

THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN IN YORK

A talk given by Michael Waters (email: mike@dingbat.me.uk) to the Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society, York, on 30 October 2018. He published an article 'The Campaign for Women's Suffrage in York and the 1911 Census Evasion' in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, volume 90, 2018, pp. 178-194 (DOI: 10.1080/00844276.2018.1465692).

Introduction

The Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the vote in Parliamentary elections, for the first time, to all men aged 21 and over without the need to meet a property qualification, and to women aged thirty and over if they or their husbands met the property qualification entitling them to vote in local government elections. This condition restricted the vote to 78 per cent of women aged thirty or over. Nevertheless, around 8.4 million women were now eligible to vote, comprising about 40 per cent of the electorate. Women voted in a general election for the first time on 14 December 1918. The first woman to vote in York was Sarah Booth of 134 Haxby Road who voted at 8am. Only in 1928 did Parliament give women the vote on the same terms as men.

I will say something about who the York suffragists and suffragettes were, what they said and did and whereabouts in York they said and did it. Originally all women suffrage campaigners were known as 'suffragists'. Their campaigning involved letters and articles in the press, petitions to Parliament, marches, discrete lobbying and making speeches before mixed audiences at public meetings (and it was previously rare for women to do that). More militant campaigners emerged in 1905 and the term 'suffragette' - intended to belittle and demean them - was coined in January 1906 by the *Daily Mail* newspaper. But militant campaigners adopted the name 'suffragette' as a badge of honour and in October 1912 made it the name of their weekly newspaper.

Nineteenth Century Suffragists

The earliest women in York that I know of who lent their names to the suffrage campaign were Emma Fitch, Agnes V Smith and Ann Swaine who were among 1499 signatories of a petition presented to the House of Commons in June 1866. At that time - and indeed until 1918 - men over 21 could vote in Parliamentary elections if they owned or occupied in their own right property of a particular minimum value. The petition stated that it was anomalous to make the ownership of property a qualification for voting in Parliamentary elections but to exclude women property owners, who '[formed] no less a constituent part of the nation', solely on grounds of their sex.

Ann Swaine, who lived at no. 1 The Crescent, off Blossom Street, was a noted campaigner for women's education. She also addressed public meetings on women's suffrage, for example in April 1880 at the Victoria Hall, Goodramgate (demolished in the 1950s) alongside several other women including Lydia Rous, a former headmistress of The Mount, York's Quaker girls' school. In April 1883 - only a couple of months before she died - Ann Swaine was on the platform at a suffrage meeting in the Festival Concert Rooms.

In March 1876, ten years after the petition that Ann Swaine signed, the York MP and railwayman George Leeman presented a petition to the House of Commons 'from the inhabitants of York' in favour of Women's Suffrage.

In March 1889 the first York-based women's suffrage organisation was formed - the York Women's Suffrage Society, which originally had strong links to the Liberal party. In 1901 it affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), which had been

formed four years earlier as what we would today call an umbrella group for local suffrage organisations.

The NUWSS, through its affiliated organisations, was the home of the peacefully campaigning suffragists. Its colours were white, green and red. Its president for many years was Millicent Garrett Fawcett whose statue in Parliament Square in London was unveiled earlier this year. Mrs Fawcett spoke in York in September 1908 at the Friends' Meeting House in Friargate.

The York Women's Suffrage Society held public meetings and also less formal gatherings at members' homes. A leading light in the Society was Almyra Gray. Her husband Edwin Gray, a solicitor, also supported the campaign. They lived near York Minster at Gray's Court which is now a hotel. In March 1903 Almyra Gray told the annual meeting of the York Women's Suffrage Society, held at the Soldier's Institute in Clifford Street, that the suffrage movement was 'working slowly and quietly, but persistently' (*York Evening Press*, 4 March 1903).

The York Women's Suffrage Society had an office at the corner of Parliament Street and Jubbergate and at 10 Museum Street (since renumbered: the white building by the traffic lights at the junction with St Leonard's Place).

