

## **MY SEARCH FOR SUFFRAGISTS AND SUFFRAGETTES IN NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND:**

### **Who were they and what did they do?**

As part of the North East Popular Politics Project I decided to focus on the role of women from North Northumberland (the area roughly bounded by Berwick, Wooler and Alnwick) in the campaign for women's suffrage. It was a subject on which I knew little but, after all, I had been brought up in Morpeth where Emily Wilding Davison is buried and I had heard frequent mentions of her name during my childhood. I had in my possession several postcards of her funeral procession in 1913 acquired by my grandfather living in Morpeth at the time. This seemed as good a motivation as any, but as I was to discover, my place of entry into the world may also have had some subliminal connection to the subject. More of this later.....

I discovered that the term "suffragist" is the more general term for those supporting the cause and includes both men and women. The term "suffragette" was originally coined as a derogatory term by the Daily Mail for members of the Women's Social and Political Union founded in 1903. A preliminary survey of the literature and a web search threw up a few names. Among these was Charlotte Marsh (1887-1961), whose birthplace in several sources is stated as Alnmouth, Northumberland. Charlotte was educated in Newcastle, Wales and France, trained as a Sanitary Inspector, joined the WSPU in 1907, took part in numerous militant acts for which she was imprisoned. She was force-fed in total 139 times. She often led parades, allegedly because of her distinguished height and carried the cross in the London funeral procession for Emily Wilding Davison. She became a motor mechanic in World War 1 and a chauffeuse to Lloyd George. However, I have not yet found any evidence that she was involved in local political action. On the 1891 census she was living at Prudhoe House, Alnmouth and a governess and servant were also listed in the household. Charlotte and her 2 sisters were all listed as born in Alnmouth. Her father, Arthur H Marsh, was an artist who came to Northumberland about 1869, settling in Alnmouth where he found inspiration for his work and exhibited at the Royal Academy. After her father died in 1909 Charlotte's mother and sisters moved to Jesmond, Newcastle. By then Charlotte was working for the WSPU in other parts of the country.

"The Women's Suffrage Movement: a Reference Guide 1866-1928 " by Elizabeth Crawford was a useful starting point as it provides biographical details on key figures in the movement. Several women from around Tyneside are listed but the only names from North Northumberland were Margaret Eleanor Thompson (1864-1957) and Mary Dawes Thompson (1866-1960) daughters of a former Master Mariner who was a Freeman of Berwick upon Tweed. They came from a family of 12 children of whom 6 daughters became teachers. They lived at Castlegate, Eastern Lane, 25 Palace Street, and 4 Summerhill Terrace and attended the Freeman's School - Berwick Corporation Academy. Only Margaret and

Mary out of his 7 daughters appear to have been actively involved in the movement. By 1882 Mary was recorded in the School Records as “having left for school in England”, and in 1889 she began her studies in Classics and Mathematics at Royal Holloway College in London. Mary achieved some academic success and won several College Prizes. As the college was the first founded specifically for women it is not surprising that one of her contemporaries there was Emily Wilding Davison. She appeared on the 1891 census with sister Margaret as students of Art in Shipley, West Yorkshire, where elder sister Elizabeth was a teacher.

Both sisters took part in many militant activities in the struggle for women’s suffrage but I have found no mention of their return to Berwick. By 1901 Mary was living with elder sister Harriet in Hampstead where both were teachers. Mary wrote on her 1911 census form, “No vote, and no census. As women are not persons in the eyes of the law, why count ciphers in the census?” before signing her name.

It would appear the sisters remained in the London area and later moved to Suffolk for the rest of their lives. In 1957 they published a book with the title of “They couldn’t stop us! Experiences of two (usually law-abiding) women in the years 1909-1913. I located a copy of this book in the British Library where another project member perused it for me with the conclusion that it contained vivid accounts of their experiences of being force-fed in prison but nothing relating to any activities in their native town.

Berwick did see some action, however. Alice Paul was an American who acted as assistant to more prominent campaigners. For one week she worked in Berwick:

“Every night we went out and spoke on the street corners of Berwick in the market-place or some place where people assembled. This was to acquaint the people of the town with why we were protesting against Sir Edward Grey.”

The latter was the MP for Berwick and had expressed support for the principle of women’s suffrage but taken little positive action to promote it.

“I was supposed to get up and say, “Well, these are very wonderful ideals and so on but couldn’t you extend them to women” or something like that. And when I did this (with great timidity, I am sure, anyway I got it out enough so that I was heard), the police immediately took me by the arms and right out of the meeting. I remember I was most indignant. They conducted me up through the streets of Berwick to the police station, holding my hands behind me. I don’t know whether with handcuffs or with what, so I was, I remember, blazingly angry and [they took me] to be arrested at the police station, or be booked, or whatever you did. So then I was arrested and I was charged with whatever I was supposed to be charged with and the meeting was over and I guess Sir Edward Grey must have told them not to go forward with any prosecution of anybody or something like that. Because I was released.”

