

# SUFFRAGETTE OR SUFFRAGIST?

Iain Wakeford 2016

Nowadays we hear a lot about the Suffragette movement, with television programmes, films and plays following the exploits of Emmeline Pankhurst – or more usually her fictional followers - but in this area some of the facts may be stranger than fiction.

As far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Levellers were digging into St Georges Hill above Byfleet, women were calling for equal rights for women to vote. They didn't get it, of course, and it wasn't really until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century before any concerted effort to get the vote came about.

In 1834 the Poor Law Act gave 'qualified' men and women the right to vote for Poor Law Guardians, but the following year the Municipal Corporations Act made it clear that to qualify you really had to be a man! It was not until the Municipal Franchise Act of 1869 that it was made clear that 'words importing the masculine gender ... shall be held to include females' when it came to local elections. The problem was that the Act required you to own 'property' to a certain value and as married women had no legal identity separate from their husbands, this effectively only allowed spinsters and widows (with the right property qualifications) the right to vote for Poor Law Guardians, School Boards and the like. It took the Local Government Act of 1894 to allow all

women (still with certain property qualifications) irrespective of marital status, the right to vote and indeed stand for election for parish and district councils etc.

The abolition of School Boards in 1901, slightly diminished the opportunity for women to vote once more, but as we all know it wasn't until after the First World War that women finally gained the right to vote in Parliamentary elections, and even then they had to be over the age of thirty (universal suffrage for those over the age of twenty-one not being introduced in this country until 1928).

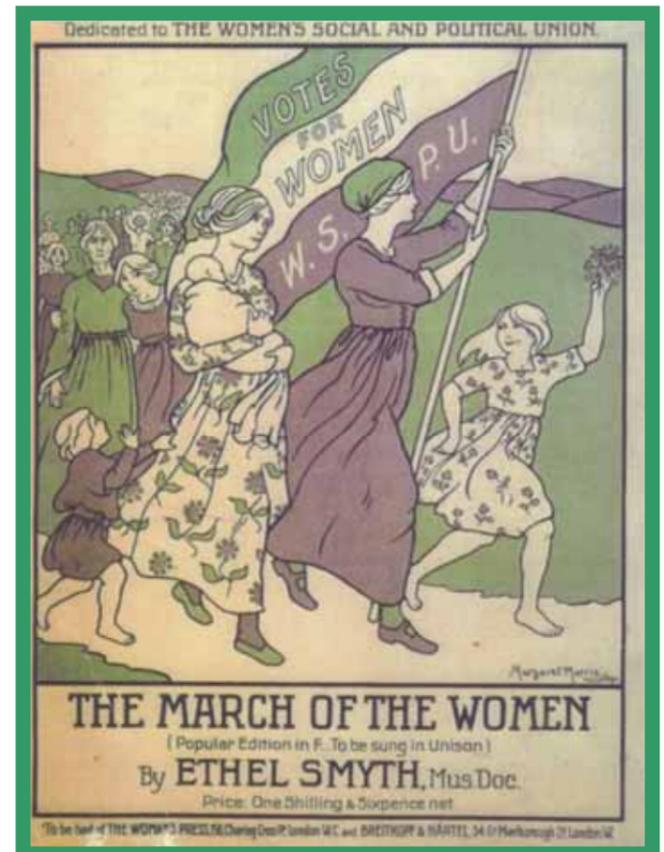
In 1908 the female composer and suffragette, Ethel Smyth, moved to Woking, building a small cottage on Hook Heath Road called 'Coigne'. Here she evidently composed her 'The March of the Women' – a sort of 'theme tune' for the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) that to this day is probably Ethel's most well-known work (although she composed numerous operas, choral works and other musical compositions).

Ethel Smyth was apparently a great friend of her near-neighbours the Balfour's, who lived just down the road at Fishers Hill.

Gerald William Balfour, and his older brother Arthur James, were the nephews of Robert Cecil, Lord Salisbury, who was extremely

influential in their political careers. Both were Members of Parliament and (according to their political opponents) when it came to important positions 'Bobs your Uncle' they got them!

