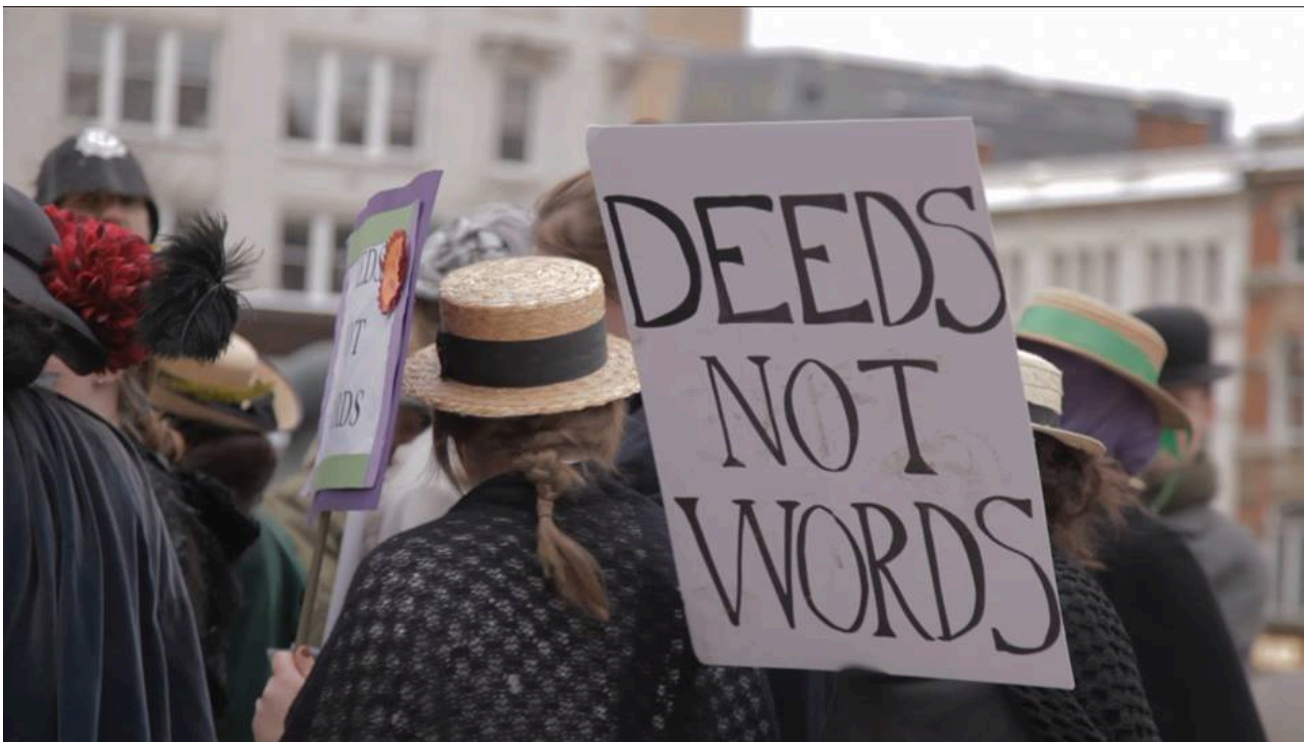


Fight for the Right: the Birmingham Suffragettes

– resource for schools (Key Stage 3)

Introduction & context

In this country universal suffrage, that is all men and women (aged over 21) having the right to vote, did not happen until 1928, less than 100 years ago. Women – and some men – campaigned during the nineteenth century for women to be given the vote. Towards the end of the century a formal organisation, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), was established to fight the cause – women belonging to this group were known as **suffragists**. Their tactics entailed lobbying parliament, writing letters and organising petitions. For some women these actions were not effective enough however, and in Manchester in 1903 the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed by the Pankhursts, headed by Emmeline and her daughter Christabel. Tactics used by members of this organisation, known as **suffragettes** (a term originally coined by the *Daily Mail* as an insult), were much more militant and they adopted the slogan ‘Deeds not Words’. Local branches were established across the country, including in Birmingham and the Midlands.



Fight for the Right: the Birmingham Suffragettes was a Heritage Lottery Funded project begun in 2012 that gave an opportunity for young women living in Birmingham to explore the activities of both sides of the suffrage campaign, militant and non-militant, that took place in the city in the early 1900s. A group of young women from two local schools, Kings Norton Girls’ School and Waverley School, who were aged 12-15 during the project, investigated social and political change by looking at different ways of campaigning and protesting by women who wanted the right to

vote. The young women involved in the project believed that the Birmingham suffrage campaigners were an important part of their heritage. While some of those involved had some prior knowledge of the suffragettes, often little is known or understood by young women about the histories of women involved in the campaign that lived and acted locally. **Fight for the Right** aimed to re-dress the balance by exploring women's voting history from a local perspective, focusing specifically on the activities of the Birmingham suffrage movement between 1909 and 1914. While primarily a local history project, participants also considered social and cultural change within women's rights today and explored ideas about voting and politics.

The project took place over a period of twelve months and was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund's Young Roots programme. A series of workshops were delivered by a small team of facilitators, including a project manager, local historians, a film maker, a drama practitioner and Education staff from Birmingham Archives & Heritage. The initial project plan was to use the knowledge gained through workshops and archival research to lead to the students scripting and filming a historical re-enactment film that interpreted the Birmingham story by focusing on the activities of both the suffragettes and the suffragists. What took place in Birmingham was not especially different to other major cities across the rest of the country but the project allowed the participants to research those events through local women and local actions, increasing a sense of connection between them and the past. The project aimed to explore the hidden stories that were not part of the students' everyday learning, where the stories told often focus on a London-centric viewpoint concentrating on a limited number of personalities, for example, the Pankhursts and Emily Wilding Davison. While clearly important figures, the participants wanted to know more about what happened in their own local area.