Alice was later imprisoned for protesting at a meeting held by Winston Churchill in Dundee. Her visit to Berwick took place shortly before the notable procession in Edinburgh in October 1909. Alice Paul became the first WSPU member who was subjected to force-feeding. On her return to the USA she played a prominent part in the movement.

A branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies had been formed in Berwick (i.e. Northumberland) or Berwickshire (i.e. Scotland) -there is some confusion in the literature- in 1905 with Mrs Hope of Sunwick as Secretary. She was also Secretary of the Scottish Federation of the NUWSS. Margaret Mein of Kelso wrote about her assistance to Mrs Hope during 1909 in an attempt to "teach Suffrage to as many of the Berwickshire folk as could be got at in a week on a bicycle. The pace was hectic! As soon as she alighted from the train at Berwick Station the two women began discussing suffrage issues with women railway staff and passengers. They then set off on a seven-mile bicycle ride to their accommodation!

The workers at Chirnside Cotton Mill (a few miles west of Berwick) were addressed outside the mill during their lunch break and were joined by local residents. The crowd was described as *large and interested*:

*The men lounged; the vast majority of women produced knitting from their pockets and worked steadily during the whole meeting. (The Common Cause, 26 August 1909)*

*During the course of the week they addressed clergymen, workers at other mills, shopkeepers, and on the Saturday visited Berwick on market day.*

*We had a splendid reception from the farmers in the Market Place; they appeared to be unanimously in favour, bought badges and booklets, and the Common Cause was in great demand. ...The Berwick meeting was, perhaps, our best during the week; the worst was certainly at Hutton the same evening. Only twenty turned up in spite of the fact that (or perhaps because) they had never heard Suffragists before. However, questions - some intelligent and some otherwise, were asked and coming from church next morning I was assured that suffrage was easily the leading topic of conversation and that it was meeting with warm support.*

The week's campaigning concluded at the county agricultural show at Duns:

*In spite of the hubbub, our voices were well heard and our arguments well received.*

Despite finding these accounts of visiting women to the area I had so far not managed to find out very much about politically active women in the movement who lived and remained in the area of North Northumberland. Militant acts further south around Tyneside and over the Border were reported in the newspapers, for example, a thwarted plan to burn down the Grandstand at Kelso racecourse in 1913 as revenge for a long prison sentence passed on

Emmeline Pankhurst and the actual burning down of Whitekirk Church, near Dunbar in 1914.

However, whilst searching through old editions of the Berwick Advertiser at Berwick Record Office I made an interesting discovery. A Women's March from Edinburgh to London (approximately 400 miles) took place in the autumn of 1912. A small core group of women covered the entire route on foot, led initially by women on horseback and were joined for shorter stretches by supporters along the route. They followed the Great North Road, passing through Berwick, Belford and Alnwick.

The Berwick Advertiser of 11 October 1912 reported:

*The objective of the march is to carry a petition for which signatures will be solicited praying the Government to adopt a measure for Women's Suffrage this session. Recruits are joining at many places en route and it is anticipated that the ranks will considerably increase as the march proceeds. Meetings will be held at all places en route and literature sold and distributed; it is hoped that all friends in sympathy with the emancipation of women will assist the campaign by their active support when the march reaches Berwick on October 16<sup>th</sup>.*

*Names of recruits, for 1 or more days, donations and offers of help are urgently asked for and should be addressed to Mrs Le Fonblanque c/o Miss Ross, Eastbourne, Midhurst, Sussex.*

Recruits were expected to defray their own expenses, estimated at 35/- per week (*less if plenty of hospitality is offered*) making participants a self-selecting group able to pay their own way and therefore less accessible to working-class women. It was intended to make the march a peaceful one, *no militancy being indulged in. Each member will be dressed in a brown tweed costume and a hat of the same material, with a green cockade at the side.* (Berwick Journal)

The marchers were joined at Dunbar by Isabel Cowe from St Abbs on her bicycle which she used to make detours for *scouting work* up by-roads in order to procure more signatures. Described by the *Berwick Journal* as an *enthusiastic Berwickshire recruit*, she was asked how the women were standing the strain:

*She replied with a homely illustration." It's like this...when I begin spring-cleaning after the winter's rest, I feel very stiff, and the first day especially is a hard grind, but afterwards I get used to it and don't feel it. These ladies will find the great walk like that and a day or two will put them in thorough training."*

*Miss Cowe has done splendid work en route, for the bicycle has enabled her to reach many out of the way farm-places and hamlets for signatures, and then rejoin the party. Her long experience of wrecks and storm at St. Abbs, where she has been a tower of strength to storm-stayed mariners, has made her hardy and helpful, and even in the roughest weather*

*of the long evening she never missed a chance of getting a signature. Wearing a sou'wester, and holding a hurricane lantern and pen and ink, she made a picturesque figure.*

Isabel Cowe had only a few months earlier taken part in the rescue of passengers and crew from the ship *Glanmire* off Coldingham and given them shelter in her home. For her bravery she was awarded a Gold Brooch by the RNLI.

