die in prison. This measure allowed for the temporary release of suffragettes on hunger strike when their health deteriorated to a dangerous point (identified

in the autumn, she deliberately broke the terms of her licence by leaving England and going to the US for a lecture tour to raise funds for the WSPU. This was the tour where she made, on 13 November 1913 in Hartford, Connecticut, what many consider to be one of the greatest speeches of the twentieth century, in which she insisted that she, and others in the WSPU, were committed to 'freedom or death'.<sup>37</sup> After this *tour-de-force*, Mrs Pankhurst planned to return for a big WSPU rally in London on 7 December. When the Home Office learned of this, the Home Secretary issued a General Warrant for her arrest, to return her to prison, in order to prevent any such public appearance and any consequent further inflammation of an already flammatory situation.<sup>38</sup> Initially, it was not known which ship Mrs Pankhurst would embark on for her return to England, meaning that there was a possibility of her landing in Liverpool, Southampton, Bristol or Plymouth. In fact, she chose to take the White Star line's steamer, *Majestic* due to dock at Plymouth on 4 December.

Meanwhile in London, having been informed of her plans, on 1 December 1913 at the WSPU meeting at Knightsbridge, Mrs Dacre Fox announced that 'Plymouth would be most sympathetic to any attempt to arrest her and there were dockyard men prepared to support them in any action they might take.'<sup>39</sup> She also confirmed that Mrs Pankhurst's 'Bodyguard' would be waiting at the port – a group of 20 women, trained in ju-jitsu tactics, who also carried wooden clubs (then known as Indian clubs) under their skirts. Under the leadership of another prominent activist, Flora 'General' Drummond, they were unashamedly a 'fighting force' willing to use physical tactics to protect her from arrest or at least to make sure that any arrest was not easily accomplished. When news of Mrs Pankhurst's impending arrival was telegraphed to London, Plymouth's Chief Constable Sowerby was immediately informed, and deputed to arrest her and hand her over to the due authorities so she could be returned to prison.

Aware of the plans to arrest their leader, suffragettes from all over the country descended on Plymouth. Local sympathisers (including suffragist families) put many of them up in their houses. This meant that at least 5,000 determined women were present in the Three Towns

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by prison doctors); it was a form of release on licence, to allow them to recover their health. They could then be re-arrested and returned to prison to complete their sentences. Inevitably, the result for many prominent suffragettes over the year after the passing of the legislation was that they would constantly be either in prison or out of it, convalescing. It was only the suspension of suffragette activities following the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914 that brought an end to this pattern.

<sup>37</sup> 'Great Speeches of the Twentieth Century: "Freedom or Death"', *The Guardian*, 26 April 2007. The speech was also widely reported at the time, see 'Mrs Pankhurst', *The Times*, 14 November 1913.

<sup>38</sup> At this time, along with the threat of Fenian activity and possible civil war in Ireland, the 'terrorist' tactics of the suffragettes was considered a major threat to government stability and state security. See Simon Webb, *The Suffragette Bombers: Britain's Forgotten Terrorists* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> *The Burnley News*, 3 December 1913.

by the morning of 4 December when the White Star's *Majestic* entered territorial waters. The women planned to hinder Mrs Pankhurst's arrest by the local Plymouth police and her transfer out of the Three Towns district. Consequently they conducted regular patrols and distributed themselves around any possible landing points and quays, as well as posting groups at the main Plymouth railway stations, so she could not easily be transferred by train to Exeter. The bodyguard gathered opposite Stonehouse Pool ready to protect Emmeline when she landed.

Given all this, the potential for trouble, and rioting on a scale that could have dwarfed the kinds of riots that were familiar to the Stonehouse police in particular, was tremendous, and this almost certainly explains why the Chief Constable of Plymouth took the action he did. Sowerby decided to avoid any confrontation by arresting Mrs Pankhurst as soon as the *Majestic* had dropped anchor in territorial waters to await the pilot boat to bring the ship into port. Sowerby, together with DI Hitchcock, six police officers and a prison wardress took a pilot boat launch from Bull Point, which was of course not open to public access and not readily observed from any of the public docks, to meet the *Majestic* now moored in Cawsand Bay. They were followed by a group of suffragettes in a motorboat who warned Mrs Pankhurst of the impending arrest with one of them shouting through a megaphone, 'Don't land! The cats are here!' (in reference to the Cat and Mouse Act).<sup>40</sup> From the privacy of the promenade deck Mrs Pankhurst asked Sowerby to produce the arrest warrant. He responded 'We do not require one for arresting you – you know that'. He then executed the warrant and effected the arrest despite her protests and those of a number of sympathetic passengers. He also agreed to let Mrs Pankhurst be accompanied on-shore by her American friend and travelling companion Mrs Rheta Childe Dorr. Since both Mrs Pankhurst and Mrs Childe Dorr had known of the danger of arrest on landing, the latter had sewed into her gown the £4,500 that Mrs Pankhurst had raised in America for WSPU activities so that it could not be seized and confiscated by the authorities.<sup>41</sup>

On the return to Bull Point, Sowerby handed Mrs Pankhurst over to Scotland Yard detectives who had decided to transport her out of the area via motor car. They took a circuitous route to avoid observation, past Dartmouth Prison, and delivered Mrs Pankhurst to Exeter jail. Mrs Childe Dorr was left behind at Bull Point, and made her way to the Plymouth Dock, about the time that news came out to the awaiting suffragettes that Mrs Pankhurst had already been

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<sup>40</sup> *Taunton Courier*, 10 December 1913.

