

◆ ‘The lady fired splendidly’

LEWES AND THE WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE CAMPAIGN

By Frances Stenlake

In its reaction to the women’s suffrage campaign conducted throughout the country during the years preceding the First World War, Lewes hardly lived up to its reputation for radicalism. Although certain eminent Lewesians, exhorted by members of the non-militant Brighton and Hove Women’s Franchise Society, eventually formed a Lewes branch of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, this was of limited effect in promoting the cause. The problem for constitutional campaigners was that, in Lewes, confusion between non-militant Suffragists and law-breaking ‘Suffragettes’ prevailed. The proximity of Brighton and the well-publicised activity of militant activists there, members of the Women’s Social and Political Union, caused the authorities in Lewes to be in constant fear of infiltration and destruction of property, especially while the organiser of the Brighton and Hove branch of the WSPU lodged in Southover High Street. The detention in Lewes Prison of women’s suffrage campaigners convicted of criminal action contributed to the popular conception of all female campaigners for women’s suffrage as bogeywomen, fit only to be impersonated by cross-dressed men in torch-lit processions, and burnt as effigies at Bonfire. The local press provides the only documentation of women’s suffrage campaigning in Lewes, but there was no particularly sympathetic newspaper printed in the town. The success of the Cuckfield and Central Sussex Women’s Suffrage Society, by contrast, owed much to the assured support of the Mid Sussex Times, printed in Haywards Heath, which repeatedly emphasised that, as a branch of the NUWSS, the CCSWSS was constitutional and law-abiding.

During the years before the First World War, several towns in East Sussex – Brighton, Cuckfield, East Grinstead, Eastbourne and Hastings – became centres of women’s suffrage campaigning, be it audaciously militant or emphatically constitutional. In Lewes, however, the response to the notion of equal franchise was surprisingly reactionary, and suffrage activists were likely to be perceived as potentially violent law-breakers.

The publicity attracted by the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed in 1903, created the popular image of ‘Suffragettes’ incited to militant action by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel.¹ The constitutional, law-abiding action advocated by Millicent Garrett Fawcett and the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was less newsworthy.

Millicent Fawcett was the widow of Henry Fawcett, radical Liberal MP for Brighton in the 1870s who, with John Stuart Mill, presented a suffrage petition to Parliament in 1866. The Municipal Franchise Act of the following year entitled women ratepayers to vote in local elections and serve as Poor Law Guardians, and Millicent

Fawcett had been holding meetings in Brighton to demand Parliamentary suffrage ever since. In 1897 she formed the NUWSS, consolidating societies already in existence in Manchester, Bristol, London, Edinburgh and Birmingham.

Both the WSPU and the NUWSS organised mass demonstrations. In February 1906 the WSPU staged its first event of this kind to coincide with the opening of Parliament following the Liberal General Election victory. However, although the majority of MPs in the new Parliament had pledged support for women’s suffrage, this had not been a major election issue and other matters took priority. In February 1907, therefore, the NUWSS held the largest suffrage rally yet seen in London, representing organisations from all over the country.

In April 1908 Herbert Asquith, notoriously opposed to giving women the vote, succeeded Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister. Suffragists demonstrated on 13 June 1908 by marching in their thousands through the streets of the West End to a rally at the Albert Hall. Participants included representatives of the Brighton and Hove Women’s Franchise Society,

first formed by Henry and Millicent Fawcett in 1872, and revived in 1906 as a local branch of the NUWSS, with Flora Merrifield as Secretary. Her parents had, with the Fawcetts, formed the original Brighton branch in 1872. Her sister-in-law, Marian Verrall of West Hoathly, was to become President of the Cuckfield and Central Sussex Women's Suffrage Society.

These constitutional Brighton and Hove suffragists tried repeatedly to encourage neighbouring Lewes to form its own women's suffrage society. It is significant that their first attempt, in May 1908, was made courtesy of market gardener and dairyman, Mr Everson of Malling Cottage, Malling Fields. The Eversons were members of the Congregational Church, known for its support of the non-militant women's suffrage campaign, and they hosted social gatherings of the Lewes Women's Adult School:

Last Saturday afternoon a small but successful open-air meeting of a private character was conducted in Malling by Miss McGlade, of the Brighton and Hove Women's Franchise Society (non-militant). She addressed a number of ladies and her very interesting remarks were followed with close attention. The wish was expressed that she would before long favour Lewes with another visit.²

A more formal meeting, 'convened by a local resident', was held in December 1908, at the British Working Men's Institute:

Should women have votes? This question, which is agitating the minds of so many people at the present time, was answered in the affirmative on Monday last by a meeting of Lewes ladies. However, they did not emphasize their rights by creating a public disturbance, but arrived at a decision after patiently listening to the arguments of three able champions of the women's suffrage cause.

The 'three able champions' were Flora Merrifield, accompanied by Mrs Francis, known as an eloquent speaker, and Mrs Robie Uniacke, a member of the NUWSS Executive Committee. 'Miss Merrifield intimated that the Brighton and Hove Society included two or three Lewes members.' She advocated the formation of a Lewes branch, affiliated to the NUWSS. Mrs Uniacke read the recent NUWSS manifesto. This, while claiming women's right to vote, deplored the methods of the

militant suffragettes as detrimental to the cause. One of the questions asked, following the lengthy speeches, was whether, as a whole, women were interested in politics. The reply was that it would be difficult to say whether men, as a whole, were interested in politics. 'They think more about football.'³

Indeed, the likelihood of Lewes women being interested in politics remained questionable. Nearly six months later:

Apparently the much discussed question of woman suffrage does not particularly appeal to the womanhood of Lewes. At all events the invitation to a public meeting at the Working Men's Institute on Wednesday afternoon did not meet with a very good response.