*Another Border lady, who not only travelled most of the way from Dunbar, but worked hard at local arrangements, was Mrs Hope of Sunwick.*

A van carrying the marchers' equipment was pulled by a horse named *Butterfly*, a mare belonging to Mrs Le Fonblanque. Bred and broken in by her, the horse completed the journey as far as Finchley in London but was then sent home to avoid the crowded London streets. (*Women's History Review 2007*)

Newspaper reports detailed names of new marchers and supporters providing accommodation and hospitality. Miss Grey of Lovaine Terrace, Mrs Willets (wife of a Head Teacher) and Mrs Fred W... were named for Berwick. Miss Grey, a teacher, was Secretary of the local WSPU.

The Daily Mail Special correspondent wrote from Reston:

*It has really been a dreadful walk for the marchers, but, wet through and tired as they must be, they were merry as crickets when I left them. Dunbar was left at seven o'clock this morning without breakfast. Mrs Harry Hope, the wife of the Unionist member for Buteshire, met the marchers on the road and took them to her home for breakfast. They had not long left here when the rain came down in torrents. The banner was stowed away in the van, but for the marchers there was no shelter and their russet brown costumes were soon almost chocolate-coloured with rain. While conditions were at their worst the marchers were cheered by the arrival of a deputation on bicycles from Haddington to wish them a good journey.*

The distance of 30 miles from Dunbar to Berwick was covered within 13 hours of 1 day, concluding in an open-air meeting near the Town Hall in Berwick. The women arrived about 8pm despite very bad weather, carrying candle-lamps and witnessed by a large crowd. (*Newcastle Evening Chronicle*)

*Yesterday, however, was a test of endurance of no mean order. It was the most strenuous and severe day which the Suffragists have had or are likely to have in their 400 mile march. While the average daily mileage for the walk is reckoned at less than 15, they did on Wednesday a heavy 30 mile stage from Dunbar to Berwick. Rain during the greater part of the day made the conditions very trying, especially as parts of the road are very exposed. One of the seven ladies ...walked no less than 28 miles. At 9pm Miss Brown was cheerfully working around the crowd collecting signatures to the great petition.*

“Everyone has been most kind to us on the road. Mrs Harry Hope, the wife of the MP, gave us breakfast at Dunbar. We had lunch at Grantshouse and Madame Bertoli of the Ayton Group of WSPU gave us tea.” (*Berwick Journal*, 17 October 1912)

The start of the speeches at Berwick was a little delayed because of the difficulty of speaking amid the tolling of the Curfew bell. Mrs Le Fonblanque’s address was greeted with boos from a number of boys at which she remarked, “I don’t think that is quite cricket, do you?” Applause from the audience followed her comment that they had not felt cold despite the weather because “The fire of enthusiasm burns within us and we are carrying the torch of light”.

*The crowd was for the most part extremely attentive although a number of boys behaved rather badly. There was, however, no intelligent opposition and Miss Benett held the attention of the large crowd for nearly an hour.*

Rowdy youths continued to interrupt the speakers and Miss Brown, one of the core group, remarked to a newspaper reporter that Berwick was the only place at which they had experienced any rowdiness.

The women left Berwick the next day in *bright sunshine* cheered by the number of signatures they had obtained.

*Indeed, the difficulty lay in overtaking the work, so many were anxious to adhibit their names. With their banner unfurled they marched down High Street, Butterfly and van following, with Miss Cowe alongside wheeling her cycle.*

A magnificent photograph of the women *as they crossed Berwick Bridge into Tweedmouth* appeared in the *Berwick Journal* (24 October 1912). This was the first, and initially the sole, photograph I managed to locate of the marchers in this area. The difference in coverage and reporting styles of the two Berwick newspapers is interesting. The *Berwick Journal* strikes a more sympathetic tone and is noteworthy in that it ran a regular column headed *Women’s Work and Interests*. This contained not only the usual articles on domestic issues but also on women’s suffrage, employment, education both at home and abroad, etc. During the time of the March it printed a letter from Mary Gillies of Edington Mains, Chirside, condemning force-feeding of suffrage prisoners.