A York Anti-suffragist: Edith Milner

The suffragists were not the only people campaigning on the subject of women's suffrage in York. A prominent anti-suffragist was Edith Milner, a lady of independent means according to the 1911 census, who lived at Heworth Moor House which was then no. 13 Heworth Green and is now no. 56. By coincidence, Edith Milner lived next door to a prominent suffragette Annie Seymour Pearson, who lived at no. 14 (now no. 58), of whom more later.

Edith Milner was heavily engaged in charitable work for young people and the poor and in local Conservative Party politics. She was also, according to a letter from her in the *Yorkshire Gazette* on 23 February 1899, 'antagonistic to women's suffrage, on social, moral, and political grounds'.

In a letter in the *Yorkshire Post* on 24 October 1908 she wrote that she had 'come to the conclusion that women could better work if they left party politics severely alone ... and occupied themselves with those duties which God created them to fill, to educate their sons and daughters, and fit them by example as well as precept to take their respective places in the world ... Women are pretty troublesome now. But if only rods now, they will be scorpions if they get the vote'.

Edith Milner was still writing anti-suffrage letters to the press in 1916; and when other women voted in the December 1918 election she promised not to vote, tore up her voting card, and wrote, 'I never break my word, and rarely if ever alter my opinion' (*Yorkshire Herald*, 17 December 1918).

The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and the Beginnings of Militancy

The relatively calm waters of the York suffragists - slow and quiet but persistent as Almyra Gray put it - were also to be disturbed from another quarter. Since 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst, aided above all by her daughter Christabel, had been leading a new organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (the WSPU), that was to revolutionise campaign methods. The WSPU adopted the colours purple, white and green which denoted dignity, purity and hope; the motto 'Deeds not Words'; and the slogan 'Votes for Women'.

In October 1905 Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney attended a Liberal Party rally in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester. When questions were invited from the audience they asked the speaker, Sir Edward Grey, if a Liberal Government would give votes to women. Sir Edward ignored them and when they persisted they were forcibly ejected and then, much to their

satisfaction, arrested and jailed, thereby ensuring publicity for the cause of women's suffrage at a time when campaigners felt that the press was ignoring them.

Their daring to ask a question in public of a male politician, and moreover to raise an issue affecting women, is recognised as the first 'militant' action of the suffrage campaign. For the next three years 'militancy' generally took the form of publicly questioning and heckling politicians, and campaigning against Government party candidates at elections, but even this modest form of militancy by women was shocking by the standards of the day. For suffragettes, by the way, the term 'militancy' did not necessarily denote violence but simply some form of positive activity – deeds, not words.

The repercussions were felt in York. In March 1907 a speaker at a meeting of the Yorkshire Council of Women's Liberal Associations complained that 'hysteria among the so-called suffragettes was impairing the fundamental English ideas as to the manner in which social changes should be brought about' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 14 March 1907).

But three weeks later the York Women's Suffrage Society itself published 'An Appeal to Reason', saying of the women involved in recent suffragette disturbances that they 'are doing all this, which they hate, in pursuance of reasonable convictions and a settled purpose for which they know not how else to gain, from the mass of men, so much as a fair hearing' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 3 April 1907)

And at the annual meeting of the York Women's Suffrage Society the next day Almyra Gray said that, 'while she would never have sufficient courage herself to go to prison she admired [the suffragettes] for their courage and devotion to principle, and above all for their willingness to incur ridicule, which was worst of all', a statement greeted by applause (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 5 April 1907).

Then suffragette militancy took more violent forms. There were incidents of WSPU members throwing stones through the windows of Government offices from June 1908, arrests of WSPU demonstrators multiplied and in October 1909 two members of another suffrage organisation, the Women's Freedom League, poured liquid into ballot boxes at a by-election at Bermondsey in London intending to damage the voting papers. 1909 also saw suffragettes going on hunger strike in protest at not being categorised as political prisoners, which in turn led to the Government-sponsored violence of forcible feeding.