Impetus for **Fight for the Right** came from an earlier project called **The Right to Vote**, organised by Birmingham Archives & Heritage in partnership with the Parliamentary Archives, which identified a need and a demand by young people, and particularly girls, to build knowledge about politics, protest, debate and voting systems. **Votes for Women: Tracing the Struggle in Birmingham**, a resource guide produced as part of the Connecting Histories project, also inspired and influenced the project. This guide, **Fight for the Right: the Birmingham Suffragettes**, provides information on suffrage groups in Birmingham and explores the tactics they used. It also provides information on those groups that is held in the collections of Birmingham Archives & Heritage and suggests questions and areas for further discussion and research. This resource should be used in conjunction with **Votes for Women** and **The Right to Vote** (details in the Sources section of this guide).

The film, *Fight for the Right*, can be viewed on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/86719388>

Militant and non-militant protest in Birmingham

The militants

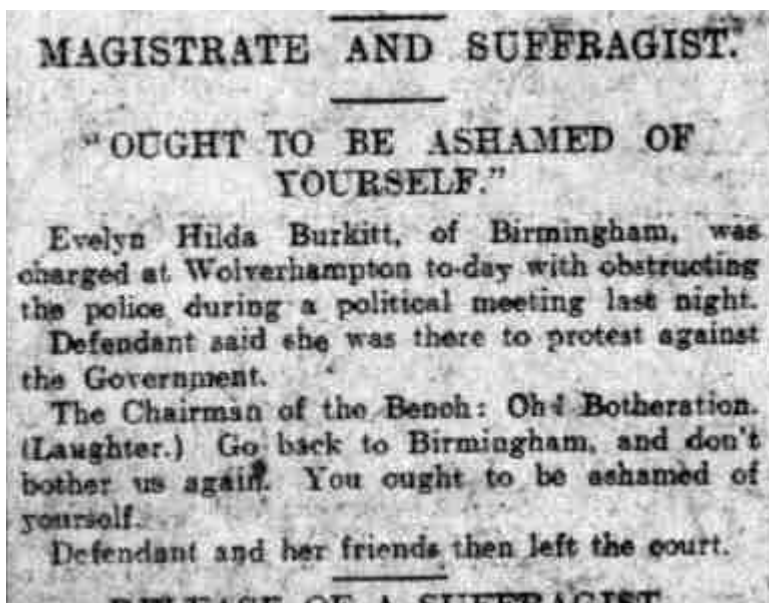
One of the earliest incidents of militant protest occurred when Prime Minister Asquith visited Birmingham's Bingley Hall in 1909 to address a meeting of Liberal politicians to discuss the budget. Members of the WSPU tried to gain entry to the meeting but were prevented from doing so by a heavy police presence. Alternative tactics were then employed by the suffragettes in order to gain access to the meeting: two of the women climbed onto the roof of a nearby house and threw roof slates at Asquith's car. Ten women were arrested in connection with the incident, one of whom, Hilda Evelyn Burkitt, a WSPU committee member from Sparkbrook, we had first encountered in the *Birmingham Weekly Mercury* in October 1908, where she had participated in a peaceful debate at the Aston Manor Parliament about women's suffrage (see image below).



Hilda Burkitt

We don't know much about Hilda's early life. She was born in July 1876 in Wolverhampton and is recorded in the 1881 census as living with her grandparents in Keresley, Warwickshire. She came from a large family and seems to have moved around the Midlands. In 1901 she is recorded as living with her sister and brother-in-law in Green Lane, Bordesley. Hilda was clearly involved in the WSPU campaign in Birmingham from the start. Her comments during the debate in October 1908 would prove to be especially pertinent given her experiences from 1909 to 1914: she remarked that women had quite as much stamina as men, and believed they were capable of bearing more pain.

Hilda had already been in trouble with the police earlier that year and had been arrested three times. In April she was in court in Wolverhampton charged with obstructing the police during a political meeting. The judge dismissed her by telling her to go back to Birmingham and not to bother them again (see image below). And in August she was in court in Hull, along with a number of other suffragettes, this time for demonstrating outside the city's Assembly Rooms.



Nottingham Evening Post, 1 April 1909

How do you think the judge's language would have made Hilda feel?

The next prisoner to enter the witness box was Miss Hilda Burkitt, of Birmingham, who said that whilst driving along to the meeting on the rally the Suffragettes did not make a sound. When they got close to the hall where Mr Samuel was speaking there had assembled a huge crowd, and the mounted police at once seized hold of the reins of their horse, and tried to turn the horse's head round so that they would have to go away from the meeting. "I did not shout," she added, "until the mounted police went on the pavement, and then I cried, 'It is not lawful for mounted policemen to ride right on to the pavement.'"

Daily Mail, 10 August 1909

Why do you think Hilda became involved in militant protest? What could have been her motivation?

Hilda's involvement in militant activities at Bingley Hall in September 1909 resulted in her first custodial sentence and she was sent to Winson Green Gaol for a month in the second division, where she was one of the first hunger-striking suffragettes to endure forcible feeding (or 'artificial' feeding as the Home Office preferred to describe it). Hunger striking as a tactic had only just been adopted, instigated by Marion Wallace-Dunlop, a WSPU member who had been imprisoned in Holloway in July 1909. She had protested against her treatment within the prison system and demanded that she be moved from the second division to the first in recognition for her conviction for a political offence – she wanted to be recognised as a political prisoner and not as an ordinary criminal. The leaders of the WSPU were outraged that women were being forcibly fed in Winson Green and petitioned the government in protest at the treatment. Statements were taken from the women, including Hilda, and they are recorded in the prison minutes:

28th September 1909.

officials. The administration of the food has been done with every consideration. I should like to ask if we may exercise together when our nine days are over.

ELLEN BARNWELL complained as follows:- I complain of being put in the Second Division and treated as a common criminal and of the Government authorising the Medical Officer to give food ~~see~~ by force. I protest against it. I have no complaints against any officer of the Prison but simply against the illegality of the treatment I have received. I have been treated kindly since I have been here. I ought to have been put in the First Division.

HILDA EVELYN BURKITT complained as follows:- I complain that I have not been treated properly since I have been here. I have been forced to take food against my will. I protest against it. I have been told that it is illegal to have a nasal pipe used. I complain of being wrapped in blankets with hands tied down and forced to take food. No more force was used than necessary. Kindness was used.