The next stage of the journey was from Berwick to Belford. Fortunately, the weather proved more sympathetic on this day:

*Instead of rain, tiredness and dreadful isolation they had an easy 14 mile tramp through delightful country in glorious weather with scores of folk out on roadsides to watch them pass. One even heard them singing as they trudged along a quiet spell of the road, where there were none but the queer-clad Northumbrian harvest women to hear them. The song*

*was "John Peel", a fine marching air. They have decidedly recovered their spirits and this notwithstanding a rather unfriendly meeting at Berwick.*

An old *dame of Tweedmouth* who waved from her window a *garment unmistakably masculine* clearly did not support their cause but a more enthusiastic response was enjoyed at their lunch stop. This was at the Plough Inn (now the Lindisfarne Inn) at Beal, described as a *solitary house, miles from anywhere*. A heated debate amongst diners took place after the women arrived:

*The diners were an unwilling audience to some blunt truths and untruths about themselves. (Would that we today had been flies on the wall!) but on their leaving the countrymen came out in a body and wished the marchers goodbye. "Well, stick to it" said the spokesman, "dinna break down, women! Stick to it now, whatever you do!"*

Belford inhabitants were reported to have *turned out in numbers, such as they are, to see the marchers*. Strong support from local women could surely be expected from a town which in 1792 had submitted a petition against the Slave Trade, notable for the large number of women who had signed it. No record of where the women stayed was mentioned in the newspaper reports. However, a year or two after completing my research a glass slide of the women standing outside the well-known Blue Bell Hotel turned up in the collection of a local person. This proved a magnificent find! Staff of the hotel can be seen watching on as the women assemble for the next stage of their journey. The woman with the bicycle is probably Isabel Cowe. *Butterfly*, the horse, can be seen ready to pull the cart containing the petition.

The next stop was Alnwick where they were met some distance north of that town by a welcome party of Suffragists. A meeting was held in the town that night. The following day Mrs Le Fonblanque sent a telegram to a newspaper when they passed through the village of Felton. They arrived in Morpeth, which, 1 year later, was to be the scene of an impressive procession at the funeral of Emily Wilding Davison. On arrival in Newcastle a grand demonstration took place and a special church service was held in connection with the Church League. (*Newcastle Evening Chronicle, 17 October*) Local organiser, Laura Ainsworth, headed the welcome party at the Blue House, North Road. They marched down Northumberland Street, Pilgrim Street, Hood Street and Grey Street taking tea at the Turk's Head.

The marchers continued to London arriving on Saturday 16 November. *The Vote* reported how *the brave Brown Women swung into Trafalgar Square to the tune of "See the Conquering Hero Comes" and "March of the Women"*. 5000 sympathisers escorted them from Camden Tube Station to Trafalgar Square. Miss Cowe was named as one of the six who covered the whole distance. The petition was presented to one of Mr Asquith's secretaries. As expected it had little effect on him but the march and the petition had promoted the

cause in new areas and reached parts of the country like North Northumberland where the movement had barely penetrated up until then.

The following year the Northern Men's Federation for Women's Suffrage was founded and a branch formed in Berwick. Newcastle became the first City Council to pass in 1913 a resolution to grant suffrage to women, an action which was the brainchild of Laura Ainsworth.

On the outbreak of WW1 all suffrage prisoners were released and the WSPU agreed to end militancy and help the war effort. The 1918 Qualification of Women Act enfranchised women who were over the age of 30; providing they were householders, married to a householder or if they held a university degree. In 1930 all women over 21 were granted the vote.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned another personal connection to this subject. I was born at the Mona Taylor Maternity Home outside Morpeth. It was not until researching this topic that I learnt who Mona Taylor was. Born Maria Gulph in 1852 in Wales she attended her first suffrage meeting with her parents in 1872 when visiting London and joined the National Society for Women's Suffrage shortly afterwards. By 1881 Mona had married Thomas Taylor, a coal owner, later Alderman. They lived at Chipchase Castle near Hexham. She formed the Newcastle Branch of the WSPU in 1908 but resigned in 1912 around the time of the Women's March after the Pankhursts split with the Pethick-Lawrences. She joined with Laura Ainsworth in forming the National Political League for Women's Suffrage.

After the old workhouses closed in the 1930's Northumberland county council decided to replace them with newly-built village-style accommodation for the elderly. Built just before WW2 they were commandeered for military purposes but after the war became Homes for the Elderly and a Maternity Hospital. They were named after the Taylors as a tribute to their philanthropic work. Mona Taylor died in 1936.

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January 2012

Revised March 2018