Flora Merrifield had returned with colleagues from the Brighton and Hove Women's Franchise Society, Miss Basden and Miss Woodhead, to make a second attempt to form either a Lewes branch of the NUWSS, for which at least 25 members would be required, or a local committee which could work with the Brighton and Hove branch. The speakers were thanked by Mr W.T. Martin, the Cliffe High Street chemist and dentist, one of the three gentlemen present, another being Flora Merrifield's brother, Frederick. Six new members were enrolled, but 'no definite action was taken as to the formation of a local branch or committee'.⁴

A branch of the militant WSPU had been formed in Brighton and Hove in 1907, and members were engaging in well-publicised action by 1908. 1909 saw the escalation of militancy nationally, with the start of stone-throwing, resultant imprisonment, and hunger strikes. Suffragette law-breaking received attention in the Lewes press during March and April of 1909, particularly in a series of letters to the editor of the *East Sussex News* provoked by his printing of an address delivered to the Lewes and District Teachers Association by its President, Miss Kate Fowler Tutt (Fig.1).

A prominent figure in the town, she was headmistress at Malling School, and then, from 1913, at the Central Senior Girls School, Southover. In 1914 she would earn lasting personal notoriety by objecting vehemently to the display of Rodin's *The Kiss* in the Town Hall.

On this occasion, the object of Kate Fowler Tutt's attack was Suffragette militancy. She advocated useful work rather than violence. To the great mass of women, the time for franchise was



Fig. 1. Kate Fowler Tutt 1913. Edward Reeves, Lewes.

not yet. Before woman had the vote, she needed to be educated to be able to use it responsibly. Suffragettes were likely to be leisured women who had no understanding of the lives of working people. Eventually, a House of Women should be elected by women, to discuss and formulate reforms in all questions relating to women and children. It should be non-Party. Each sex should keep to the work it best could do. Men voted in by women would not be any better than those voted in by men:

The noble women who have left an indelible mark on the spiritual and moral growth of the human race were none of them shouters and shriekers.⁵

The following week, a letter from Miss Isabella McKeown, secretary of the Brighton and Hove WSPU, rejected Kate Fowler Tutt's argument.⁶ Equally predictable was the contribution from Greek-born Giovanna Were, wife of a solicitor resident in King Henry's Road. She described herself as a 'working member of Anti-Suffrage League' and was an indefatigable writer of letters to the local press, passionate to the point of incoherence. Thanking Kate Fowler Tutt, she expounded her strongly held and frequently reiterated belief that

women's suffrage was the work of the Devil and that anyone supporting it, for example the Bishop of London, was likely to be a Socialist.⁷

This prompted a letter from Marie Corbett of Danehill, whose husband, Charles Corbett, had won the East Grinstead seat for the Liberals in 1906. The Corbetts were founder members of the Liberal Women's Suffrage Society and would form, in East Grinstead, branches of the Women's Suffrage Society and the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. Marie Corbett acknowledged that one statement made by Giovanna Were was accurate: that information about women's suffrage was sadly needed in Lewes. In her ignorance of the history of the movement, Mrs Were was confusing the militant actions of a Union in existence for only five years with the serious campaign that had been going on for over forty years.

In what was to become a series of exchanges with Giovanna Were, Charles Whiteside of Lewes also wrote in support of the women's suffrage cause, ridiculing Mrs Were's letter as being eloquent of the defects of the Antis' position. 'As a display of intellectual antiquities, it would be difficult to surpass'.⁸

Meanwhile, during the summer of 1909, WSPU members made two open-air attempts to present their case in Lewes. The fearsome Miss Helen Ogston was based in Brighton in 1909, and campaigning throughout southern England. The previous December, after interrupting Lloyd George's speech to the Women's Liberal Federation at the Albert Hall, she had used a dog whip against stewards who attempted to eject her from the meeting, an incident depicted on the front page of the *Illustrated London News*.⁹ This notoriety ensured her and her colleague, Miss Hare, an audience at a gathering in Lewes:

'Votes for women, meeting by the lamp tonight.' Such was the announcement which caught the eye of people in the High Street on Tuesday evening. The words had been chalked on the pavement outside County Hall, and the report was soon circulated through the town that militant suffragists were in our midst. This was their first visit since the cause of women suffrage has been brought so prominently before the public, and much interest centred in the visitors. There were only two speakers, but the fact that one was reputed to be the lady of 'dog

whip' fame proved quite sufficient to attract a considerable assembly to the lamp at the top of Schoolhill. There the suffragists, with all the force at their command, told the people why women should have votes, and it eventually transpired that one of the visitors was no other than the lady who used the dog whip at the memorable London meeting. She now claimed that her action was quite justified in view of the violence used by the officials. Miss Ogston spoke for over an hour, standing on a chair, and with comparatively few interruptions, the speeches continued until after eight o'clock, when the suffragists bade their hearers adieu. Escorted by two policemen, they wended their way to the railway station followed by a crowd of young folk, who booed and hooted them, reciting snatches of Bonfire prayers. This demonstration, however, in no way perturbed the upholders of 'Votes for Women'. They smiled complacently, and arriving at the station entrance, they thanked the gallant constables for their escort. There was a final derisive shout from the crowd in the road above as their train steamed out of the station for Brighton.

An added comment was that Miss Ogston bore no resemblance to the typical caricature of a Suffragette, possessing youth and an uncommon share of good looks. Mr Ponting, of Pelham Place, insurance agent and outspoken Liberal, queried whether the fair speaker could cook a meat pudding properly, but was still in doubt at the end of meeting.¹⁰

Without the presence of such a well-known name, a gathering a month later was much less newsworthy:

'Votes for women' was the cry of Sunday agitators at an open meeting held on Castle Banks on Sunday afternoon. The four suffragettes had two male supporters with them, but they could not get their fairly large audience to take them at all seriously. One lady speaker addressed the crowd for upwards of one hour, her volubility being much stronger than her logic. Banter and flat contradiction of many of the statements made by the speakers made the meeting lively at times, but nobody seemed much impressed. Perhaps the afternoon was too



Fig. 2. The widowed Mrs Stewart-Jones and her family at Southover Grange in 1916. Capt Stewart-Jones had been killed in May 1915. Courtesy of Barney Jones.

hot for political questions. The audience, attracted hither by numerous notices chalked on pavements of town, began to dwindle, tea being more important. The visitors eventually adjourned to the White Hart. They must have been convinced that this effort to transform peaceful Lewes into a miniature Hyde Park had been anything but a success.¹¹

By the following summer, 1910, women's suffrage sympathisers in Lewes were at last beginning to organise themselves. A garden party held at the Croft, St Anne's, by the wife of Alderman Every, owner of the Phoenix Ironworks, chaired by Flora Merrifield, was addressed by Mrs Francis and another well-known Brighton speaker, Miss Barbara Duncan. Lewes was, for the third time, urged to form its own branch of the NUWSS and so come into line with other parts of Sussex. The Revd Duncan Pearce, Rector of St Anne's, said that great things had from the earliest ages happened in a garden and he hoped that great things would result from this meeting and that Lewes would form a society as suggested.¹²

The Lewes Women's Suffrage Society was subsequently formed with, as President, Mrs Joan Stewart-Jones of Southover Grange, whose husband was an Inner Temple barrister (Fig. 2).