~~After~~ Each of the prisoners was informed that their complaints should be forwarded to the Home Secretary.

After all the complaints had been heard and the prisoners withdrawn the Chairman on behalf of the Committee expressed the opinion that the Doctors had acted in a most humane manner and that the prisoners had been shown every consideration and that the Doctors should be commended.

J. Winson Green

CHAIRMAN

6th October 1909.

5

What do you think of Hilda's statement? Do you think it is accurate and truthful?

Hilda Evelyn Burkitt:

"I complain that I have not been treated properly since I have been here. I have been forced to take food against my will. I protest against it. I have been told that it is illegal to have a nasal pipe used. I complain of being wrapped in blankets with hands tied down and forced to take food. No more force was used than necessary. Kindness was used" (Winson Green Visiting Committee, 1909, Birmingham Archives & Heritage, PS/B/4/5/1/3).

Ironically the horror of this treatment, which became the main tactic employed by the government to deal with suffragettes in order to prevent any deaths while they were in custody, actually brought women into the movement, many of whom would also subsequently undergo the treatment, and many suffragette activists gave their outrage at the policy of forcible feeding as a reason for their actions. Imagery and statements from women who suffered were used as propaganda by the WSPU in their newspapers *Votes for Women* and *The Suffragette*. One newspaper report described Hilda's treatment (see image below):

'Miss Burkitt was forced to sit in a chair, and the attendants proceeded to wrap a blanket around her. She struggled violently, but was overpowered, and two doctors forced her lips open and poured some milk and meat juice between her teeth. She declared however that she did not swallow any of it, and later the doctor forced a nasal tube up her nose. ... forcibly fed using a feeding cup. Every two hours she was fed in that way'.

For a couple of days she ate voluntarily but later recommenced her strike. This time

'the prison doctor adopted a new method. The mattress on which Miss Burkitt was lying was raised, wardresses held her hands down, and the doctor put his hand round her throat and forced her mouth open. In this way she was made to swallow some food and brandy'.

Why do you think the government chose to force feed women while they were in prison?

Explore the concept of 'political prisoners'. What does that mean? Can you think of any contemporary parallels?

WOMEN AND THE VOTE.

HUNGER STRIKER'S PRISON EXPERIENCES.

Miss Ellen Barnwell, Selly Oak, and Miss Hilda Evelyn Burkitt, Sparkbrook, two of the ten "Suffragettes" convicted for participation in the disturbances on the occasion of the Prime Minister's visit to Birmingham, were liberated from Winson Green Gaol on Saturday morning after serving a month's imprisonment. Miss Gladys Keevil, the local secretary of the Social and Political Union, subsequently communicated to the Press a statement made to her by Miss Burkitt. Miss Burkitt commenced her hunger strike immediately she was committed to prison on September 18. On the following Monday she wrote to the Home Secretary announcing her intention not to take food until she was treated as a first-class prisoner. On the following morning she was examined by two doctors, one of whom had been sent from London by order of the Home Office, and in the afternoon she was taken to the hospital kitchen. Miss Burkitt was forced to sit in a chair, and the attendants proceeded to wrap a blanket round her. She struggled violently, but was overpowered, and two doctors forced her lips open and poured some milk and meat juice between her teeth. She declared, however, that she did not swallow any of it, and later the doctor forced a nasal tube up her nose. By this time she was feeling very weak and was taken back to her cell, where she was left for an hour and a half. At the end of that time she still refused to take food, and was again forcibly fed by means of a feeding cup. Every two hours she was fed in that way. Several days later the prison governor visited her and informed her that he had received a letter from the Home Office in which Mr. Gladstone said that he could not interfere with the magistrate's decision and authorised the prison authorities to use what force was necessary to make her take food. For a couple of days she decided to take the food voluntarily in order that she might get back to her cell and have a chance of communicating with the other prisoners, but after doing this she recommenced the hunger strike. The prison doctor adopted a new method. The mattress on which Miss Burkitt was lying was raised, wardresses held her hands down, and the doctor put his hand round her throat and forced her mouth open. In this way she was made to swallow some food and brandy. "All this time," said Miss Keevil, "Miss Burkitt appeared to be at the point of collapse. She was icy cold, and she was placed in bed and surrounded by hot-water bottles. She remained an inmate of the hospital until her release this morning." Altogether Miss Burkitt had taken part in three hunger strikes—one of 81 hours' duration, one of 76 hours, and the last one of 24 hours.

Somerset & West of England Advertiser, 21 Oct 1909

After her release from prison Hilda continued with her activism but met fierce opposition. A month after her release from prison she appears in the papers again: on November 26th *The Mercury* covered a campaign meeting that had taken place at Walsall, organised by the Birmingham WSPU office. Hilda tried to speak at the meeting but 'was pushed off a chair on which she was standing, and she was also pelted with rotten apples and other similar missiles'. The women were forced to stop the meeting.

Under the auspices of the Birmingham Branch of the National Women's Social and Political Union, a women's suffragist campaign was opened at Walsall on Monday, and some lively scenes were witnessed. The first meeting took place on Townsend Bank, where a large crowd assembled. The speakers were Miss Eva Dixon, a Walsall lady, and Miss Hilda Burkitt.—Miss Burkitt spoke under considerable difficulty owing to frequent interruptions, and the attitude of the crowd eventually became decidedly hostile. Miss Burkitt was pushed off a chair on which she was standing, and she was also pelted with rotten apples and other similar missiles. After a time order was partially restored, and the speaker endeavoured to continue her address. The crowd, however, refused to hear her, and the Rev. W. Riley, a local Congregational minister, who accompanied the suffragists, had his silk hat knocked off. Eventually the ladies were compelled to seek refuge in flight and, although hustled by the crowd, they succeeded in escaping unharmed. At night a further attempt was made to hold an open-air meeting in Bradford Place, and the appearance of the suffragists caused some thousands of people to assemble. Although about a dozen police officers under Chief Inspector Ballance endeavoured to maintain order their efforts failed to gain the speakers a hearing. Missiles were thrown and repeated rushes were made by the crowd, who eventually swept police and suffragists in front of them. The officers, however, formed a body guard for the ladies, and succeeded in removing them to a place of safety.

