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Yorkshire women on the front line of battle for the vote



A century ago the suffragettes were locked in battle with the government. Yvette Huddleston looks back at their fight for women's

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In any discussion of the suffragette movement, the names that most frequently crop up are those of the London-based leaders – in particular the Pankhurst family – but Yorkshire women had a significant part to play in the campaign.

Often they were mill workers and also involved in the trade union movement who saw getting votes for women as part of a larger campaign for equality. "One of the most well known of the Yorkshire suffragettes was Dora Thewlis," says Dr Jill Liddington of Leeds University, author of *Rebel Gids: Their Fight for the Vote*, which focuses on the suffrage movement across the industrial North.

"Dora was a weaver from Huddersfield and an active member of the local branch of the Women's Social and Political Union." Led by Emmeline

and Christabel Pankhurst, the WSPU was the militant wing of the movement and supported direct action. When Dora went down to London to take part in one of their protests, her picture made it on to the front page of a national newspaper. It was a striking image of a young woman being restrained by two policeman – her shawl askew, a defiant expression on her face – and it obviously captured the public imagination.

In the Edwardian equivalent of posting an image on Facebook, Dora's photograph was put onto a postcard and sent up and down the country and she hit the headlines. "As she was only 16 at the time, she became known, to her embarrassment, as 'Baby Suffragette,'" says Liddington. "That photograph became nationally known but after she was released from prison she went very quiet."

Liddington speculates that, like many women of her class, her priorities were of a more practical nature. "I have no doubt that the mill owner would not have approved of her action and she wanted to hang on to her job."

It wasn't just young women who were making their feelings known to those in power. In the autumn of 1913, a few months after Emily Wilding Davis threw herself in front of the King's horse on Derby Day, Leonora Cohen, a respectable middle-aged woman from Leeds, made a decision to take direct action when the Liberal Government announced a men-only suffrage bill, reneging once again on a commitment to votes for women.

"She started off supporting the movement by selling the paper and raising funds by making marmalade," says Liddington.




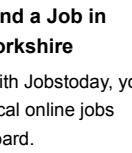




"But she was hit by the feeling that she had to do more when it became clear the Government weren't going to give an inch, so she went to the Jewel House in the Tower of London – elegantly dressed, she had been a milliner before she married – and hurled an iron bar at one of the display cases."

Leonora spent some time in prison for her action but, because she went on hunger strike, was released under the infamous Cat and Mouse Act, passed by Asquith's government in 1913. A consequence of the Act was an increase in police surveillance and Cohen, who had already received hate letters and whose son had been bullied at school, was advised to leave Leeds. The family went to live in Harrogate and while there she provided a safe house for fleeing suffragettes, released from jail and attempting to evade rearrest.

The end of 1913 and the early part of 1914 was a time of frenzied activity in the Women's Suffrage Movement and many suffragettes were either on the run from the police, in hiding, or in exile. Emmeline Pankhurst had been arrested again and Christabel was in exile in Paris. The third and youngest Pankhurst daughter, Adela, had strong links with Yorkshire, becoming the chief organiser of the Sheffield WSPU and effectively running the campaign in the North. At the tender age of just 19 she was speaking eloquently and passionately in front of crowds of 100,000 people in Leeds.

The outbreak of hostilities in Europe in August 1914 had a dramatic effect on the Women's Suffrage Movement. It split the Pankhurst family – Emmeline and Christabel immediately ceased their campaign, supported the recruitment of soldiers and urged women to join the war effort, while Sylvia and Adela remained internationalists and pacifist. "I think what is important is the wide range of response to the First World War among the suffragettes," says Liddington.

"On one wing there were the arch patriots who supported the war and on the other were the internationalists who opposed it. There definitely was a parting of the ways with people going in different directions when they were suddenly faced with this new threat."

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