

NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STONELEIGH HISTORY SOCIETY HELD ON 29 MAY 2018

Apologies: Dick and Daphne James, Derek Robinson, and Jean Vaughan

Present: 36, including 8 guests

Welcome: Sheila Woolf welcomed everyone, especially visitors.

- Thanks to SHS members Margaret Brown, Derek Robinson and Margaret Wallis for their production of 'The Story of the Stoneleigh Stitchers' which was dedicated in Stoneleigh Church on 27 May.
- The annual outing had been held on 24 April and was attended by 35 members and friends. The visit to Merevale Hall had been very interesting, despite the pouring rain.
- The cover of the June edition of Stoneleigh & Ashow News shows a picture of the visit of Victoria and Albert to Stoneleigh Abbey in 1858. Sheila had written an article about the visit.
- On Friday 16 November, the SHS, together with the Stoneleigh Male Voice Choir would mark the commemoration of the end of WW1.
- Thanks to Janet Gibson and Rachel Gill for refreshments. Also – **A plea for a large turquoise Co-op bag, containing items for SHS refreshments, which had disappeared after the February meeting. If anyone knows its whereabouts please contact Shirley Ball on 01926 858094.**

Sheila then introduced **Dr Sarah Richardson of the University of Warwick to speak about the centenary of women's suffrage.**

(N.B. Dr Richardson has curated an exhibition currently on display in the Houses of Parliament. For details see <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/vote/100/voice-andvote/>).

Dr Richardson referred to the origins of the campaign for women's suffrage which began in 1867 when John Stuart Mill handed a petition signed by 1500 to the House of Commons seeking a suffrage amendment to the Reform Act. This was followed by the formation of the London Society led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett (mainly comprised of middle class liberals) and the Manchester Society (initially associated with Lydia Becher's campaign against the Corn Laws but later becoming more radical under Emmeline Pankhurst). Initially campaigning mainly involved low key lobbying, trying to win men over to the cause but in time severe tactical disagreements developed over the question of direct action.

Debates raged about whether the vote should be for all women or just property owners (far fewer of course), single as well as married women. Class prejudices were voiced along the lines of 'my gardener gets the vote, why don't I?'

Following the formation of the WPSU there was increased radicalisation and several groups were formed with slightly different objectives but the main difference was between direct and indirect action. Green, purple and white became the WPSU colours and these appeared on numerous banners, posters etc during parades. The Artists Suffrage League and the Suffrage Atelier produced all these materials.

Militancy gained particular notoriety/publicity when Emily Wilding Davidson died during the Derby when she, deliberately or not, threw herself at the King's horse. Also in 1913 the Liberal Government passed 'The Cat and Mouse Act' which introduced forced feeding. Violence against property and physical abuse was common on both sides but there were strong feelings that forced feeding was unacceptable and some likened it to rape.

By 1913 several groups existed. Although there were some fundamental differences in terms of tactics their overall objective was shared and in fact they co-operated on many campaigning activities. There was considerable bickering about tactics within each group. Although there was some resentment/disgust even at some of the more militant tactics, it was generally acknowledged that militancy had drawn a great deal of attention to the cause of Votes for Women and had made people think more about the issues.

The *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (NUWSS) at 460 branches was by far the biggest society, following Mill and Fawcett. Their members tended to be moderate, middle-class and property owning women. Men were allowed to join. There were branches all over Warwickshire. Marie Louise Vellacott was the Secretary in Leamington at Langton House, Leam Terrace. Mary Dormer Harris (a one-time resident of Stoneleigh) was another NUWSS member but as she was single and lived with her mother and was both a property-owner she was not eventually able to vote. She did however, exchange correspondence with George Bernard Shaw who supported The Cause.

Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) had 90 branches, led by the Pankhursts. Their motto was 'Deeds Not Words'. Very active in Birmingham and many activists visited Coventry and Leamington. Annie Kenney, from Manchester, was the first woman to be force fed. Bertha Ryland was imprisoned and force fed for having slashed a painting in Birmingham Art Gallery. Men were not allowed to join.

Women's Freedom League (WFL) had 61 branches and was a breakaway group using non-violent methods

Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association (CUWFA) was very active in Warwickshire where the key person was Lady Willoughby de Broke, or Compton Verney. The Secretary of the CUWFA's Warwickshire branch was Frances Donisthorpe who lived at Lodge Farm (between Kineton and Wellesbourne). She later became a private ambulance drivers in the Hacker Lowther Ambulance Unit (an all-women unit) and later set up with her 'friend' and it is felt that a character in Radclyffe Hall's 'Well of Loneliness' was based on her.

The Women's Emancipation Unit had a branch in Coventry and were mainly concerned with equal employment rights.

There was even a *National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage*, a prominent member of which was Margaret Elizabeth Child Villiers (nee Leigh 1849), Countess of Jersey who was its chair.

The suffragettes and suffragists attracted some male supporters, not least MPs Keir Hardie and George Lansbury.

With the outbreak of WW1 these organisations stopped much of their campaigning and concentrated on the war effort. **Emmeline** Pankhurst cause on trades unions to allow women to work in traditionally male sectors. She denounced those she saw as anti-War socialists and Labour activists such as suffragists Margaret Bondfield and Mary MacArthur.

Limited women's suffrage was eventually obtained with the 1918 Representation of the People Act when 7+ million women over 30 got the vote but 5 million were still without it (ironically, it was this younger age group who had helped with most of the war effort). There was considerable political concern that women might outnumber male voters so male returning soldiers were given the vote even if they still lived with their parents (which had previously disqualified them), and other categories of men were also included. (N.B. it was not until the Equal Franchise Act in 1928 that women over 21 were able to vote and women voters reached 15 million).

Sheila thanked Sarah for a most interesting talk. The number of questions from the floor and in individual conversation with Sarah afterwards was testament to the audience's response to the presentation.

MSW/1/6/18