The Women's Freedom League

Meanwhile, what about the WSPU in York? Simply, it was not yet established here. The second women's suffrage organisation to establish itself in York was the Women's Freedom League. This was set up in 1907 by former members of the WSPU who split from it because of concerns about the dictatorial rule of the Pankhursts. Its colours were green, white and gold. In June 1908 a York branch of the Women's Freedom League was formed at the Independent Labour Party's rooms in St Sampson's Square; afterwards a public meeting was held in Exhibition Square, the space in front of the art gallery that was a major venue for open-air meetings. The York branch of the Women's Freedom League was still in existence in 1913 but I know little more about it.

The WSPU Visits York

Finally, also in June 1908, the WSPU came to York - not to set up a branch but to test the waters. Two major demonstrations were planned for London in June 1908. The York Women's Suffrage Society planned to send ten women, with the Society's dark red silk banner (now lost), to the NUWSS' demonstration at the Albert Hall on 13 June. The WSPU planned a demonstration for 21 June that would culminate in Hyde Park and speakers came to York to

drum up support. Emmeline Pankhurst herself and other speakers addressed meetings in the De Grey Rooms and Exhibition Square. Another visiting speaker lobbied women workers at Rowntree's chocolate and cocoa works during their lunch hour. However, I don't know if anyone from York attended the WSPU demonstration.

The WSPU made a further attempt to establish itself in the city during the York Pageant held in July 1909. Charlotte Marsh, a WSPU organiser in Leeds and Bradford, Miss Newton, a teacher from Bradford, and Mrs Rosling from Southport spoke at meetings in St Sampson's Square and Exhibition Square. In her speech, Charlotte Marsh referred to the occasion the previous month when two suffragettes threw stones through Prime Minister Asquith's windows in Downing Street in anger at his refusal to meet a deputation from the WSPU. She said that a great fuss was made over a few windows smashed by suffragettes 'but no one had ever attempted to calculate the house burning and bloodshed which occurred when the men determined to have the vote' (*Yorkshire Herald*, 30 July 1909). But after the Pageant the WSPU turned its attention to Cleveland, organising several meetings in the second half of 1909 in Saltburn, Redcar and Middlesbrough.

The York Branch of the WSPU

Finally, in 1910, a branch of the WSPU was established in York. The initial driving force was Annie Coultate, head assistant mistress at Fishergate School in York who was then living at 66 Nunthorpe Road. She became the branch's secretary and was joined by Violet Key Jones of Hawthorne Lodge, Bishopthorpe, first as joint secretary, then as treasurer and finally, from December 1910, as the WSPU's official organiser in York. Violet Key Jones was to be the dominant WSPU figure in the city alongside Annie Coultate as branch secretary. Both made many speeches, in York and elsewhere, arguing the case for women's suffrage. They made a formidable team.

So just what did York's suffragettes - members of the new branch of the WSPU - actually do? First, they set up an office at which they could be contacted and where they could meet:

Initially this was at 35 Coney Street. Until summer 2017 this was a branch of Currys / PC World, albeit since 1910 Coney Street has been renumbered and the property is now numbered 36. There was a piano warehouse at that address in 1910 so I assume the WSPU had a room or rooms on one of the upper floors.

Then in April 1911 they moved to 8 New Street; not the site of the bar and restaurant that is number 8 now, half-way up the west side of New Street. In 1911 the property numbered 8 was at the south-east corner of New Street at the junction with Coney Street

Finally from January 1912 their office was at Colby Chambers, 11 Coppergate. The WSPU newspaper *Votes for Women* emphasised its 'front windows which will be advantageous for showing stock', so clearly this office was on the ground floor.

York's suffragettes organised visits from leading, national figures in the WSPU to address public meetings, including Mrs Pankhurst herself; her daughter Adela, who organised the WSPU's branch in Scarborough; both Emmeline and Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, who provided vital financial and administrative support to the WSPU until they were forced out in October 1912 because of their opposition to the WSPU's increasing attacks on property; and Flora Drummond, known as 'the General'.