Hilda Burkitt was arrested numerous times across the country and was involved in window smashing and arson. In total, she was forcibly fed a shocking 292 times from 1909-1914.¹

What do the newspapers tell us about attitudes to women protesters at this time?

How does language differ in all of the documents that you've read so far?

¹ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 87

Bertha Ryland

Bertha Ryland was born in Birmingham in 1882. She lived with her family in Hermitage Road, Edgbaston. Her father William is described in the 1881 census as a surveyor and the family had domestic staff.

In 1908, Bertha, along with her mother Alice, a former member of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society, joined the WSPU and then Bertha went on to run the newly founded regional office. In 1911 she took part in a window-smashing campaign in London and was sentenced to 7 days' imprisonment. In the same year Bertha and Alice, along with many other members of the WSPU and other suffrage organisations, had boycotted the census, proclaiming 'No vote, no census'.² Bertha also spent a week in Holloway Prison in November 1911 and, after taking part in the March 1912 window-smashing campaign in London, had been sentenced to six months' imprisonment, spending four months in Winson Green Gaol where she was forcibly fed. Like Hilda, this did not deter her from participating in further militant activities however, and in June 1914 Bertha used a meat cleaver to slash a painting titled *Master Thornhill* by the 18th century artist George Romney which was on loan at the time to Birmingham Art Gallery (this painting is now part of the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston).



² Jill Liddington, *Vanishing for the Vote: Suffrage, Citizenship and the Battle for the Census* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 337

Events

brother Abraham, while £1,000 each were contributed by Mr. Thomas Lloyd and Mr. G. F. Muntz. £7,000 was got together in this way, and the Company subsequently, by 34 votes to 14, decided to buy the hall and park. The result was that the property company was wound up, and all the shareholders having relinquished their claims the purchase was completed on the 12th September, 1864, on the 2nd of which month the park was opened to the public, a banquet given in the Long Gallery of the Hall the then Mayor (Mr. W. Holliday). Thus it was that the historic old building passed into the possession of the municipality. *2 Pm B mail*

GRAVELLY HILL WHITE CITY SCHEME.

10.6.14
Promoters of the White City scheme, yesterday, completed their arrangements with the Birmingham Water Department for the taking over of the site at the bottom of Gravelly Hill, including the large reservoir and the land by the side of the Tame. The department is granting a lease of the ground for thirty-five years at an annual rental of £1,500. It is one of the conditions of the lease that the lessees erect upon the ground buildings of the value of £30,000. Building operations, it is understood, will be started immediately. *U B B Post*

SUFFRAGETTE OUTRAGE AT ART GALLERY.

PICTURE ATTACKED WITH A HATCHET.

EDGBASTON WOMAN ARRESTED.

Early yesterday afternoon a valuable portrait by George Romney, hung in the Old Masters' Room at the Birmingham Art Gallery, was slashed with a chopper by a suffragette and damaged to the extent of between £50 and £70. One result of the outrage is that it was immediately decided to close the Art Gallery to the public until further notice.

It was between 1.15 and 1.30 p.m. that Attendant Evans had his attention attracted to a woman who walked straight up to the picture. His suspicions were aroused, and he walked towards her, but before he could reach her she had produced from her pocket a hatchet with a blade about ten inches long and dealt the picture three sharp blows with the instrument. Evans at once closed with her. Attendant Williams came to his assistance, and the chopper was wrested from her. The woman was then handed over to the custody of Police-constable Eardley, who was on duty in the gallery. The woman did not resist arrest, but trembled violently as though she was alarmed at the result of her act. She was asked for her name

PREVIOUS OUTRAGES IN BIRMINGHAM.

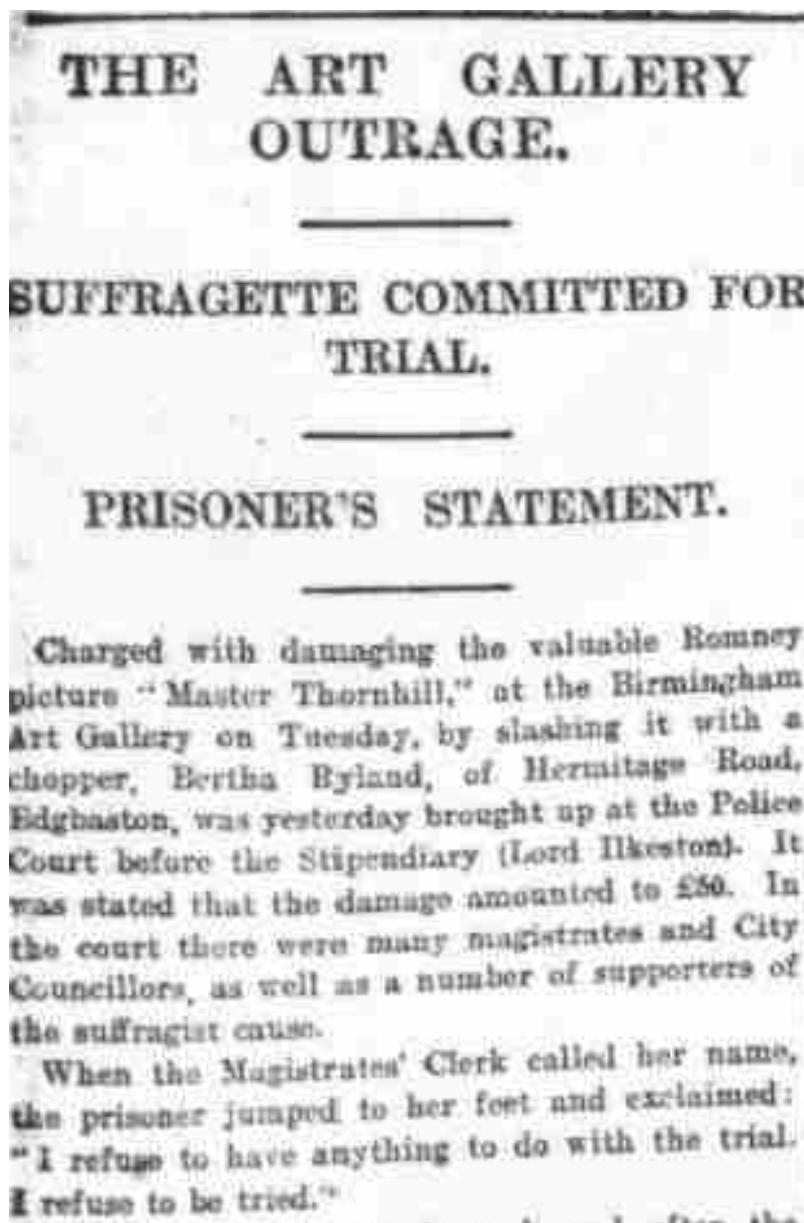
On numerous occasions during the past two years Birmingham has been the scene of acts of violence on the part of suffragettes, ranging from wilful damage to windows to the more serious crimes of arson and sacrilege. The following is a chronological list of the militants' misdeeds in the Birmingham district:—