Secretary was Mrs Maud Vallance; her husband, the well-known local GP, and the Revd Harcourt Anson, of Southover Rectory, became Committee

members. The secretary's role included responding to further letters to the local press from Giovanna Were, now calling herself 'Voice in the Wilderness', and inveighing against the 'howling Suffragettes'. Maud Vallance, easily identifying the Voice, as all regular readers must have done, suggested that Mrs Were was suffering from the hysteria of which she was accusing the Suffragettes.¹³

Mayor Holman agreed to take the Chair at the first public meeting of the Lewes Women's Suffrage Society, in the Corn Exchange, but only because he had been assured that this suffrage society was non-political and non-militant. He agreed that the Parliamentary franchise should be extended to women who could already vote for Town Councils and Boards of Guardians, i.e. women householders, single or married, but not to wives or occupiers. Beyond this Mayor Holman was not prepared to go. He thought the franchise had been extended quite far enough, even as regards men. He did not think many lodger voters really had a claim to a vote in the affairs of this country. And if there were not so many lazy, incompetent men addicted to selfish luxuries, there would not be so many ladies agitating for the vote.

Mayor Holman congratulated Mrs Vallance for having secured the support on the platform of Laurence Housman, a founder member of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage. The Mayor reminded his audience that this writer's play, *Pains and Penalties*, censured by the Lord Chamberlain, was about the ill-treatment of Queen Caroline by George IV, a frequent visitor to Lewes and, in particular, to Southover Grange, now home of the Society's president, Mrs Stewart-Jones.

Supported by Flora Merrifield and Marian Verrall, principal speaker Miss Bladen stated the case for the meeting to call on the Government to proceed with the passage of the women's suffrage measure drawn up by an all-party Committee of 54 MPs six months earlier, in February 1910. This so-called Conciliation Bill was a compromise: it would enfranchise single women occupiers as well as householders, i.e. ratepayers. Although it would not grant equality with men, it received general suffragist support. It passed its second reading on 12 July 1910, but the Government prevented its progress into law by dissolving Parliament.

One prominent local figure present at the Corn Exchange meeting was the Congregational minister, the Revd Burgess Wilkinson, whose wife

was a leading member of the Lewes Women's Liberal Association. He expressed concern on behalf of a section of the audience that the Conciliation Bill did not go far enough and was not fully democratic. However, the resolution proposed by Miss Bladen was carried with only three people dissenting, and all present were invited to sign a petition in support of the Bill.¹⁴

The local press was still using the terms 'Suffragette' and 'Suffragist' indiscriminately, and 'Suffragette Meeting at the Corn Exchange' was how the *Sussex Express* reported an event actually organised by the Lewes Society for Women's Suffrage in January 1911. On this occasion the confusion was understandable, given the reputation for militancy of the guest speaker, Mrs Evelina Haverfield. As a member of the WSPU as well as of the NUWSS, she had been imprisoned for militancy three times, despite being defended by Lord Robert Cecil, of Chelwood Gate, who was active in the Men's League for Women's Suffrage.

This Suffragist meeting was presided over by the new Mayor, Dr Hugh Stott, who, in his opening remarks, emphasised the importance of the matter of votes for women, and said that suffrage societies deserved every encouragement in their work. He was convinced that women should have the vote, and saw no reason at all why they should not. Why women should not be trusted as much as men was beyond him.

Evelina Haverfield's theme was the misery and poverty that existed among women and children, unnoticed by a large number of women of the upper class who went about with their eyes tightly closed. Parliamentary representation would make poor women's lives much better, for example in places like Dundee, where women worked under the most wretched conditions imaginable.

As far as the Mayor, Mr Stott, was concerned, Evelina Haverfield was preaching to the converted. As soon as she had finished speaking, he said that he was sure that all present were satisfied with the points she had made, and he proposed a resolution urging the Government to proceed with the Conciliation Bill without delay. Childhood misery and poverty had always been a horror to him, and he considered that laws concerning women and children should be made by women. If women were going to improve the wretched conditions that existed, they should have the vote. In their demonstrations, however, determination would be

more effective than violence. His resolution was carried with only two dissentients.

This unprecedented demonstration of mayoral support and enthusiasm appeared on the same page as an account of the Mayor's annual fancy dress ball and the list of guests and costumes worn. At the top of the alphabetical list was Miss Greta Allen of 15 High Street, Southover. Trained as a hospital nurse, she gave lectures on public health to county councils, and was the author of *Practical Hints to Health Visitors*, published in 1908. She had just taken over as Brighton and Hove WSPU branch organiser. Her predecessor, Mary Clarke, younger sister of Emmeline Pankhurst, had died on Christmas Day, 1910, probably as a result of force-feeding. Greta Allen had been imprisoned for militancy, too, and her costume, 'Suffragette: Second Division', was a reminder of the distinction between Suffragettes and Suffragists. 'Second Division' was how imprisoned Suffragettes were categorised. Unlike male political prisoners, who were categorised as 'First Division' and accommodated in relative comfort, Suffragettes were treated as 'common criminals', and confined to tiny cells. Greta Allen's convict attire on this festive occasion, the most glittering social event of the year, must have provided the starkest possible contrast to all the Spanish Princesses, Eastern Ladies, Cavaliers, Pierrots, and others in picturesque and exotic attire.¹⁵

At the beginning of May 1911 Mrs Stewart-Jones, the Revd Harcourt Anson, and Dr and Mrs Vallance had gone to Brighton to join a deputation from the Worthing Women's Suffrage Society to see William Campion, who had become the constituency MP on the death of Sir Henry Aubrey-Fletcher in June 1910. He was not in favour of women's suffrage but declared himself to be open to conviction.¹⁶