<sup>41</sup> In today's terms, this amounted to about a quarter of a million pounds in value, a very important resource to enable the WSPU to carry on its activities.

arrested and taken out of Plymouth. With no valid reason to cause trouble, the disappointed suffragettes dejectedly left the Three Towns without any substantial incidents taking place.

A few suffragettes travelled from Plymouth to Exeter and maintained a largely silent vigil outside the prison as Exeter was not known for its militancy. More significantly, while Mrs Pankhurst was still in Exeter jail, a large group of suffragists held a meeting at the Queens Hall organised by the NUWSS which according to the *Western Times* 'attracted more than usual interest' and was chaired by Sir Robert Newman. The society's President, Mrs Fawcett, together with Miss Helen Fraser sympathised with the treatment of Mrs Pankhurst which 'was entirely unlooked for and unexpected' but reasserted the NUWSS position that 'we are entirely opposed to the use of violence of any kind as a means of political propaganda'. They stressed that they were becoming 'more and more opposed to militancy the more their experience of the [suffragette] movement was extended' and 'appealed to the principles of justice against the principles of brute force'.<sup>42</sup> Mrs Pankhurst was later transferred to London and the 'Cat and Mouse' started all over again.

However, Sowerby's actions were neither forgotten nor forgiven by the suffragettes. Later that month they sought their revenge. On 19 December a timber yard in Devonport, just off Richmond Walk and opposite Stonehouse Pool, which had been under police surveillance since the arrest, was set ablaze. The fire caused £12,000 worth of damage and also destroyed Hancock's pleasure fair (over £1million in today's money). The garrisons and warships sent fire fighters, incendiary devices were found at the site, and a witness remembered seeing two women in nurse's uniform walk by.<sup>43</sup>

A copy of the *Suffragette* was found tied to nearby railings with a number of postcards: 'To the Government: How Dare you Arrest Mrs Pankhurst'; 'Votes for Women: An answer to the cowardly arrest of Mrs Pankhurst here' and 'Revenge on the Government for the arrest of Mrs Pankhurst.' The reference to the 'cowardly arrest' was a clear allusion to Sowerby's successful tactics in evading trouble. The action was followed up by a number of other local attacks, including pillar box fires, shop-window smashing, heckling of opponents to the suffrage cause at local political meetings etc. Sowerby, however, won plaudits for his handling of the arrest before the *Majestic* docked and in preventing a major riot. *The Western Times* reported that 'all Plymouth was laughing' at the way in which the bodyguard was deceived, the *Taunton Courier* led with 'Mrs Pankhurst. Re-arrested off Plymouth. How

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<sup>42</sup> *The Western Times*, 6 December 1913.

<sup>43</sup> *Somerset and West England Advertiser*, 19 December 1913.

Police Tricked her Bodyguard' and *The Devon and Exeter Gazette* 'Suffragettes Eluded in Plymouth.'<sup>44</sup>

Suffragette activity in the South West only ceased with the outbreak of war in August 1914.

## **Conclusion**

In reflecting back on what the suffrage movement achieved and whether the suffragettes did, indeed, make the difference that enabled women to get the vote in 1918, it is ironic that many of the suffragettes who risked so much for the cause did not themselves benefit when votes for women became part of the Representation of the People Act 1918. Many of the suffragettes were young, single women: the age qualification was set at 30 for voting in elections to Parliament. The justification for this was that women matured (in terms of their ability to reason etc) later than men, who received the vote at 21. Likely to be in her early 20s at most, the heroine of *Suffragette* could well have been still too young to vote in 1918. Also, in line with what the suffragette and suffragist leaders had been campaigning for, votes for women in 1918 were granted on a property basis (including possession of a degree), rather than being part of the universal suffrage awarded to men. Only women who were householders, or married to householders, of the rateable value in place in 1914 were eligible to be on the electoral register in 1918. This would certainly not have included Maud Watts. It was not until 1928 that the vote was equalised for men and women, and finally, the last vestige of a property qualification to vote in national elections disappeared.

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<sup>44</sup> *The Western Times*, 5 December 1913; *Taunton Courier*, 10 December 1913; *The Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 5 December 1913.