- October 25, 1912.—Pillar-box outrages in Church Road, Yardley, and elsewhere.
- November 28, 1912.—Another pillar-box campaign.
- April 22, 1913.—Attempt to burn the boathouse in Handsworth Park.
- June 20, 1913.—"Haselwood," a void villa in Warwick Road, Olton, destroyed by fire.
- June 21, 1913.—Attempt to blow away the canal embankment at Yardley Wood with gunpowder.
- July 19, 1913.—More pillar-box outrages.
- July 20, 1913.—House fired at Selly Oak.
- July 21, 1913.—Windows of Grand Hotel smashed on the occasion of Prime Minister's attendance at Chamber of Commerce banquet.
- February 12, 1914.—The Carnegie library at Northfield destroyed by fire. Damage £1,300.
- February 12, 1914.—Attempt to blow up Moor Green Hall, the residence of the late Mr. Arthur Chamberlain.
- March 1, 1914.—Attempt to fire the refreshment rooms and the Old Golden Lion shelter in Cannon Hill Park.
- March 1, 1914.—Doors of St. Stephen's Church, Selly Hill, and the Parish Church, Edgbaston, disfigured by white paint lettering.
- March 13, 1914.—Pavilion of Olton Tennis Club destroyed by fire.
- March 14, 1914.—Interior of the Cathedral disfigured by mottoes painted in white enamel.
- March 15, 1914.—Railway carriages set on fire at King's Norton, on the Midland Railway.
- May 7, 1914.—Goods van fired at Adderley Park Station.
- May 15, 1914.—Cricket pavilion at Harborne destroyed by fire.
- May 17, 1914.—Stands on Birmingham Racecourse destroyed by fire.

Birmingham Mayoral Robes. 30.5.14

With reference to my paragraph last week on the subject of the robes worn by Mayors and Lords Mayors of Birmingham, I am reminded that two Mayors wore robes in their official capacity before 1862 when the late Alderman Manton attended wearing a scarlet robe at the opening of the International Exhibition. Mr. J. B. T. Hodgson was the first to wear a mayoral robe in Birmingham. In 1855, when chief magistrate, he received an invitation from the Lord Mayor of London to a banquet at the Guildhall to the King of Sardinia, and he informed the Town Council that he had accepted the invitation, and intended to comply, as a matter of etiquette, with the request to appear in robes. Three years later Queen Victoria, accompanied by the Prince Consort, visited Birmingham

The museum minutes record that her handbag had been examined at the turnstile on entering the museum, however 'the damage was committed by means of a chopper concealed beneath her jacket' (Records of Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Archives & Heritage, BCC 1/BQ/1/1/1, 1912-17). Bertha had with her a note with her name and address and an explanation of her conduct: "I attack this work of art deliberately as a protest against the government's criminal injustice in denying women the vote, and also against the government's brutal injustice in imprisoning, forcibly feeding, and drugging suffragist militants, while allowing Ulster militants to go free". The gallery was immediately closed for six weeks.



"I refuse to have anything to do with the trial. I refuse to be tried."

Bertha Ryland

Birmingham Daily Post, 11 June 1914

The interruption was ignored, and after the charge had been read over, Mr. J. E. Hill, the prosecuting solicitor, narrated the circumstances which led to the woman's appearance in court. For some minutes the prisoner kept up an intermittent interruption. She protested first of all that she did not see why militant suffragettes should be arrested while the Ulster militants were allowed to go free, and when Mr. Hill mentioned the question of damage she exclaimed: "It is nothing to the damage caused by civil war. These Ulster militants are inciting to damage; why don't they arrest Sir Edward Carson and the rest of them?" After this her interruptions ceased, and she stood silently listening to Mr. Hill's opening statement.

She protested first of all that she did not see why militant suffragettes should be arrested while the Ulster militants were allowed to go free.

He did not propose, he said, to enter into the political reasons which animated injury and spoliation of this character nor the motives which underlay them. It was a marvel to him that anyone could be found—anyone with a sense of decency—to commit damage of this sort, especially to old masters such as this. At 1.20 on Tuesday prisoner walked into the Art Gallery. It was the practice to search women's handbags and to take possession of umbrellas, sticks, or anything they were carrying with which it might be possible to cause damage. This young woman was not suspected. Immediately she got into the gallery proper she walked hurriedly across to the Romney picture and stooped down as if to read the title. When she stood up again she drew a chopper from her blouse and slashed three times at the picture. One cut severed the foot of the figure and the other cuts were on the canvas. Happily the injuries were such as could be readily repaired. Prisoner was immediately secured by one of the attendants and handed over to the police. When asked for her name she said: "You will find it on that paper on the floor."

