

BORTHWICK INSTITUTE  
UNIVERSITY OF YORK

# **The Militant Suffragette Movement in York**

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BORTHWICK PAPER NO. 110

First Published 2007

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ISSN: 0524-0913

ISBN-13: 978-1-904497-21-9

ISBN-10: 1-904497-21-7

## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the staff at the following libraries and archives for their assistance in the research which went into this paper: Birmingham Art Gallery; Camellia Collection, Linton Park; Gloucester Record Office; International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam; Museum of London; West Yorkshire Archives Service, Kirklees; The National Archives; and The Women's Library, London; also Catherine Elliott for her M.A. dissertation on Doncaster and Jane Rendall and Ian Packer for discussions on the themes and events described in this paper.

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## Abbreviations

ILP	Independent Labour Party
n.d.	not dated
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
SFC	Suffragette Fellowship Collection, Museum of London
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
TS	Transcript
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

# *The Militant Suffragette Movement in York*

## **Introduction**

Between 1867 and 1903 campaigners seeking Parliamentary votes for women in Britain relied on sedate methods such as petitions or public meetings in front of invited audiences.<sup>1</sup> This altered in 1903 when Emmeline Pankhurst invited a group of women, friends from Manchester Independent Labour Party, to a meeting at her house to discuss the franchise campaign, declaring ‘women, we must do the work ourselves’.<sup>2</sup> The Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) which formed as a result of this meeting became the best-known of Britain’s many suffrage societies.<sup>3</sup> Over the next eleven years the WSPU secured national attention for its flamboyant campaign which drew many women into the fight for the vote. The Union’s adherence to forms of militancy which encompassed a wide range of activities, from those which transgressed expected gender roles through to criminal acts of violence, ensured that it was rarely out of the public gaze. Militancy has also helped to secure sustained historical attention for the Union and its work.

The first histories of the WSPU concentrated on its leadership.<sup>4</sup> Suffragette militancy began in Manchester, or in locations which were within easy travelling distance of the city. At the end of 1905 this stage of the work culminated in a high-profile campaign of heckling and disruption at Liberal Party meetings arranged to co-incide with the on-going General Election. Subsequently, Christabel Pankhurst, the Union’s chief strategist, realised that it was in danger of losing the momentum built up in the campaign as she watched prominent MPs leave provincial constituencies for London. Early in 1906, she persuaded her mother to allow Annie Kenney to take the Union’s remaining election fund and go to London to develop a base in the capital. Within two years the Union had established a large base of offices at Clements Inn (moving to even larger premises at Lincolns Inn in 1912) close to Westminster and to Fleet Street with its national newspaper headquarters. It had its own national weekly paper, *Votes for Women* (which was succeeded by *The Suffragette* when the Lincolns Inn move was made). Placing the WSPU in close proximity to national centres of political power made it easy to direct militant action against political targets. Between 1906 and 1914 the Union

took full advantage of its London location to organise ‘monster’ demonstrations on the streets of the capital. These proved irresistible to the Edwardian media, particularly to recently-launched newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* which relied heavily on photo-journalism.<sup>5</sup> Images and reports of the WSPU were rarely absent from their pages.

Further public attention was drawn to the series of ‘Women’s Parliament’ meetings which the WSPU arranged to co-incide with events pertinent to women’s suffrage such as the state opening of Parliament if the King’s speech failed to make mention of votes for women; or the talking-out of yet another private member’s bill which had attempted to initiate suffrage reform. These and similar events would be marked by a ‘Women’s Parliament’. At such meetings, suffragettes from throughout Britain would gather in the Caxton Hall, close to the Palace of Westminster, where speeches and debates took place. When the expected disappointing news arrived from the House of Commons a small deputation would leave the hall for Parliament led by a WSPU leader – usually Mrs Pankhurst – carrying a resolution condemning the latest setback in their campaign. The police, always present in large numbers, would try to stop them, and arrests would ensue. The associated spectacle of women brawling *en masse* with members of the Metropolitan Police assured prominent press coverage for the Women’s Parliaments whilst the presence of large numbers of provincial suffragettes from centres throughout Britain ensured that the local press afforded the events similarly high levels of column inches in their own pages – a point to which this paper will return.