Favoured places in York for holding public meetings were in the open air in Exhibition Square, the space in front of the Art Gallery (the fountain wasn't there then but the statue of the painter William Etty was, being unveiled in February 1911); in the de Grey Rooms opposite; in the Assembly Rooms, now a restaurant but presumably structurally unchanged inside; in the Exhibition Buildings, that is, the exhibition hall that originally stood at the back of the Art Gallery (it suffered bomb damage in World War II and was demolished in 1942); and in the

Festival Concert Rooms (also now demolished) which were situated behind the Assembly Rooms and fronted onto Museum Street, around where Bailey's Café and Tea Rooms are now.

York's suffragettes maintained a visible presence in the city by distributing hand bills and selling the WSPU's newspaper, initially called *Votes for Women* and later *The Suffragette*, both house-to-house and on the street, especially in Coney Street and the Market Place, that is, Parliament Street. Annie Coultate was an indefatigable newspaper seller.

They raised funds through whist drives, jumble sales and raffles.

And they made their own particular contributions to the cause by what they said in their speeches and by the actions they took.

Speeches by suffragettes did not only talk about the need for women to have the vote. This would certainly be a sign that women enjoyed equal citizenship with men; but it would also enable women to exercise pressure on male Parliamentarians to legislate on matters that were important to women. The women's suffrage campaign was part of a larger movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that sought to improve women's position in society and under the law.

So, when Adela Pankhurst spoke at Bishopthorpe in September 1910, as well as defending militant tactics such as smashing windows, she spoke of the need for reform in legislation affecting children, housing, education, infant mortality, sweating and women's wages.

People attending, or reading newspaper reports of, suffrage meetings in York would be well aware of suffragettes' uncompromising position on the use of militant tactics, including attacks on property. In November 1911 Violet Key Jones pointed out that for 40 years women had tried peaceful methods without success. She thought that tactics such as smashing windows showed women's 'earnest spirit in asking for the vote, and it was the only way in which they could hope to get [it]' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 28 November 1911).

Annie Coultate was clear that, in line with the WSPU's slogan, it was deeds, not words, that counted. In 1912 she urged her audience to do something. The women who held back the movement were those who believed in it but did nothing.

So what were York's suffragettes doing apart from making speeches and selling newspapers?

The first distinctive thing they did was to engage in amateur theatricals. On 28 February 1911 they performed three plays in the Assembly Rooms: one that they had written themselves; J. M. Barrie's play *The Six Pound Look* about women's financial independence; and the most celebrated suffrage play *How The Vote Was Won* by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St. John. The cast of this included the sisters Nona and Dorothy Baines of Bell Hall, Naburn and Violet Key Jones herself.

Lest the serious purpose behind the entertainment was overlooked, at each performance Adela Pankhurst 'made a speech in defence of the women's suffrage movement, declaring that the position of women was so intolerable as to render the reform necessary'. She also 'warmly praised the work of zealous women in York who were furthering the movement in a variety of ways' (*Yorkshire Gazette*, 4 March 1911).

The 1911 Census Evasion

Next, York suffragettes took part in the evasion of the 1911 census. The WSPU supported a boycott of the census, to be held on the night of 2–3 April, on the grounds that, if women did not count politically, they should not be counted at all. Nationally, perhaps around three to four thousand women evaded the census.

Laurence Housman, a book illustrator, writer, committed socialist and pacifist, and one of the founders of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage, and brother of the poet and classical

scholar A. E. Housman, delivered a series of speeches around the country to drum up support for the boycott. Speaking in York's Assembly Rooms, he urged the necessity of women resisting the census, arguing that to secure larger legislative improvement a minor law had often to be broken.

Suffragettes evaded the census by hiding away in a place where the census enumerator could not identify them. The previously known extent of the boycott in York was identified by Jill Liddington, who has written an excellent book on the 1911 census evasion entitled *Vanishing for the Vote*. She drew attention to what the census enumerator wrote on the form signed by Annie Coultate, who was then living at 33 Melbourne Street, between Fishergate and Cemetery Road, where only her son Henry was recorded as present: 'She was away from home during the night of the Census, but was most probably enumerated amongst a number of Suffragettes who passed the night in a room in Coney St, York, with the object of evading the Census'.

Just where did the York census evaders spend the night of 2-3 April 1911?