It was the practice to search women's handbags and to take possession of umbrellas, sticks, or anything they were carrying with which it might be possible to cause damage. This young woman was not suspected.

...she drew a chopper from her blouse and slashed three times at the picture...

Birmingham Daily Post, 11 June 1914

"GOVERNMENT'S CRIMINAL INJUSTICE."

In front of the picture was found a sheet of paper on which was written the following statement:—

Christ says "I came not to bring peace but a sword." I attack this work of art deliberately as a protest against the Government's criminal injustice in denying women the vote, and also against the Government's brutal injustice in imprisoning, forcibly feeding, and drugging suffragist militants, while allowing Ulster militants to go free. Let all sensible men and women enquire into the cause of militancy, instead of condemning the militants. We are militant because only so can the vote be won. We need the vote because only by it can the woman's movement become a truly effective power. The woman's movement means the spiritual, mental, and physical salvation of the race, because it is the one movement that undertakes to stamp out all sexual immorality and all its attendant horrors. It is futile to attempt to crush this great movement by persecution and misrepresentation. No power on earth can stop a movement that is working with Divine guidance for purity and righteousness.—BERTHA RYLAND.

That statement, added Mr. Hill, showed a deliberate intention to damage the picture.

"Let all sensible men and women enquire into the cause of militancy, instead of condemning the militants. We are militant only so the vote can be won. We need the vote because only by it can the women's movement become a truly effective power."

Bertha Ryland

Police-constable Copeley said he was on duty at the Art Gallery turnstile in company with Police-constable Eardley, and saw the prisoner enter at 1.20. There was nothing suspicious about her appearance. She proceeded upstairs towards the gallery, and two or three minutes later witness heard a whistle blown. He ran up the staircase, and outside No. 2 gallery he saw the prisoner struggling with two attendants, Evans and Williams. In consequence of the statement made to him witness took prisoner towards the damaged picture, and as they were entering the gallery she fell back as though about to faint, and exclaimed, "For God's sake don't take me back there." In the gallery witness was handed by the attendant Evans the chopper produced, a butcher's cleaver about 12 inches long. He told prisoner she would be arrested on a charge of damaging the picture, and asked for her name. She paused a moment and then said, "You will find my name on a piece of paper down there," pointing to the floor in front of the picture. She was taken to the Detective Office, and made no reply when the charge was read to her.

THE DAMAGE REPARABLE.

Edwin Evans, of 172, Dartmouth Street, an attendant at the Art Gallery, said prisoner walked straight up to the Romney picture and stooped down as if to read the title at the bottom of the frame. When she stood erect again she pulled the chopper produced from under her jacket and struck the canvas three downward blows. Witness, who was six or seven yards away, rushed towards her, secured her, and handed her over to the police.

Sir Whitworth Wallis, keeper of the Art Gallery, was the next witness called. His attention was drawn to the damaged picture on Tuesday night by Mr. A. B. Chamberlain, the assistant keeper. The damage to the picture, which was a very valuable one, he estimated at £50, and happily it was reparable. The picture, a well-known Romney, was the property of Mrs. Powlett Lane, of Broadstone, Dorsetshire, and was on loan to the Birmingham Corporation. Every care was taken at the gallery in the matter of searching women, and he did not think any precaution could have prevented an attack of this character.

Prisoner was then formally charged, and maintained a sullen silence when asked if she had any statement to make or desired to call any witnesses.

The Stipendiary committed her for trial at the Quarter Sessions, and as she turned to descend from the dock to the cells she waved her hand to friends at the rear of the court and called out, "No surrender."

...as she turned to descend from the dock to the cells she waved her hand to friends at the rear of the court and called out "No surrender".

Birmingham Daily Post, 11 June 1914

See also

Birmingham Daily Post 15 June 1914

Birmingham Daily Post 16 June 1914

Birmingham Gazette, 16 June 1914

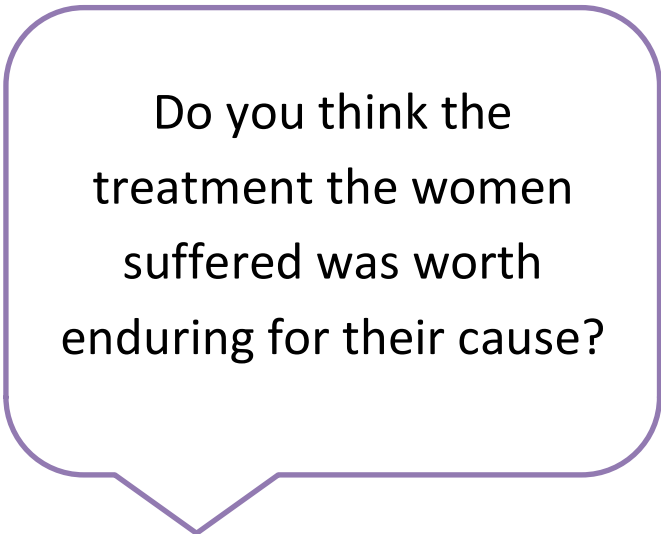
Birmingham Daily Post 17 June 1914

Do you agree with this type of militant activity?
Do you think Bertha's reasons justify her actions?

The *Birmingham Daily Post* on June 11 reported that when the Magistrate called out her name during the court hearing, Bertha jumped up and exclaimed 'I refuse to have anything to do with the trial. I refuse to be tried'. Bertha continued to interrupt the hearing and protested that she did not see why militant suffragettes should be arrested while the Ulster militants were allowed to go free and was said to have cried 'no surrender' as she left the court. She was committed for trial and while on remand in Winson Green went on hunger strike and was again forcibly fed. A week later Bertha's father applied for bail and this was given after Bertha gave a verbal undertaking that she would not commit a similar act or attend suffragette meetings.

