

Transcript

Trailer: *The history of female protest and suffrage in the UK*

Voiceover:

You've probably heard of the term suffragette...

Perhaps the word brings certain images to mind...maybe a well-dressed Edwardian lady, in a big hat, making a nuisance of herself.

And of course, all these ideas are not incorrect and have their place...however the reality on the ground was rather more complicate.

At this time in history a great deal was at stake.

Women's rights, their treatment in the workplace, their wages, their role in the home... indeed the whole concept of what a woman was and should be.

The term 'suffragette' was first coined by the Daily Mail in 1906 but there were many female suffragist campaigners that came before this.

According to the British Library, there were 16 other societies in favour of female suffrage in the 1800s.

In 1897 many suffrage societies joined together to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, the NUWSS.

You may recognise some of the big names connected with the women's suffrage movement.

You have probably heard about Emmeline Pankhurst and Millicent Fawcett but what about Ada Nield Chew and May Billinghurst? Two lesser known but none-the-less remarkable suffragists...

Ada Nield Chew, a working-class suffragist wrote direct and well-reasoned arguments for working women's rights and for better working conditions.

...We must stand all together, and refuse to tolerate a world where women's lives are so cheap!

May Billinghurst was middle-class. At the age of five months, she suffered an illness which paralysed her from the waist down. She spent the rest of her life using an invalid tricycle for mobility. However, May's disability never stopped her from participating in physically demanding activities.

On 18 November 1910, May and her comrades in the Women's Social and Political Union, WSPU went to a demonstration in London which was to become known as 'Black Friday'.

She was badly assaulted by the police. In 1912 she was imprisoned and sentenced to one month in Holloway prison for window-smashing.

Krista Cowman: *Bombing came in very much towards the end of the campaign. One of the things that happens after 1912 is that prosecution of suffrage leaders, suffragette leaders, increases massively. Jail sentences increase massively. And the government start to prosecute for conspiracy. (02.53-03.09)*

One could describe it as a terrorist organisation. I think certainly the suffragettes stand within a broader spectrum of anarchists, of Fenians, of very militant trade unions, who were prepared to use violent means to achieve their ends. And certainly people in their day would describe them in those terms. (04.09-04.28)

June Purvis: *I don't agree with that at all. I mean there's no one universally accepted definition of what a terrorist is. Now, Mrs Pankhurst would be horrified at that sort of means of trying to get your way politically because she never advocated the suffragettes killing anybody. That was really out of the question. (04.31-04.54)*

From 1903 -1914 the peaceful NUWSS continued patiently to put forward the moral case for reform, while the militant WSPU grabbed the headlines with a series of dramatic actions. Both organisations operated an extensive network of branches across the country and could count their supporters in the thousands.

But success in gaining the vote was a long time coming.

In August 1914, the narrative abruptly changed with the outbreak of the First World War.

The war years were to have a transformative effect on women's roles in society.

After the war, The Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the vote not only to men over the age of 21, but also to women over the age of 30.

Once this crucial change had been made, there was strong momentum for further reform. In 1928 women were finally given equality with men in national elections, gaining the entitlement to vote from the age of 21.