Chris Rainger (chair of the Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society) spotted the following, inserted under the name of Annie Coultate, in an article headed 'Suffragist Plans for Census Night', in *Votes for Women* of 31 March: 'A meeting will be held at the office, 8, New Street. It will take the form of an all-night social. Music, readings, and recitations will be part of the programme. Supper (1s.) and breakfast (6d.) will be provided. Tickets for admission free, on application at the office'.

In addition, Violet Key Jones wrote in a letter published in the *Yorkshire Gazette* on 1 April: 'Any woman who would like to be omitted from the census - until women are citizens - should communicate with me at 8, New-st., on Saturday, between 11 and 1, or 2.30 and 5.30, when all particulars will be supplied'.

So Annie Coultate was saying the census would be evaded at 8 New Street, but Violet Key Jones did not specifically address the point.

I have found a second contemporary source, that forms part of the official census documentation, namely a Summary Book which lists each property on a single line. At the foot of the first page that covers Coney Street the enumerator wrote, 'Suffragettes occupying Room Bland's Court Coney Street', showing the numbers as 3 males and 18 females, totalling 21 persons.

Bland's Court opened up at the end of a narrow passageway between what were then numbers 34 and 35 Coney Street, next to the WSPU's first York office which was at no. 35. You can see it on the 1891 Ordnance Survey map of York.

Bland's Court still exists today. The passageway is now closed off behind a locked door but it wasn't last year when I went in. In the west wall of Bland's Court (the east wall of what in 1911 was 35 Coney Street but is now no. 36), there are two blocked doorways, one of which presumably accessed the WSPU's office.

Neither the census Summary Book nor the individual schedule for 8, New Street (occupied on census night by Elizabeth Ann Render, a charwoman) mention it as the location of the census evasion.

I think it highly likely that the 21 census evaders were hiding in the WSPU's office at 35 Coney Street which was accessed via Bland's Court, which is why the census enumerator, on the spot and at the time, mentioned Bland's Court in the Summary Book. 8 New Street was too far away for the census enumerator to have been referring to it under the designation Bland's Court. And there is some evidence that the 35 Coney Street premises were not immediately given up when space was rented at 8 New Street; in *Votes for Women* of 7 April, just after the census, the WSPU office address is still shown as 35 Coney Street and it is first given as 8 New Street a week later.

As well as Annie Coultate, Violet Key Jones must have evaded since, although I can find her mother and two brothers on the 1911 census, living in Main Street, Bishopthorpe, I cannot find Violet herself.

The Suffield Sisters of Fulford

Also among the evaders, I believe, were four sisters by the name of Suffield, daughters of William Suffield, initially a coal merchant but a dairy farmer according to the 1911 census, and his wife Mary, formerly Scarr. In 1911 the family home was at East View House in Fulford. I will say something about the Suffield sisters before continuing with story of the suffragette campaign in York more generally.

The first Suffield sister to be mentioned as a suffragette is Ada, a year or more before the formation of the York branch of the WSPU. She was living in Scarborough and in July 1909 volunteered 'to open a stall for the sale of Votes for Women, literature, and colours in our covered-in market every Saturday', adding 'if any speakers are coming to Scarborough for a holiday, I will do all I can by holding meetings or organising' (*Votes for Women*, 16 July 1909). By January 1910 she was the secretary of the newly-formed Scarborough branch of the WSPU whose organiser was Adela Pankhurst. Ada was a regular speaker at WSPU events, addressing audiences in Scarborough (including miners who were attending a conference there), Whitby, York (several times), Selby, Malton, Doncaster, Sheffield, Leeds, Bridlington, and at Darlington and nearby Eaglescliffe and Middleton-One-Row. She spoke at the last two places on 11 July 1914, a couple of months England declared war on Germany and WSPU campaigning ceased.

Also active in Scarborough was Ada's sister Elizabeth Emma who married George Frederick Stubbs in 1900. We know that Elizabeth Emma was a suffragette from notices in *Votes for Women* of 21 April 1911 saying that members of the Scarborough branch of the WSPU would sympathise with Mr and Mrs Stubbs over the death of their daughter Dorothy who was 'an extraordinarily bright child' who, despite being only five, 'took a tremendous interest in the cause' and only three months earlier had sold programmes at the evening of amateur theatricals in York.