That he remained unconvinced was made clear in March 1912 at a meeting at the Corn Exchange of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, arranged by Mrs Lucas, of Castle Precincts, the local secretary of the League. Mrs Campion and Lady Shiffner, of Chailey, sent apologies. The speaker, Mrs Harold Norris, declared how fortunate this constituency was that its member was an ardent anti-suffragist. Her argument was that the intellectual capacity of the electorate was low enough already and they did not want to add to it. 'An influx of Brighton Suffragists delivered a



Fig. 3. Georgina Brackenbury. Postcard in collection of Alice Hawkins. Courtesy of alicesuffragette.co.uk.

fusillade of questions but Mrs Norris was equal to the occasion and her spirited replies evoked much applause.' She was thanked by Mr Frederick Flint of Offham Road, and the Presbyterian Revd Granville Ramage of Grange Road. Nearly 40 new members were enrolled.¹⁷

While Giovanna Were was to hail Mrs Norris's speech as deliverance from the Anti-Christ, Greta Allen responded more calmly, pointing out that the number of 'Suffragists from Brighton' amounted to fewer than a dozen, that no resolution was put to the meeting until they asked for one, and that the voting was 72 for the anti-suffragists against 51. She reminded readers that Lewes had an active branch of the NUWSS, besides members of the various church leagues for women's suffrage and the WSPU, of which she was the local organiser.¹⁸

In fact, Greta Allen was, at this time, organising the first indoor WSPU meeting in Lewes. The *East*

Sussex News printed a notice of this, as well as a letter from Maud Vallance asking the editor to publish the enclosed statement from Millicent Fawcett to show how strongly the Lewes Women's Suffrage Society disapproved of the recent proceedings of the militant section and to explain the NUWSS position.¹⁹

The meeting, in the Assembly Room and chaired by former Mayor Hugh Stott, was well-attended:

The tricolours of the WSPU, purple, white and green, were prominently displayed, and the stewardesses were attired in white and wore sashes bearing the words, 'Votes for Women'. This was the first big militant meeting to be held at Lewes, and considerable interest was evinced in the proceedings. Several questions were asked, but the meeting was free from heckling and disturbance.

The speaker, Georgina Brackenbury (Fig. 3) supported by Lieutenant Cather RN, was the daughter of the famous General Brackenbury.

Her speech, transcribed in full, included references to her experience of Holloway. Both she and her 80-year-old mother had participated in window smashing. In response, Alderman Every advocated constitutional methods, but Greta Allen remarked that those regarded as criminals in one age were often regarded as leaders and reformers by their successors. A women's suffrage motion was 'carried by a considerable majority'.²⁰

A majority in favour of women's suffrage could never be counted on, however. In December 1912, when the Co-operative Society held a debate on the subject in its Hall in West Street, the vote was 11 for and 18 against.²¹

In April 1912, under the headline 'Window Smashers at Lewes', it had been reported that Suffragettes sentenced in London the previous week for breaking windows had been allocated to Lewes, Birmingham and Aylesbury prisons.²² Reminded in this way of disturbance in the capital, and mindful of the proximity of Brighton, where the local branch of the WSPU was one of the most active in the country, and an unsympathetic press reported militant activity almost every day, authorities in the Lewes area continued to manifest nervousness, and in Barcombe more than a year later a mock bomb scare afforded some fun at their expense.²³

A more serious alarm occurred two weeks later:

Great excitement prevailed in Lewes on

Tuesday when it became known that two High Street shop windows had been broken during the night. An outrage by Suffragettes was supposed, and various stories soon circulated. It was also known that the police had arrested a woman in connection with the affair. Several people assembled at the County Hall soon after 10 o'clock to gain admission to the Court, and when the doors were opened the public seats were soon crowded. From the evidence given, there did not seem to be the slightest foundation that the woman was a Suffragette.

The shops in question were Freeman, Hardy and Willis and Robert Nelson's, household appliances supplier; the defendant, of no fixed address, pleaded that she had drunk more than was good for her.²⁴ The *East Sussex News*, under the headline, 'Woman Window Smasher Lewes; Suffragette Scare', actually printed a photograph of the shattered window on its back page. 'Not unnaturally the damage was attributed to Suffragettes.'

Later in the month the *Sussex Express* reported a 'mysterious case of window-smashing at Southover'. 'Owing to the recent activities of Suffragettes in the town, they were, of course, suspected.'²⁵ According to the *Sussex County Herald*, 'The mischief at Southover Church was more likely to be the work of a would-be thief'.²⁶

Nevertheless, Southover Church and St Michael's in the High Street were among the churches closed except for divine service 'in consequence of the militant outrages in the country', and a letter some weeks later, from a member of the Church League for Women's Suffrage, begging militants to spare churches, indicates the level of local anxiety.²⁷

'Suffragettes and Sewage Pipes' was the headline of the subsequent monthly meeting of Lewes Town Council. 'The Lady with the Square-Toed Shoes' was the first item on the agenda:

Alderman Holman drew attention to the drastic measures taken during the last few days in locking the Town Hall. On enquiry he found that there had been a suspicious-looking female anxious to see the oak staircase. He was told that the lady wore a 'flop' hat, a short skirt, and square-toed shoes, and that she carried a bag. He did not know whether all women wearing square-

toed shoes were to be regarded as militant Suffragettes; the lady in question might have been a Countess in ordinary walking attire anxious to inspect their Town Hall. The locking of the building was, he thought, calculated to raise unnecessary alarm, and while he did not object to ordinary precautions, he did not favour the adoption of steps which would create undue alarm or panic.

Alderman Every, however, expressed his abhorrence of the deplorable outrages by fire and other means that had occurred in other parts of the country and warmly approved of the precautions taken.

Councillor Gerard Lloyd stated that the Municipal Surveyor had called on him with reference to taking care of the Municipal Buildings while they had a Suffragette at the top of the town whose friends were also in the neighbourhood. When the lady came into the Town Hall the other day, she was shown the staircase and then seen safely from the building. The bag she was carrying might have contained an infernal machine, gunpowder or nitro-glycerine, which, deposited on a portion of the staircase, might have destroyed it and damaged the building. Councillor Lloyd had therefore at once given orders for the building to be locked up with the exception of the front door, where a man was placed on guard.