It was reported in the *Birmingham Gazette* that Bertha looked very ill and was driven away in a taxicab in the company of her father and sister. On 17 July the *Daily Post* reported that Bertha's trial was postponed: Mr William Billington, surgeon to Queen's Hospital, stated that her nervous and mental condition was very unsatisfactory. After her stint in prison in 1912 her doctor had discovered a gross displacement to her kidneys and had advised that an operation was necessary. Billington stated that a court hearing at this time would 'gravely jeopardise her mental condition'. The WSPU mouthpiece, the *Suffragette* carried the headline: 'The inquisition in England: Miss Bertha Ryland's experiences in prison, torturing a sick woman, utter agony and misery' and reported that the examining doctor observed that her treatment in 1912 had entailed Bertha being 'seized around the waist by wardresses, and once tied around the waist in the operating chair. This mauling of the unprotected kidney, together with the retching and choking strained and twisted the kidney and caused chronic inflammation'.

The trial had not taken place by the time war broke out in August 1914 and all imprisoned suffragettes were granted amnesty. The charges against Bertha were officially dropped in October 1914. She suffered permanent kidney damage as a result of forcible feeding. Bertha lived until the 1970s.

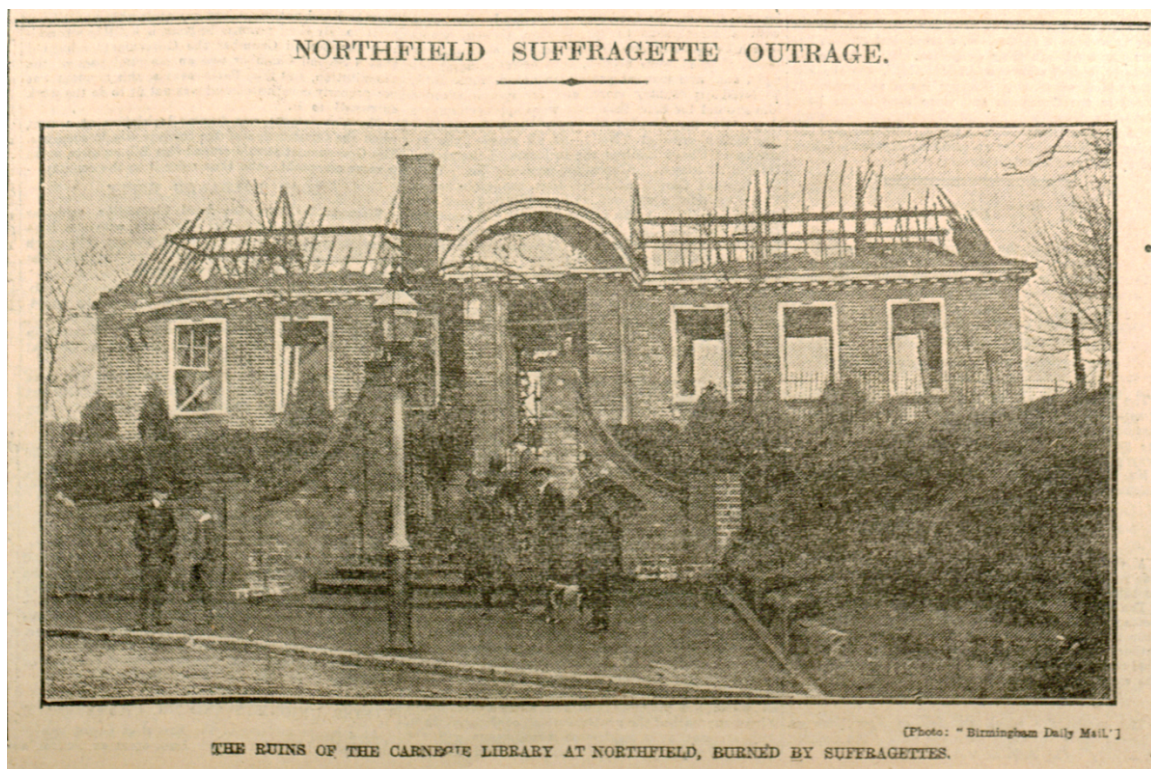


Do you think the treatment the women suffered was worth enduring for their cause?

Other notable acts of militancy in Birmingham

On 12 February 1914 the Carnegie Library, now Northfield Library, was burnt down destroying around 1,500 books (the culprits left a copy of Christabel Pankhurst's pamphlet 'The Great Scourge and How to End It' along with a note saying 'To start your new library, Give Women the Vote'); on the same night there was an attempted explosion at Moor Green Hall in King's Heath the residence of the late Arthur Chamberlain (the note left there read 'Please post this to Mr McKenna, Home Office, London. Militancy is not dead, but if you are not you soon will be'); on 2 March Cannon Hill Park refreshments pavilion was destroyed by fire; Birmingham Cathedral was attacked on 14 March, slogans condemning forcible feeding were daubed throughout, including on the Burne-Jones stained glass; on 14 May Harborne Oratory School cricket pavilion was burnt down; the Grandstand at Castle Bromwich Racecourse was attacked; a train carriage at Kings Norton station was destroyed.

Do you think activism increased at this time, in 1914? Why do you think that was?





Tension was clearly building in these summer months and an incident that occurred in Birmingham points to the treatment of the suffragettes by those who disagreed with their cause: the *Dundee Courier* reported on 18 May 1914 that a young woman in Birmingham had been attacked by three men who suspected her of being a WSPU member, tearing off some of her clothing, covering it in tar and setting fire to it, as the paper described it 'a drastic reprisal to numerous outrages recently committed in Birmingham'.

The non-militants

The frustration of the Birmingham suffragist Catherine Osler at not being allowed into the Asquith meeting was reported in the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*: Osler had written a letter in which she observed that:

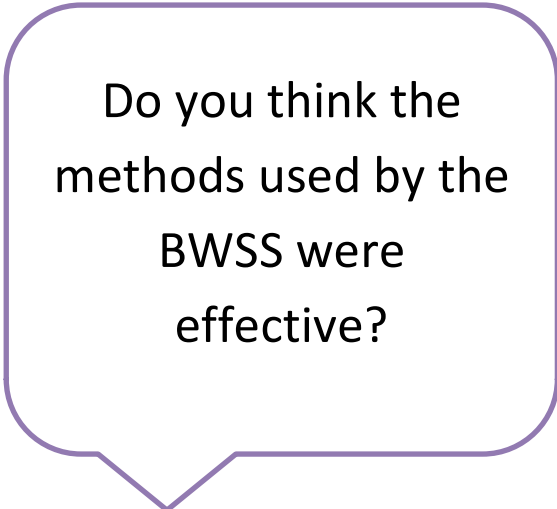
“women citizens had undoubted reason to feel insulted and injured when denied the right of listening to the exposition by the Prime Minister of proposals which affected them equally with men, and on which they were refused the expression of an opinion through the vote. The injury and insult would be most keenly felt by those who like herself strongly condemned disorder and violence as a means of public agitation” (18 September 1909).