The York-based Suffield sisters - Alice, Clara and Agnes - were involved with the York branch of the WSPU from the start. The 'Misses Suffield' helped Annie Coultate and Violet Key Jones to organise meetings in September and October 1910.

Agnes was appointed open-air meeting secretary in October 1911 and from 1911 to July 1914 herself addressed public meetings in York, New Earswick, Scarborough, Darlington, Leeds and Bishop Auckland. In April 1913 she became joint honorary secretary with Annie Coultate.

Alice helped to organise a whist drive, a jumble sale and a cake sale and in December 1913 was refreshments secretary. In March 1914 she was arranging 'Sunday evening meetings on social purity' at the WSPU's office, no doubt inspired by Christabel Pankhurst's book *The Great Scourge, and How To End It* about how men were infecting women with syphilis and gonorrhoea.

Clara also helped with jumble sales and became literature secretary and *Votes for Women* secretary in August and October 1911.

All three sisters are also recorded as making small financial donations to the cause.

Back now to the 1911 census evasion.

I believe that Ada Suffield evaded the census in Scarborough, where she was the secretary of the local branch of the WSPU; and that her sisters Agnes, Alice and Clara, who were all active members of the WSPU in York, were among the evaders in Bland's Court. I cannot find any of those four recorded as present on census night in York, Scarborough or anywhere else. The

'Misses Suffield, of Fulford' had attended the meeting in York at which Laurence Housman urged the evasion of the census.

Sympathy for women's suffrage in the Suffield household in Fulford, even in the four activist sisters' absence, is indicated by the fact that on the census return the word 'unenfranchised' is written against the names of two of the people who were present, namely their mother Mary and their married sister Elizabeth Emma Stubbs, in the final column of the form, intended for the recording of infirmities. The women were deliberately equating not having a vote with being deaf, dumb, blind and mentally ill. Someone in officialdom has crossed the words out as being a misuse of the form.

York Suffragettes and the 'Antis'

Next, in June 1911 suffragettes from York, marching behind their banner (sadly now lost), were among tens of thousands of women from all the national suffrage societies who marched in London in support of the cause.

York's suffragettes must have enjoyed what they did at an anti-suffrage meeting in the Exhibition Buildings in March 1912. A newspaper reported that 'for about a week prior to the meeting large and expensive posters had advertised the meeting, depicting the anti-suffragist as the acme of womanhood and the suffragist as a low type of woman, long-striding and ugly' (*Yorkshire Gazette*, 16 March 1912).

Anti-suffrage propaganda regularly peddled the line that suffragettes were ugly harridans who had turned 'anti-man' because they could not get husbands.

At the meeting an anti-suffrage resolution was proposed from the chair; the prominent York anti-suffrage campaigner Edith Milner introduced the speaker, a Mrs Harold Norris; and after an apparently peaceful meeting the resolution was put to the vote – and lost. Suffragettes had infiltrated the meeting in sufficient numbers to ensure its defeat.

A newspaper report tells what happened next: 'The defeat of the "antis" was the occasion of much joy amongst the suffragists present, shouts of "Bravo" and "Hurrah" going up, whilst Miss Key Jones ... stood up on a seat and displayed a banner with the words "Votes for Women in 1912"'. She had perforce to take care of it, as an organiser of the Anti-Suffrage League seemed to have taken a fancy to it. Still Miss Key Jones retained possession' (*Yorkshire Gazette*, 16 March 1912). The meeting broke up in disorder.

Visiting Politicians

York's suffragettes harassed and heckled visiting politicians. In 1912, John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, many of whose MPs had just voted against giving votes to women in the hope of currying favour with Prime Minister Asquith on the subject of Irish Home Rule, was severely heckled when he spoke in the Exhibition Buildings.

