

Stoneleigh History Society 29th March 2022

'The Women's Suffrage Movement 1867 – 1928' by Peter Huxford.

In his talk Peter presented us with some fascinating information which illustrated the different viewpoints held at the time as to *how* and indeed, *if* women's suffrage should be pursued.

'In the second Reform Act of 1867 the franchise was extended to almost all urban males. In the same year the first debate on women's suffrage was held in Parliament led by John Stuart Mill.

Following that debate, several local Women's Suffrage Associations were set up e.g., in Manchester, London and Edinburgh. In 1872 the 'Central Committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage' first met. Their objective was to create a wider sense that *some* women should have the vote. Amongst their members were, the Garrett sisters, Florence Nightingale, Millicent and Philippa Fawcett.

In 1897 the 'National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' was established, and they became a pressure group. Midland branches were set up in the early 20th century in Warwick and Leamington, Berkswell and Kenilworth. They lobbied members of parliament, held public meetings, held rummage sales and put on evening entertainments. Their public meetings were addressed by the likes of Lady Frances Balfour, Mrs Bertrand Russell and Lord Willoughby de Broke. As New Zealand had adopted female suffrage in 1893 several prominent New Zealanders such as Maud Pember Reeves and Kate Sheppard also addressed meetings. (Kate Sheppard's image appears on 10-dollar bills in New Zealand today) In 1908 members of the Warwick and Leamington branch attended a demonstration in London and in 1913 Mary Dormer Harris led a group from Warwick and Leamington to a rally in Hyde Park.

There was a great deal of prejudicial literature published about women's unsuitability to vote. The established political parties were generally against the idea of women having the vote, but the newly established Labour Party was generally in favour.

Amongst women there developed a clear division about the tactics to be employed to change the status quo. In 1903 the 'Women's Social and Political Union' was established with the motto "Deeds not Words". With their purple, green and white badges and banners they began a campaign of civil disobedience, destruction of property and arson. The Pankhursts visited Coventry and Warwickshire on several occasions to address crowds in Pool Meadow and the Baths Assembly Hall. They also visited the factories of Cash's and Whitworths to address workers. In May 1913 in Leamington, petrol-soaked rags were put in letter boxes and set alight.

As the activities of the Suffragettes became more extreme others distanced themselves; Millicent Fawcett and Mary Dormer Harris in the Suffragists camp rejected the violence. Meanwhile many groups of men and women in society became more vehemently anti women's suffrage. Locally, both Lord and Lady Leigh were against votes for women. The

American born Lady Leigh was chair of the Stoneleigh branch of the Anti-Suffrage League which nationally had over 250,000 members.

The 1911 Census provided another opportunity for women to show their dissatisfaction. Some entries were non sensical and often husbands supported their wives in the descriptions they gave. Tara Morton in 'Mapping Women's Suffrage ,1911', University of Warwick, gives a host of fascinating detail of women involved in the suffrage movement.

As more and more women were imprisoned for their misdemeanours, the Suffragettes began hunger strikes to get political prisoner status. To counter this the Asquith government passed what became known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act' (1913).

As war loomed suffrage activities were curtailed. The suffragettes called a truce and members held in prison were released. The government began to sloganize in favour of women and their contribution to the Land Army, nursing and factory work, in particular munitions.

Before the war was over men aged 21 were given the vote as were women over 30 who had property. It wasn't until 1928 that all women were enfranchised.'

Peter finished his presentation by posing a question as to whose contribution was greatest in bringing about 'votes for women'. The answer is clearly one of personal perspective, was it politicians, women war workers or female activists!

At the end of the presentation Sheila thanked Peter for a very thought-provoking talk.

As a postscript, thanks also to Mel and Anthony for providing the refreshments.