Gerald was the MP for Leeds Central from 1885 to 1906 (President of the Local Government Board 1885-1886 and again in 1905; Chief Secretary for Ireland 1895-1900; President of



Ethel Smyth (later created a Dame) lived in Woking until she died in 1944. She had a succession of Old English Sheepdogs, all called Pen.



the Board of Trade 1900-1905; and admitted to the Privy Council in 1905), whilst Arthur, who entered Parliament in 1874, went on to become Prime Minister between July 1902 and December 1905!

Gerald Balfour was married to Lady Elizabeth (Betty) Bulwer-Lytton, whose sister Constance was another prominent suffragette. She often went on her terrorist campaigns under the name of 'Jane Warton', so that the authorities would not treat her any differently than other 'normal' women when she was imprisoned!

One of Betty's other sisters was the more respectable Emily, who married the architect Edwin Lutyens. It was Lutyens who designed Fishers Hill for his sister-in-law and her husband.

Whether the Balfour's and Ethel Smyth were also friends with Miss H Laird-Cox, I do not know. She lived just up Hook Heath Road, in the opposite direction, at Hook Hill Cottage. Miss Cox was the first secretary of the Woking Branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (a Suffragist) when it was formed in 1910, so what she thought of the radical Suffragette Ethel Smyth would be interesting to know.

Mrs Horace Barrett of Maybury Croft in Heathside, was the secretary of the Woking Branch of the WSPU (formed in 1911). In 1912

one of their members, Mrs Skepwith, who was also a member of a group called the Tax Resistance League, had her goods sold at auction in Woking when she refused to pay her taxes.

He protest was mild, however, compared to some of the other tactics taken by Ethel Smyth and her friends. It is said that whilst other golf courses in Surrey were being dug up by the Suffragettes as part of their protest, Woking (where Ethel Smyth was a member) was quite safe. Indeed it is claimed that Ethel used the trees on the edge of the course as targets when she taught Emmeline Pankhurst to throw stones. Emmeline was apparently a very bad shot, with her first attempt narrowly missing Ethel's dog, Pen (one of a succession of Old English Sheepdogs that were always given that name). They didn't put that in the film!

Although the golf course was saved from attack, I am not so certain about some of the shop windows in Woking. Ethel Smyth certainly didn't break any locally, but others up in London were not so lucky with both Ethel and Emmeline being arrested and imprisoned. On one occasion, after being temporarily released to recover from her hunger strike, Emmeline Pankhurst recuperated at Ethel's home, before being arrested again once she had recovered sufficiently to complete her sentence (pictured above right).



Whilst in Holloway Prison, Ethel Smyth was once visited by her friend Thomas Beecham who found other suffragettes marching in the quadrangle singing 'The March of the Women', encouraged by Ethel who was leaning out of a window conducting them with a toothbrush!

In the end the First World War brought an abrupt end to the women's campaign, but that is a story for another day.

Built by Edwin Lutyens for his wife's sister and her husband, Fishers Hill is now divided into a couple of properties.



# WAS THIS THE FOUNDATION STONE FOR WOKING'S UNDERGROUND LOOS?

**A**nother mystery photograph for you to identify!



A few years ago an old school friend rang me to say that in his parents back garden in Horsell was a lump of stone that I might be interested in. His father, who once worked for the council, had apparently acquired it sometime in the past to be broken up and used in a rockery, but fortunately that had never happened and the stone survived intact.

As you can see it bears the date 1911 and the names of the members of the local Sanitary Committee – but where it originally came from I have so far been unable to prove. My guess is that it was from one of the two underground toilets built at either end of Commercial Road (by Victoria Arch and at the junction with Chertsey Road), but unless someone can actually remember seeing the stone there (or better still have a photograph), I fear we may never know.

## WOKING'S NEW COURTHOUSE IN 1912



**I**n 1912 cases against local suffragettes could be heard in Woking's new courthouse, built directly behind the police station that at that stage was on the corner of Guildford Road and Heathside Road.

The Woking Petty Sessional Division had been

formed just a couple of years earlier, and before then Woking was part of the Guildford Division, although for some time court cases had been heard on alternate Saturdays at both Guildford and Woking - the Assembly Rooms and the old Onslow Hall in Guildford Road (where Tesco's is now) being used until 1904

when a temporary courthouse was built in the town.

This photograph shows later alterations to the building, long before it was demolished and replaced by the houses of St Andrews Gate.