Before the meeting began Violet Key Jones was recognised in the audience and, a newspaper reported, 'despite the fact that she had paid for a ticket, and was going quietly to her seat, an order was given to the stewards to eject her. As the lady would not go out she was taken by the arms, and ... forcibly ejected ... We understand that Miss Key Jones is considering the question of bringing an action for alleged assault, and also suing for the return of the money paid for admission unless in the meantime it is returned, and an apology is made to the lady' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 18 November 1912).

Speeches by two Labour MPs, Keir Hardie and Philip Snowden, in the Exhibition Buildings were repeatedly interrupted by questions from suffragettes, despite their known support of women's suffrage. They were attacked over the lack of progress on the matter in Parliament and challenged over the Labour Party's commitment to the issue. The suffragettes were either

persuaded to leave or forcibly ejected by stewards or by the police. Violet Key Jones presented a problem at Philip Snowden's meeting, however, since she had taken the precaution of tying herself to her chair. A newspaper reported that 'she was tenderly but firmly removed' (*Leeds Mercury*, 4 March 1913; the *Leeds Mercury* the next day carried a photograph of Violet Key Jones captioned 'Miss Violet Key-Jones, who was prominent in the disorders at the women's suffrage demonstration at York').

Imprisonment of a York Suffragette

By and large the suffragettes were making a nuisance of themselves without breaking the law, apart from the census evasion which was a peaceful affair.

That was to change.

Annie Seymour Pearson of 14 (now 58) Heworth Green, York first become involved with the suffragettes after seeing a message chalked on a pavement, 'General Drummond is coming', referring to Flora Drummond's speech in York's Exhibition Buildings on 1 April 1912. At first Annie is recorded in *Votes for Women* and *The Suffragette* as donating small amounts of one shilling to the cause; then she hosted an office tea and lent a sewing machine.

On 28 January 1913 Annie was one of seventeen women who took the train to London to take part in a demonstration. Annie was arrested while trying to get into the House of Commons, found guilty of obstructing the police and sentenced to a £2 fine or two weeks imprisonment. Like suffragettes generally she refused to pay the fine and was sent to Holloway. She was there only a couple of days before her husband turned up and paid the fine on her behalf. Annie Seymour Pearson is the only York suffragette who acquired a criminal record - although Violet Key Jones soon came very close.

Bombs in York

So now suffragettes in York were certainly involved in law breaking, but not necessarily in violence.

That changed with the letter bombs.

On 29 January 1913, the day after Annie Seymour Pearson's arrest in London, someone posted letter bombs, said to have been addressed to Prime Minister Asquith, in pillar boxes at Castle Mills Bridge and in Wigginton Road, Parliament Street and Balmoral Terrace (which is off Bishopthorpe Road). One went off in the sorting office, setting fire to a number of other letters and burning the hands of two postal workers. Suffragettes, when setting fires and planting bombs and generally damaging property, were usually careful not to injure people and this was clearly an unfortunate exception.

But someone was not averse to using explosives. In April 1913 a parcel containing a bomb with a timing device was left on the doorstep of the office of the *Yorkshire Evening Press* and the *Yorkshire Herald* newspapers at what was then no. 9 Coney Street. That is where, I believe, either Waterstones bookshop or the shop to the left of Waterstones as you look at it is now.

A policeman on his beat found the device at about five-o'clock in the morning of 20 April, carried it all the way to the police station in Clifford Street and dunked it in a bucket of water before it could go off. The parcel also contained cards and paper on which were written 'Votes for Women' and 'We will have votes'. The *Yorkshire Herald* of 22 April 1913 carried a photograph of the 'infernal machine'.

Annie Seymour Pearson denied to a local journalist that local suffragettes had anything to do with it; and the police said they had had three women, evidently strangers to the city, under observation the previous day. The WSPU's newspaper *The Suffragette* of 26 December 1913

included the incident in a list of 'the more serious attacks on property which have been attributed to Suffragettes during the year 1913'. Nationally, in April 1913 alone there were twenty-one such incidents involving fires and bombs.

Annie Seymour Pearson and the 'Mouse'

In June 1913 a young journalist named Harry Johnson and a young woman later identified as Lilian Lenton - the WSPU's chief arsonist - were arrested for trying to set fire to a house in Barlby, Doncaster. A piece of paper with Violet Key Jones' name on it was found at the house but it was not strong enough evidence for the police to charge her with involvement in the attempted arson attack.