The meeting then proceeded to the next item on the agenda: the contract for sewerage works.²⁸

In response to its report of this council meeting, the *County Herald* received a letter headed 'The Square-Toed Woman':

Pointed shoes are no guarantee of non-militancy. Some of the most dangerous 'pétroleuses' wear Louis Quatorze shoes and French embroidered stockings. Besides, a modern hat permits not only the concealment of a good deal of nitro-glycerine but even an occasional bomb. If females are to be let into a Town Hall mentioned in most guide books to Lewes, they should be searched by a female attendant. No right-minded tourist could possibly object, and a tourist who is not right-minded should not be shown the oak staircase that is the glory of Lewes Town Hall.²⁹

Two months later Councillors were still arguing

about the need for a guard on the Town Hall door.³⁰

A high level of vigilance continued to be maintained. When the Municipal Librarian's wife noticed a strange female sitting at a table, acting suspiciously, she summoned her husband. He arrived to find the woman had gone, leaving what looked like a bomb, with two spirals joined at the top resembling fuses. This, after being plunged in water, was found to contain nothing but earth and a photograph of Mrs Pankhurst.³¹

HMP Lewes accommodated women convicts as well as men until 1917, and at least one prominent Suffragette was sent there; Beatrice Sanders, financial secretary of the WSPU. Her husband, Alderman Sanders of the LCC, was to become Labour MP for Battersea. The trial that had led to her sentence continued for over a week, beginning just six days after the self-destructive action of another WSPU member, Emily Davison, at the Epsom Derby. While the newsreel of this enjoyed an extended run at the cinema in Lewes High Street, running reports of the Sanders trial were carried in the *Times* and included the evidence from her mother that this defendant was the daughter of a tobacconist, that she had no business training, and that her husband's only livelihood was as a lecturer for the Fabian Society.³² The *County Herald* gave the story full and sympathetic front page coverage, claiming it to be a 'Herald Exclusive':

At the Old Bailey six Suffragette leaders and Mr Edwy Godwin Clayton, a chemist, were found guilty of conspiracy to commit damage and inciting others to commit damage. One of the six was Mrs Sanders who was sentenced to 15 months in the third division. The third division denotes ordinary prisoners and means prison costume, cutting hair and a plank bed. Most recently-sentenced Suffragettes have been committed to the second division, permitting special consideration as regards dress, diet, work and visitors.

On 18 June Mrs Sanders was brought to Lewes. Very few persons knew who she was, but some present at the station, at the arrival of the 11.47, saw a small-built woman attired in a serge costume, with a sad or serious countenance, escorted by two female warders and one male officer in private clothes. The male officer carried Mrs Sanders' belongings

in a handbag. A vehicle was waiting for her from Messrs Chapman of Station Street, the Government contractors. Since her admission, she has been hunger-striking. We understand that she is well-conducted and gives absolutely no trouble to officials. It is anticipated that she will be released under the Cat and Mouse Act in a few days.³³

The Prisoner (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act, otherwise known as the Cat and Mouse Act, had been passed on 25 April 1913. Prison staff members were to stop force-feeding Suffragettes and, when they became very weak, release them to recover. Any further wrong-doing would lead to immediate re-imprisonment.

The *County Herald's* story included Greta Allen's attempt to rally local public support of Beatrice Sanders at this time. At a 'Noisy Suffragette Meeting at the top of School Hill':

Miss Allen, well-known locally, addressed a large crowd. There were many interruptions and the speaker apparently failed to make an impression on the audience. Councillor Savage was one of those present and his acrid remarks were not appreciated. Eventually the speaker and her comrades, followed by a jeering crowd, were helped by police to escape down a side street.

The following week, the *County Herald's* front page carried the headline, 'Released Suffragette out of Prison on Licence: Weak Condition':

On Saturday afternoon 20 to 30 Suffragettes assembled on the Downs, in the shade of the prison walls, and sang Suffragette hymns and songs. On Tuesday afternoon Miss Allen rushed to the prison in a taxi and at 6pm Mrs Sanders left in a carriage and drove by the back of the town to the nursing home in Priory Terrace, Southover. She smiled to hear supporters crying 'No surrender' as the carriage left the prison. She has had plenty of fresh air so is not as ill as others have been but she is weak and able to take food only by spoon. Two policemen stood at the entrance to Priory Terrace. Miss Allen called later in the evening and brought a bouquet of beautiful flowers.

Mrs Sanders left the next afternoon. The *Herald* was again the only reporter present. She looked very weak and pale and was wrapped up closely. Her husband carried

her in his arms to the carriage. There were very few people at the station. Mrs Sanders wept as she was carried from the cab to the platform in an invalid chair by two porters. She is to deliver herself to the Governor of Lewes Prison on Tuesday, health permitting.

The same edition carried a 'Letter from a Parent':

I have heard that a certain teacher has made herself conspicuous and ridiculous by selling Suffragette literature at a recent meeting of Suffragettes in Lewes and also at the prison gates on the release of Mrs Sanders. Most parents will resent their children being taught by misled creatures as there is certainly a fear of fiddle-faddle being put into their heads.³⁴

Despite the evidence, apparently to the contrary, of the views she had expressed in 1909, the teacher here is likely to have been Kate Fowler Tutt. During the General Election of December 1918, she was to play a prominent role, addressing meetings to urge newly-enfranchised women not only to use their votes wisely but to become involved in politics and public affairs themselves. The many years she would spend as Lewes' first woman Town Councillor would see her practising what she preached. By the summer of 1913 she was living in St Swithun's Terrace, and therefore not far from Greta Allen, with whom she had in common a professional interest in child welfare. However, she was later to advise women not to join a particular Party, as they could be more effective as 'free lances', so any 'Suffragette literature' she distributed she had probably written herself.³⁵

Two weeks later the *Sussex Express* headline, 'Re-arrested', announced the re-arrest of 'Lewes Hunger Striker' Beatrice Sanders on 9 July, while stepping out of a car outside her home in Battersea.³⁶ The *County Herald* printed letters urging the editor to join other newspapers in public protest against the Cat and Mouse Bill.³⁷