The move to London and the spectacular militant acts which subsequently took place there have affected historical presentations of the WSPU. Accounts have tended to concentrate on events in London, either directly in descriptions of the Union’s large demonstrations, both militant and peaceful, which dominated the streets of the capital or indirectly through describing the decisions, activities and methodologies of the Union’s leadership and its interaction with the Edwardian government.<sup>6</sup> This London-centred narrative has not gone uncontested, particularly by women’s historians whose studies of the WSPU’s activities across a variety of regions have served to demonstrate that it was a much larger organisation than its London base might suggest. Initially the impetus behind regional studies was to challenge the predominance of militancy and the Pankhurst family within suffrage historiography, an

approach pioneered by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris in their 1978 study of constitutional suffrage in Lancashire, *One Hand Tied Behind Us*.<sup>7</sup> Other local studies were more concerned with recovering ‘lost’ historical figures or simply detailing suffrage activities within a particular region to answer the question ‘what did the suffragettes do *here*?’<sup>8</sup> More recently a third trend has emerged in suffrage historiography whereby the methodology of a local or regional study is deployed to re-evaluate the efficacy of militant tactics through demonstrating that they were more widespread or diverse than has hitherto been acknowledged.<sup>9</sup> It is within the context of these historiographical trends that this paper investigates events in the WSPU’s campaign in York. Having outlined the development of the local WSPU branch it will focus on two key moments of militancy in the city as a means of considering similarities and differences between local and national suffragette activities, and the impact that each may have had on the other.

### **The WSPU in York**

While there has been some consideration of the militant suffrage movement in the surrounding region, the WSPU in York has, to date, received little or no historical attention.<sup>10</sup> In many ways this is not surprising. The paucity of records which confronts most suffrage historians attempting to work from a regional basis is particularly acute in York. In common with most other branches in the country, no minute book has survived to offer insights into the inner workings of the WSPU branch in the city.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, unlike larger provincial cities such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds or Manchester, York, as a small city, did not sustain an active or diverse political culture on a large scale. This absence makes it impossible to rely on broader sources such as the abundant socialist periodical press to track the activities of radical women.<sup>12</sup> Nor were there many opportunities for such activities. Municipal politics were predominantly Conservative although the Liberal Party made significant gains throughout the first decade of the twentieth century and took control of the council for 1911 – 13. A small Labour Party presence – the first Labour seat on the city council was won in 1900 – helped this, but York’s Parliamentary representation divided between Conservative and Liberal in this period.<sup>13</sup> There was some interest in the issue of women’s suffrage. A local woman, Mary Smith of Stanmore, was credited with sending the first petition on the question to Parliament in 1832, stating that ‘she paid taxes and therefore did not see

why she should not have a share in the election of a representative'.<sup>14</sup> Although this claim was not immediately followed by the emergence of an organised suffrage movement, York did have some involvement with the first, constitutional suffrage campaigns, largely through the more radical elements of the city's female middle-class. Emma Fitch and Ann Swaine, both involved in campaigns for extending educational opportunities for girls, were signatories of the 1866 suffrage petition, a smaller, separate petition from York appeared in 1869 and occasional suffrage meetings were held in the city from 1874. Local suffragists received help from more radical Yorkshire women, notably Alice Scatcherd Cliff who came from Leeds to address several meetings in York in the final decades of the nineteenth century, but the predominant political complexion of early York suffrage remained Liberal. York established one of the earliest Women's Liberal Associations, and it was at a meeting of this group in 1889 that the national Women's Liberal Federation speaker, Florence Balgarnie, announced the formation of a York Women's Suffrage Society.<sup>15</sup> This society worked independently until 1901 when it affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. The NUWSS continued to have a presence in York up to the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>16</sup> There were also other outlets for women's political energies. Conservative women involved themselves in the local branch of the Primrose League. Edith Milner, who appears below, was a leading member of this organisation and stood for the School Board in the Conservative interest.<sup>17</sup> Although she was unsuccessful, both the School Board and the Board of Guardians in York did have female members. Municipal politics were clearly opening up to women in the city by the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