Johnson was sentenced to a year's hard labour and sent to Wakefield jail. He went on hunger strike and as he grew weak was released under legislation which provided for prisoners suffering from the effects of hunger strikes to be temporarily set free and then, when they had regained their strength, called back to resume their sentence – like a cat playing with a mouse, hence the nickname the Cat and Mouse Act. Prisoners on temporary release were supervised by the police but were free to travel. Just before he was due back in prison Harry Johnson decided to visit Annie Seymour Pearson in York. Escorted by two police officers, he took the train to York and a taxi to 14 (now 58) Heworth Green.

While the police officers were obligingly paying the taxi, Johnson entered the house and disappeared. One story was that he went in the front door and straight out the back and was driven away in a waiting car belonging to, and driven by, a WSPU member

Another story was that he was smuggled out of a bedroom window into the house next door - presumably not into the house where Annie Pearson's neighbour the anti-suffragist Edith Milner lived.

Either way, Annie Pearson had helped him to get away, although she was not charged with any offence for having done so.

Campaigning in 1914

Campaigning continued in 1914. In February of that year suffragettes interrupted a service at Bishopthorpe Church, in which the Archbishop of York was taking part, to protest against forcible feeding which was still being applied to prisoners who the authorities feared would abscond if released under the Cat and Mouse Act.

A newspaper reported, 'Shortly after the reading of the second lesson by the Archbishop a number of ladies were heard chanting the words: "Oh God, help and save the women who are being tortured in prison for conscience sake. Amen". The ladies, who transpired to be York members of the WSPU, twelve in number, then rose and quietly left the church. As they proceeded towards the door they threw suffragette leaflets into the seats amongst the congregation' (*Yorkshire Evening Press*, 16 February 1914). The suffragettes repeated the protest in York Minster the following month.

On 1 May 1914, just before a performance at York Theatre Royal, 'a woman in the centre of the front row of dress circle stood up and ... told [the] audience that she was taking the opportunity of advertising *The Suffragette* [newspaper], saying that no one was justified in criticising the actions of the militant women who had not first bought and read [it]. [She then] quietly left the theatre' (*The Suffragette*, 8 May 1914). Demonstrators in the upper circle and the dress circle threw down suffrage leaflets and then stayed to watch the show.

On 7 May 1914 attacks were made on the contents of several pillar boxes in York by pouring in phosphorous. *The Suffragette* of 15 May 1914 reported that 'pillar-boxes in the Mount and Heworth districts and in Bishopthorpe Road, were fired. When the postmen unlocked the boxes

the phosphorus burst into flames, and it was only with difficulty they managed to save a portion of the letters. Some sand was promptly obtained, and in this way the fires were put out’.

A few months later, World War I broke out. The women’s suffrage organisations ended their public campaigns and the Government released all suffragette prisoners. Mrs Pankhurst now put all her energy into supporting the war effort. The NUWSS under Millicent Garrett Fawcett remained an active force and lobbied Lloyd George who in 1916 succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister and who was more sympathetic to the cause of women’s suffrage. It was Lloyd George who introduced the legislation which in 1918 gave women over 30 (some of them, anyway) the vote in Parliamentary elections.

The Last Word

I will give the last word to Annie Seymour Pearson. The *Yorkshire Evening Press* of 13 July 1949 contained an interview with her. Annie was then 76 and the article described her as ‘a little, grey-haired, fragile, old lady’. But the next day she was going down to London to mark the anniversary of Mrs Pankhurst’s birthday by taking part in the annual march to her statue in Victoria Tower Gardens next to the Houses of Parliament.

The journalist asked her if all the fights, hunger strikes and rough handling by the police were worth it. Mrs Seymour-Pearson was very definite in her answer. She said, ‘I would do it all again tomorrow, if necessary. You see, I was not fighting for myself, I was fighting for the future, and for my children’.

The journalist then enquired, ‘Have women used their right to vote wisely?’. She replied, ‘Well, do the men?’.