At the beginning of August, the *Sussex Express* appeared to be more sympathetic than hitherto towards Lewes' own Suffragette:

In connection with the annual conference of the British Medical Association in Brighton, a discussion took place last week on 'Crime and Punishment', and one of the speakers was Miss G Allen of Priory Street, Lewes, a well-known worker on behalf of women's

suffrage. Referring to her imprisonment in Holloway, she mentioned that, while in prison, the greatest craving Suffragettes seemed to have was for coffee, vinegar or alcohol. Usually she did not take alcohol, but, in her own case, she felt that the first thing she would have when she came out was green Chartreuse (laughter), a thing she had never previously tasted. However, what she really did have when she came out, and drank most greedily, was strong black coffee. This experience of hers was in the old days before hunger-striking. She submitted that the prison system weakened body and will, and complained that prisoners were not given enough sunshine, fresh air and exercise.³⁸

Some months later, however, readers were again invited to laugh at the Suffragettes:

Waiting for Mrs Pankhurst: Mrs Pankhurst, who after her arrest went on hunger strike at Exeter Prison and was released on Sunday night, is responsible for an amusing Lewes incident. Rumour had it that the Suffragette leader would be removed from Exeter to Lewes Prison on Friday evening, and several enthusiastic supporters of the cause, accompanied by a local journalist, kept vigil outside the gaol until a late hour. Mrs Pankhurst did not appear and so the reception awaiting her had to be abandoned. During the vigil, a woman employee at the Prison Governor's house returned from a journey, and her arrival in a cab raised the spirits of the little company at the prison gates who were preparing to give their leader an encouraging word. However, they were doomed to disappointment, while the domestic was highly amused.³⁹

One male campaigner for women's suffrage who experienced imprisonment at Lewes, however briefly, was Capt Gonne RA, of Bognor. Like Mark Wilks, who in a much-publicised test case had been imprisoned for non-payment of taxes the previous year, he was a member of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage; their wives belonged to the Women's Tax Resistance League:

Supporters of the No Vote No Tax cry held a meeting at the top of School Hill on Monday evening, the good-humoured crowd being addressed by Mrs Margaret Kinton Parkes, secretary of the Women's Tax Resistance

League, and Mr Mark Wilks. The meeting was intended as one of protest against the imprisonment of Capt Gonne who was arrested on Saturday and imprisoned at Lewes Gaol because he refused to pay taxes as a protest against the treatment of the women's suffrage question. However, to quote one of the speakers, it developed into 'a meeting of rejoicing' for the Captain had now been released. The speakers dealt with the injustice of the taxation of women without corresponding representation. They were heckled by the crowd and a good deal of banter was indulged in. The police were in force but no serious disturbance occurred.⁴⁰

The following week, the *County Herald* printed a letter from Greta Allen who explained that about two years before, while heckling Lloyd George on women's suffrage, Capt Gonne was ejected with such violence by Liberal stewards, instructed to 'fling out hecklers', that his spine was injured, leaving him an invalid ever since. His recent imprisonment, hunger-striking and hurried release before the arrival of friends were causing very grave anxiety to his relatives. Greta Allen enclosed a letter from his son, who wrote that Capt Gonne was sent home from Lewes on the 6.02am train. The Governor gave him 1s 5d and a third-class ticket. He had been woken that morning and asked to dress hurriedly; a cab had been called and his wife had been wired to expect him at Bognor. His son expressed his father's gratitude for the letters he had received.⁴¹

Although Greta Allen's letter to the *County Herald* was written from the WSPU office at 8 North Street Quadrant, Brighton, she was actually about to resign as organiser of the Brighton and Hove WSPU and to resume her work in health education, remaining in Sussex, and giving lectures on home nursing and hygiene.⁴²

It was now up to the Lewes Women's Suffrage Society, therefore, to keep the female franchise flag flying in the town. President of the Brighton and Hove Women's Franchise Society, Lady Maud Parry, wife of composer Sir Hubert Parry, of Rustington, presided over a public meeting held in the Assembly Room in February 1914 (Fig. 4).

With her on the platform were Lady Betty Balfour, elder sister of suffragette Constance Lytton, and the Mayor, now Thomas Roberts, supported by committee members Mrs Stewart-Jones, Mrs



Fig. 4. Photo Bassano; Elizabeth Maud (née Herbert) Lady Parry. ©npg.org.uk.

Vallance and Mrs Kemp, of Bedford Lodge, Rotten Row, who was, like the Eversons of Malling, involved in the Women's Adult School. Lady Betty Balfour, calling for any government measure that would enfranchise women, deeply deplored the methods of militants:

She knew militancy had marred their cause over and over again. She should like their movement to be kept clear of it. Let the Government promise the enfranchisement of women tomorrow and she could promise there would not be a militant left.

Mayor Roberts revealed his ignorance of the distinction between Suffragists and Suffragettes:

He was very glad to hear the speakers adopt such a moderate course. Many of them thought it would have been better for the cause if they had taken this attitude long before. A voice in the audience cried, "We did!"

Two weeks earlier Mrs Wilkinson, presiding over the AGM of the Lewes Women's Liberal Association, had announced an alteration in its policy: that it would not work for a Liberal candidate who did not support women's suffrage.⁴³

A question now put by the Revd Walter Loveband, Curate of Barcombe, about the political affiliation of the NUWSS 'led to some argument'. Conservative Lady Balfour and Liberal Lady Parry defended NUWSS support for the Labour Party on the grounds that it was the only party to have declared for women's suffrage, and this was the NUWSS priority. Warned by 'a gentleman at the back of the room' that this meant 'supporting a Party that was striving for Socialism, Home Rule and the destruction of the Empire', they recommended membership of associations that worked only for candidates within their own parties who were in favour of women's suffrage. 'The meeting terminated in peace.'⁴⁴

It would be another six months before the next report of a women's suffrage meeting, when Marie Corbett addressed the Sisterhood of the Tabernacle Congregational Church in the Lower High Street, and the President, Mrs Everson, spoke of the waste of children's lives through impure milk and women's inability to do anything about such evils until they had the vote.⁴⁵