Many British cities had both constitutional and militant suffrage branches within a year or two of the WSPU's formation. The WSPU branch in York appeared much later, and also later than in other cities within the region such as Leeds or Bradford. Nevertheless, it has left some traces from which its work may be reconstructed. As previously mentioned, the WSPU published two newspapers, *Votes for Women* which began in 1908 and remained the official WSPU organ until the departure of its founding editor, Frederick Pethick Lawrence, and his wife Emmeline from the Union in 1912, and *The Suffragette*, edited by Christabel Pankhurst, which appeared in October 1912 and continued (under the title *Britannia*) until the end of the First World War. As with other political papers, these publications were as much concerned with recruitment as with propagandising, and also helped develop a sense of political identity



amongst women.<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of each edition were pages devoted to the activities of local branches. Secretaries or organizers from each branch would send a short report down to the WSPU's headquarters each week giving a brief outline of what the branch had been doing. Their content also suggests that they served the function of a message board. As most WSPU members received *Votes for Women* or *The Suffragette* directly from a member of the branch (the *Votes* secretary) or on subscription from Headquarters, organizers could be sure that anything written in their local reports would be circulated to the entire branch. Organizers and secretaries also used the columns to encourage their members to take on different tasks. Quite insignificant activities – a first paper sale, for example, or the giving of a vote of thanks at a public meeting – would result in a mention by name in the report. This means that despite the absence of formal membership records it is not impossible to reconstruct a profile of the active membership of any WSPU branch.

The coverage of suffragette activities in York which can be found within these columns of local reports demonstrates that the movement was fairly slow to get off the ground in the city. From the first years of its campaigning, the WSPU had employed paid organizers who were promoted from within its membership ranks. The organizers, who were seen as the most effective means of building up a network of branches throughout the country to further the Union's aims, would be sent out to particular locations to establish or develop centres of work. For this they would receive a salary of about two pounds a week. As this represented a considerable investment by the Union, the choice of where to locate an organizer was carefully considered.<sup>20</sup> Branches would be established if there were a particular need for a WSPU presence in a district, for instance at the time of a by-election campaign.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, they would usually be placed in large urban centres where communication and transport links were good and employment patterns offered a body of the educated or organised women workers, who counted for significant numbers amongst the WSPU's recruits. 'You can't have a meeting in amongst the fields' was how Olive Bartels, a WSPU organizer who worked in and around Cambridge, explained the WSPU's urban-focus to Brian Harrison in 1976.<sup>22</sup> York was too small to fit this pattern and merit a separate organizer. Instead it came under the jurisdiction of the WSPU's Yorkshire organizer who was generally based in Bradford.<sup>23</sup> From here, campaigns in Leeds and Bradford were overseen as well as much of the work in the Colne Valley which was an important site for suffragette activities following the election of Victor Grayson as its MP in

1907. Grayson stood – successfully- as an Independent Socialist in an extremely radical campaign which was enthusiastically supported by suffragettes and socialists alike. He continued to champion the suffragettes’ demands in Parliament making his constituency a good site for public meetings.

With other areas in her region offering ample potential for growth there was little incentive for the Yorkshire organizer to target York. Mrs Pankhurst had spoken in the city in June 1908 as part of a national campaign aimed at encouraging provincial women to participate in the WSPU’s huge ‘Women’s Sunday’ demonstration at Hyde Park, but her meeting had largely been facilitated by local constitutional suffragists and no WSPU branch formed subsequently.<sup>24</sup> With no external pressure, the impetus for organizing a branch had to come from within the city itself. This finally occurred in February 1910 when a local woman, Mrs Coultate, announced that ‘a meeting [was] being arranged for March 2’ and invited interested parties to communicate with her.<sup>25</sup> There is nothing to suggest what made her take this step at this point; there was no obvious national building campaign going on within the WSPU as there had been at earlier stages in its work such as in the months leading up to ‘Women’s Sunday’. Possibly Mrs Coultate had encountered Adela Pankhurst, the Yorkshire organizer, who had been spending some time in Scarborough recuperating from a chest infection and also building up WSPU work in that town.<sup>26</sup> Certainly she had been in contact with the national WSPU Headquarters at Clements Inn and had received official approval for her initiative for, within a week of placing the announcement in *Votes for Women*, she was described as the local WSPU secretary. Rapid advancement of this sort was not uncommon in new WSPU branches, and the role would not have been very demanding as, at this stage, Mrs Coultate had no branch. Nor did her prospects of acquiring one look good. Lack of local interest resulted in the postponement of the March meeting, and for much of the spring and early summer of 1910 it looked as if no further suffragette activity would take place in York.

Yet although there is no evidence of public campaigning, Mrs Coultate remained active behind the scenes, helped by Adela Pankhurst. On 12 August, *Votes for Women* announced that two local open air meetings had taken place, one with Adela as the main speaker and another one featuring two international women voters, Miss Hodge of Australia and Miss Frondsen of Norway, along with Dr Marion Mackenzie from Scarborough who had worked closely with Adela to build the Union branch there. These meetings sparked off a reasonable