Catherine Osler (Birmingham Portraits Collection)

How do you think Catherine felt about not being allowed in to the meeting?

Alongside the militant activities of the suffragettes were more peaceful campaigners connected to Millicent Garret Fawcett's NUWSS and Catherine Osler, president of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS), offers a counterpoint to Hilda Burkitt and Bertha Ryland. Osler had grown up in the midst of liberal politics and the fight for enfranchisement; her parents were founding members of the BWSS and by 1901 Catherine was President. During the 1910 election campaign members of the BWSS wrote to parliamentary candidates asking for support and carried out door-to-door canvassing with a voters' petition. They also picketed the polling booths. Committee rooms were set up across the city: each room was a centre for the distribution of literature and for holding meetings. Outdoor meetings were held by the BWSS during the election campaign, these took place during dinner hours outside factory gates and on street corners, including at the Bull Ring.



Do you think the methods used by the BWSS were effective?

While many women became impatient with the NUWSS and their perceived lack of progress in winning the right to vote, their membership actually continued to grow during this time, particularly amongst middle class women, and there were local branches across the country (in 1908-9 membership of the BWSS went from 220 to 541 and by 1911 there were 700 members). However, despite the increase they were given far less attention in the press. Catherine Osler recalled a journalist asking her if her organisation was going to do anything extraordinary for if not then he was too busy to stay. They also made the following point in their annual report for 1910-11; "our steady educational work is not sensational enough to supply striking headlines and nothing else is of use unless backed up by power and influence" (Reports of the BWSS, Birmingham Archives & Heritage, LF 76.12).

Although she did not condone the militant actions of the WSPU, Osler did condemn the practice of forcible feeding, indeed, she resigned her presidency of the Birmingham Women's Liberal Association in protest at the government policy (although this reason was not reported in the press).

How do you think Catherine felt about the press not reporting the peaceful campaigning of the BWSS?

The NUWSS had more members than the WSPU but this isn't very well known. Why do you think this is?

How important do you think press coverage is for a campaign?

First World War

After the war began in August 1914 Emmeline Pankhurst immediately suspended the activities of the WSPU and declared her full support for the war effort. She concentrated on helping the government to recruit women into war work and encouraging men to enlist. The NUWSS continued to campaign for the vote during the war. Many members of the NUWSS were against the war, and some of them were involved in a Peace Congress that took place at The Hague in 1915.

The Vote

In February 1918 the Representation of the People Act was passed. This was a partial victory for suffrage campaigners as it gave women aged over 30 the right to vote if they could satisfy certain criteria, such as owning property.

All men and women over the age of 21 were finally given the right to vote in the UK in 1928. The act was passed by the Conservative Party without much opposition from other parties.

The bill became law on 2 July 1928, having been introduced in March. Millicent Fawcett was still alive and attended the parliament session to see the vote take place. She wrote in her diary the same night: 'It is almost exactly 61 years ago since I heard John Stuart Mill introduce his suffrage amendment to the Reform Bill on 20 May 1867. So I have had extraordinary good luck in having seen the struggle from the beginning'. Emmeline Pankhurst died on 14 June aged 69, just weeks before the bill was passed.

- *Do you think equality between men and women exists in the UK? What about the rest of the world? Can you think of examples?*
- *What advances have been made in gaining equality between men and women? Can you think of examples?*
- *Are women equally represented in politics? Can you name any female politicians?*
- *How important do you think it is to vote in elections?*
- *The current voting age is 18. Do you agree with that? What age do you think people should be allowed to vote?*

Fight for the Right project plan/research model

Fight for the Right took place over a period of twelve months and was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund's Young Roots programme. A series of workshops were delivered by a small team of facilitators, including a project manager, local historians, a film maker, a drama practitioner and Education staff from Birmingham Archives & Heritage.

Over the first 3 months a series of workshops were held in Birmingham Archives & Heritage where the participants and local historians explored the suffrage campaign and researched material to be used for the next phase of the project (as described above). The workshops focused on learning about the suffragettes and suffragists in Birmingham and where that information could be accessed. The young people began to gain a greater understanding of historical research and how to interpret that knowledge.

A blog was created to support and build interest in the project:

<https://birminghamsuffragettes.wordpress.com/>

This was free to use and provided a good way of documenting the project and sharing the material that was found.

After the research stage the project team invited a local female MP (Shabana Mahmood, Labour MP for Birmingham Ladywood) to meet with them which allowed the young people to gain a greater understanding of politics today and the challenges facing women entering politics, including underrepresentation of women and campaigning. The group also visited the Houses of Parliament.

In addition to using the material held by Birmingham Archives & Heritage, the group visited Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery to meet one of the social history curators and to look at suffragette material held there. The participants began to gain a greater understanding of museum collections and how they could be interpreted for other people.

A walking tour in Birmingham also took place, where the group visited sites of relevance to the story of the Birmingham suffrage campaign. This encouraged the participants to learn more about their local area and to see where actual events during the suffrage campaign had taken place.

The knowledge and research found over a period of approximately 6 months was then used to make the historical re-enactment film, *Fight for the Right*. The film was developed and produced by the participants and shown at a public screening at the Library of Birmingham in November 2013.

The film, *Fight for the Right*, can be viewed on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/86719388>

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Newspaper extracts accessed via the *British Newspaper Archive* (subscription charge)

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>