However, women's suffrage campaigners were likely to be involved also in related social causes, particularly the Temperance movement, the abolition of child prostitution or 'white slavery', and of underpaid piece-work or 'sweating'. In Lewes, the Revd Burgess and Mrs Wilkinson, the Revd Duncan and Mrs Pearce, Mrs Stewart-Jones, Mrs Vallance and Mrs Kemp met regularly at Temperance Association meetings and at events such as a lecture in the Assembly Room by Miss Alice Abadam, who travelled the country to address suffrage societies on 'How the vote will affect the white slave traffic'.⁴⁶

The *County Herald* had printed, at the end of August 1913, the annual report of Dr A. E. Harris, Medical Health Officer of Islington, who wrote of how 'sweating' resulted in an inadequate education for household management and motherhood, as girls were leaving school as early as possible to go into underpaid employment.⁴⁷ That women needed to have the vote in order to remedy the evils of sweating was the theme of the first meeting held by the Lewes branch of the Church League for Women's Suffrage, in the Town Hall in April 1914. It was chaired by the Revd J Burns, rector of Berwick:

It is becoming quite evident that if women are ever to gain the vote, it will be through

peaceful agencies like this, which show that women are entitled to qualify to exercise the vote, not by attempts at intimidation such as breaking the windows of Cabinet Ministers' houses, burning down mansions, brawling in churches and hacking masterpieces, which tactics have had their day.

Mrs Duncan Pearce was the speaker, illustrating her paper on 'Sweated Industries' with lantern slides. She spoke hopefully of the Trade Boards Act under which a board of employers and workers had to be set up in certain selected trades, for example Vesta box making, to fix a legal minimum wage. Mrs Pearce advocated the extension of this to all sweated industries, mentioning in particular the making of flowers, gloves, toothbrushes, butcher's scrubs, vamp beaders, boot uppers, paper bags, dolls' heads, cards of buttons and hooks and eyes, and military embroidery. She was strongly supported by James Chandler, of Kingston, and Brighton solicitor Frank Bentham Stevens, whose family were leading figures in the Cuckfield and Central Sussex Women's Suffrage Society that had staged an exhibition of Sweated Industries two years earlier in Haywards Heath.⁴⁸

Indeed, campaigning in Central Sussex included not only exhibitions but frequent meetings in towns and villages, musical performances, the staging of Suffragist plays, pre-election canvassing, a programme of lectures on maternal and child welfare, and a speech by Millicent Fawcett herself in Cuckfield's Queen's Hall.⁴⁹ By comparison, the activity undertaken by the Lewes Women's Suffrage Society seems to have been limited and rather ineffectual.

No evidence has been found of a Lewes contingent participating in the Great Pilgrimage for Women's Suffrage in July 1913, a march undertaken by Women's Suffrage Societies from all over the country, converging on London along eight main routes. Although the *Sussex Express* seemed unaware that this event was taking place, it was fully reported in the *County Herald*, the *Brighton Gazette* and the *Mid Sussex Times*. The Sussex route, nearly 40 miles and one of the shortest, was up through Burgess Hill, Cuckfield, Handcross and Crawley, then on via Croydon, Streatham Common, Brixton and Kennington.

Participants came from across the county – Brighton, Shoreham, Littlehampton, Worthing, Bognor, Cuckfield and Central Sussex, Hailsham,

Eastbourne, Seaford and Newhaven. The procession, led by Sir Hubert and Lady Maud Parry, set off from the Steine in Brighton on Monday 21 July at 10am, then from Cuckfield on Tuesday 22 July, and from Crawley on Wednesday 23 July. The Pilgrimage culminated in a mass meeting in Hyde Park on Saturday, 26 July, where Millicent Fawcett was one of the speakers, and a special service in St Paul's the following day.⁵⁰

Lewes suffragists did take certain opportunities to 'network'. In January 1912 they joined constitutional campaigners from diverse political and religious societies at a mass gathering in the Dome, organised by the Brighton and Hove Women's Franchise Society, and addressed by Millicent Fawcett, Lord Robert Cecil and Brighton MP John Gordon.⁵¹

In June 1913, at a reception at Hove Town Hall for delegates to a congress in Brighton of the Church League for Women's Suffrage, the *Sussex Daily News* could assure readers that 'refinement and dainty dress' proved that these women had lost none of their femininity. Among the most fashionable, from all over country, was Mrs Stewart-Jones of Lewes: elegant in black with real lace effects.⁵²

In its attempt to be taken seriously, the Lewes Women's Suffrage Society was not helped by the lack of a reliably supportive, committed local press. The *Sussex County Herald* prided itself on the considerable space it gave to women's matters, but although it followed the Beatrice Sanders story closely, it was essentially the Eastbourne weekly. Neither the *Sussex Express* nor the *East Sussex News*, the weeklies printed in Lewes, could compare in their coverage of the women's suffrage cause with the *Mid Sussex Times*, printed in Haywards Heath. Its Congregationalist editor, Charles Clarke, provided his readers with detailed reports of campaigning at both local and national level. Indeed, the participation of Congregationalists in Cuckfield and Haywards Heath in local suffrage activity was very significant. Photographer Douglas Miller, whose family had Lewes connections and whose postcards of Lewes are well-known, accompanied his wife on the first day of the Pilgrimage, and the series of photographs he took along the way are invaluable as the only pictorial documentation of the Brighton to Cuckfield stage of the route (Fig. 5).

Despite the repeated emphasis on non-violence on the part of the NUWSS and other constitutional



Fig. 5. Douglas Miller, Suffragist Pilgrims at Clayton 21 July 1913. Courtesy of www.sussexpostcards.info.

suffrage organisations, it must have been inevitable that the proximity of Brighton and the fear of militant infiltration would cause the 'Votes for Women' slogan to remain associated in many minds in Lewes with unlawful and destructive action. Cuckfield was sufficiently rural and distanced from Brighton to be less affected by this. In addition, it was not known for its zealous celebration of the Fifth of November. In Lewes, the popular notion of the Suffragette Bogeywoman was encouraged by Bonfire.

