



THE SUFFRAGETTES IN BATH

A FEMINIST ARBORETUM AND DESTRUCTION ON THE GOLF COURSE!

Anne Twitchett

In 1866 a group of women presented a petition demanding the same voting rights as men. This was the second mass suffrage petition put before Parliament and again it was refused. There were two main groups campaigning for women's suffrage, The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (non confrontational led by Millicent Fawcett) and the other, The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst who was confrontational and angry as discussion and debate had not succeeded in securing voting rights for women. Emmeline mustered her 'soldiers' with a rallying cry, "Deeds not Words!".

This short essay could be a walk around the World Heritage City of Bath. It focuses on the women who came to Bath known as the Suffragettes (WSPU). These Suffragettes were honoured guests of the Blathwayt family of Eagle House, Batheaston. They were guests of Colonel Blathwayt looking to recover after release from prison and their harsh treatment as common criminals often on hunger strike demanding to be treated as political prisoners.

There are many stories, but I have picked a couple that highlight Bath and affected the landscape city.

Mary Blathwayt 1879-1961 (North Parade looking north towards Batheaston)

Mary came to live in Batheaston with her parents Colonel Linley Blathwayt and his wife Emily on their return from India. It was the Colonel who took the initiative to invite the suffragettes to their home and Mary became involved with the suffrage cause. The family welcomed over 60 suffragettes. The Colonel, a keen botanist commemorated the bravery of the visiting suffragettes by planting a pine tree for a prison sentence and a holly tree for activism and marked the occasion with a plaque and a photograph.

The trees were planted between 1909 and 1912 resulting in a feminist arboretum. By the 1960s the feminist cause was all but forgotten and nothing was said when this feminist arboretum, probably unique in the world, was bulldozed to make way for housing.






Suffragette Annie Kenney planting a tree



Mabel Capper



Left by Suffragettes on Bath Golf Course (Bath In Time.)




One tree survives and it belonged to Rose Lamartine Yates, a close friend of Emily Wilding Davison who threw herself at the King's horse at the Epsom Derby 1913. Mary belonged to the WSPU but was a reluctant activist finding 'Deeds not words' did not sit comfortably with her. She did however boycott the Census of 1911 along with 28 other suffragettes. Mary and the others spent the night in an empty property at 12 Lansdown Crescent. The women felt that if they did not count, why should they be counted. She resigned from the WSPU in 1913 feeling uncomfortable with the escalation of the activities of Deeds.

Emmeline Pankhurst 1858-1928

Emmeline was a frequent visitor to Bath through her friendship with Mary Blathwayt and spoke at the Guildhall and the Pavilion in 1909 and 1911. Emmeline grew up in a home of ideas and visitors to the house included Kier Hardie, the founder of the Labour Party. In 1903 she founded the WSPU and her daughters, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela became very involved. They adopted a radical strategy; with other militant suffragettes they set fire to rich people's country homes, carried bricks in their bags, damaged golf courses and placed bombs in letterboxes. The public were astonished at their deeds and the authorities could not control their disobedience.

They paid the price with excessive prison sentences and force feeding. Emmeline viewed it as civil war saying, "I come to you tonight ...as a soldier. I am a dangerous woman....I do not look like a soldier or a convict, but I am both. We are here not because we are law breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law makers". Wives had no right to their husband's property, no legal say in the upbringing of their children, girls were marriageable at 12 years old, divorce was shameful. The vote was seen as the first step towards economic and political equality.




Violence escalated and her daughters struggled with their relationship with Emmeline and family life was never the same. Militancy ended in 1914 when she turned her attention to the war effort. Women were granted equal voting rights with men at the age of 21 in 1928, the year she died.

Mabel Capper 1888-1966 (Corner of Duke Street, North Parade looking towards the Pavilion)

Mabel joined the WSPU in 1907 and was totally committed to the cause of universal suffrage. Whenever she could, she made a nuisance of herself, disorderly conduct, obstruction and assaulting police officers. She received six prison sentences.

Between 1906 and 1911 there were several Women's Suffrage Bills dropped for various reasons. In 1911 a suffrage meeting was organised in Bath's new skating rink (the Pavilion) and Lloyd George was the speaker. An advertisement was published in the Bath Herald, "Due to the limited space and tremendous demand...only MEN will be allowed to attend". Women excluded from the very space where votes for women would be discussed! Mabel and other suffragettes took a lease on a building close to the Pavilion and once the meeting started, they climbed onto the roof and made a huge noise and caused a big distraction with the crowds yelling insults at them. They disrupted the meeting and disappeared over the roof space as the police arrived! On her way home from this disruption, Mabel, who kept a toffee hammer in her dress pocket, smashed as many windows of the post office as she could and stayed breaking windows until the police arrived and arrested her.



The Tollemache Sisters, Grace and Aethel 1870s to 1950s (Looking up towards Bath University and Sham Castle from North Parade)

The Tollemaches were neighbours and friends of the Blathwayts. The family led a privileged life and the sisters were vegetarians, so unusual for the time. The sisters and the mother became devoted to the cause of suffrage, even refusing to pay their taxes. The sisters became militant and their names were linked to house fires and an act of destruction linked to the golf course by Sham Castle. The Bath Herald said, “the green-man...discovered that the 15th green, which is near the bridle path on Hampton Down, had been damaged. Between 30 and 40 holes were found in the green and caustic soda had been scattered about causing the grass to be discoloured”. There was similar damage to other greens.

WW1 interrupted campaigning and with nearly 5 million women in the workforce in 1918 Parliament could not ignore their contribution. In 1918 some women over 30 gained the vote ignoring the working class women who had undertaken the most dangerous war jobs but Universal Suffrage came in 1928.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Twitchett has lived in Bath for 41 years. She attended the City of Bath Girls School later to become Hayesfield. She worked in international sales and marketing with a background in languages. Her interests are in local history, the countryside and music. She plays the oboe in the Band of Avon Fire and Rescue and has been a Mayor's Guide for 10 years.