From 1908 Suffragettes featured regularly at Fifth of November celebrations in the Lewes area. The annual processions were clearly seen by some men as opportunities to indulge in topical cross-dressing, and at Firle in 1908 a Mr Honeysett, as a Suffragette, came second in the costume competition, winning 9s. The prize for Suffragette Mr Toms, who came fourth, was a shoulder of mutton.⁵³

Suffragettes also made good effigies. At Lewes Bonfire in 1913, the last until after the War, the tableau paraded by Borough Society, 'using women's suffrage for all it is worth', was entitled 'Caught in the Act', and featured a Suffragette,

more than eight feet tall, carrying an object labelled 'Bomb', being apprehended at the door of a church by two policemen. 'The church and the lady fired splendidly.' 'The militant phase of the movement is beneath the contempt of all sane Englishmen.'⁵⁴

At Newick the same year:

The fire burnt freely, and it took but a short time to consume the effigy of Guy Fawkes, which, with that of the representative of 'Votes for Women', had been placed at the top. Whether the lady was intentionally doomed to a more lingering death could not be ascertained, but, at any rate, she survived the flames for a considerable time, though, of course, she too finally succumbed.⁵⁵

The declaration of war on 4 August 1914 brought about a suspension of women's suffrage campaigning, and the Lewes Women's Suffrage Society announced that it would use its organisation to help those who would be sufferers from the economic and industrial dislocation caused by the war.⁵⁶

In recent years in Lewes, women in Suffragette costume have paraded as heroines, fighters for

equal rights who are deservedly included in the town's Fifth of November processions. In their

own time, however, Suffragettes were Enemies of Bonfire.

Author: Frances Stenlake, 28 Sun Street, Lewes BN7 2QB, East Sussex, frances_stenlake@yahoo.com.

NOTES

- ¹ For accounts of the women's suffrage campaign at the national level, see: Crawford, Elizabeth, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland, a Regional Survey* Routledge 2006. Fawcett, MG, *Women's Suffrage, A Short History of a Great Movement*. The People's Books, TC and EC Jack 1911. Pugh, M, *Women's Suffrage in Britain 1867–1928*. Historical Association pamphlet 1978. Rover, Constance, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain 1866–1914*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.
- ² *East Sussex News* 5 June 1908.
- ³ *Sussex Express* 5 Dec 1908.
- ⁴ *Sussex Express* and *East Sussex News* 14 May 1909.
- ⁵ *East Sussex News* 19 March 1909.
- ⁶ *East Sussex News* 26 March 1909.
- ⁷ *East Sussex News* 9 April 1909.
- ⁸ *East Sussex News* 16 April 1909.
- ⁹ *Illustrated London News* 12 Dec 1908.
- ¹⁰ *Sussex Express* and *East Sussex News* 23 July 1909.
- ¹¹ *Sussex Express* and *East Sussex News* 20 Aug 1909.
- ¹² *Sussex Express* 22 July 1910.
- ¹³ *East Sussex News* 2 Dec 1910.
- ¹⁴ *Sussex Express* 4 Nov 1910.
- ¹⁵ *Sussex Express* 2 Feb 1912.
- ¹⁶ *Sussex Express* 5 May 1911.
- ¹⁷ *Sussex Express* and *East Sussex News* 22 March 1912.
- ¹⁸ *East Sussex News* 5 April 1912 *Sussex Express* 29 March 1912.
- ¹⁹ *East Sussex News* 12 April 1912.
- ²⁰ *Sussex Express* and *East Sussex News* 19 April 1912.
- ²¹ *Sussex Express* 13 Dec 1912.
- ²² *East Sussex News* 5 April 1912.
- ²³ *Sussex Express* 23 May 1913.
- ²⁴ *Sussex Express* 6 June 1913 and *East Sussex News* 6 June 1913.
- ²⁵ *Sussex Express* 27 June 1913.
- ²⁶ *Sussex County Herald* 28 June 1913, 28 June 1913.
- ²⁷ *Sussex County Herald* 9 Aug 1913.
- ²⁸ *Sussex Express* 4 July 1913.
- ²⁹ *Sussex County Herald* 19 July 1913.
- ³⁰ *Sussex County Herald* 9 Aug 1913.
- ³¹ *Sussex Express* 5 Mar 1914 and *East Sussex News* 6 Mar 1914.
- ³² *Times* 10, 12, 14 and 18 June 1913.
- ³³ *Sussex County Herald* 21 June 1913.
- ³⁴ *Sussex County Herald* 28 June 1913.
- ³⁵ *Sussex Express* 8 Nov 1918; 3 Dec 1918; 20 Dec 1918.
- ³⁶ *Sussex Express* of 11 July 1913.
- ³⁷ *Sussex County Herald* 12 and 19 July 1913.
- ³⁸ *Sussex Express* 1 Aug 1913.
- ³⁹ *Sussex Express* 11 Dec 1913.
- ⁴⁰ *Sussex Express* 18 Dec 1913 and *East Sussex News* 19 Dec 1913.
- ⁴¹ *Sussex County Herald* 27 Dec 1913.
- ⁴² *East Sussex News* 23 Jan 1914.
- ⁴³ *Sussex Express* 5 Feb 1914.
- ⁴⁴ *Sussex Express* 19 Feb 1914.
- ⁴⁵ *East Sussex News* 1 Aug 1913.
- ⁴⁶ *East Sussex News* 13 Dec 1912.
- ⁴⁷ *Sussex County Herald* 30 Aug 1913.
- ⁴⁸ *Sussex Express* 2 April 1914.
- ⁴⁹ See Stenlake, Frances, *Mid Sussex Suffragists*, 2009. Unicorn Press.
- ⁵⁰ *Brighton Gazette* and *Mid Sussex Times* 23 July 1913; *Sussex County Herald* 2 Aug 1913,
- ⁵¹ *East Sussex News* 2 Feb 1912.
- ⁵² *Sussex Daily News* 2 July 1913.
- ⁵³ *East Sussex News* 13 Nov 1908.
- ⁵⁴ *Sussex Daily News* 6 Nov 1913 and *Sussex County Herald* 8 Nov 1913.
- ⁵⁵ *Sussex Express* 8 Nov 1913.
- ⁵⁶ *East Sussex News* 7 Aug 1914.