

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2023

Suffragettes - Dr Margaret Simons

Wargrave Local History Society's February meeting was an illustrated presentation by Dr Margaret Simons, on "Suffragettes". The Act of Parliament that gave women over 30 the right to vote in general elections was passed just 105 years ago, on 6th February 1918, but this was just a part of a wider movement to increase rights for women. The fight to gain the franchise had taken about 50 years, and had both male and female supporters and detractors.

A Women's Suffrage Committee was formed as long ago as 1866. They organised a petition with some 1500 which was presented to Parliament on their behalf by John Stuart Mill MP. He supported their cause, and proposed an amendment be made to the 1867 Reform Bill for extending the franchise for men, seeking to replace "male person" by "person", which would entitle women to gain the vote if they were qualified in the same way as male electors. The amendment was defeated. The 1867 Reform Act was the result of a private member's Bill, and this was to be the case for most similar Acts of Parliament, to be presented almost annually over the next 50 years. Another organisation, the National Society for Women's Suffrage, was formed in 1867 by Lydia Becker, and 2 years later the Berkshire Chronicle reported that petitions to Parliament in favour of women's suffrage were being prepared in 56 towns across the country – 9 women from Berkshire being signatories to these.

In December 1872 a crowded meeting was held in Reading Town Hall. The chairman, George Palmer, was in favour of the Bill then before Parliament granting women the vote, on the point of honesty and fairness to women who had the same liabilities for rates and so on as men, but were denied the right to vote. At that time, it was noted that in Reading 482 would qualify for the vote, and in Windsor 193, with 98 in Abingdon, 63 in Maidenhead and 40 at Wallingford (all then within Berkshire).

Amongst the arguments presented against women being given the right to vote were that "if women were to stop at home and look after their husbands and children as they ought to do, they would have neither time nor inclination to mix in the strife and turmoil of elections", which was strongly argued against at the 1872 meeting. A local clergyman, Rev Stevenson, put forward a resolution that "the exclusion of women otherwise qualified to vote is injurious to those excluded, and contrary to the principles of fairness", and this was passed by the meeting.



Many people thought that the campaign was asking for all women to be enabled to vote, but that was not the case. The proposals were that those women would be granted the vote if they qualified on the same basis as the men – which would have been about 1 in 60 of the adult females (around 70,000 nationwide). Giving the vote to women whose husbands had the vote was thought to be a specific problem, but despite removing that possibility, the provisions in the 1874 Bill were defeated in Parliament.

A talk on 'Taxation and Representation' presented in Reading put forward the view that Government should not oppose the grant of women's rights to those who paid taxes but were not represented in Parliament. It was also suggested that "the quiet thought of women would be better than the balderdash of spit and sawdust"!



The 1884 Reform Bill made rapid progress – until an amendment to extend the franchise to women was proposed. As this risked the loss of the Bill as a whole, the amendment was dropped. By the time leading campaigner Millicent Fawcett addressed a meeting in Reading in 1887, the idea was not considered ridiculous, and it was anticipated that women would soon get their just rights. The issue of married women however was still a difficulty, and so progress was slow.

By 1895, the campaigners became more organised, with the formation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Under Millicent Fawcett's leadership, these suffragists sought to use legal and peaceful means to achieve their aims. A different approach was taken by the Women's Social and Political Union, begun by Mrs Pankhurst in Manchester in 1903. These suffragettes were more militant, and believed deeds not words would be more effective. Local meetings of both groups were regularly reported in the local newspapers.

There was also a Women's National Anti-Suffrage League, with several notable local ladies, such as Councillor Edith Sutton (of the Sutton seeds family, Lady Benyon and Lady Wantage amongst them.

The Women's Social and Political Union was run on fairly autocratic lines by the Pankhursts, and this led to a split, with the formation of the Women's Freedom League - still a militant movement, but run more democratically. A meeting at Tilehurst in December 1908 considered that militant action was necessary if they were to be taken seriously, whilst others thought that militancy would show that women were unfit to be involved in public affairs.



A number of open air meetings were held in and around Reading during 1908, and when 50 or so local members attended a demonstration in London, they had the largest banner on the march. It was thought about 50,000 attended the event, and Prime Minister Asquith was asked for his reaction. To show their feelings, members of the Women's Social and Political Union threw stones at the windows of 10 Downing Street. There were suggestions that giving the vote to women would be a danger to the state, as the vote should be for the benefit of the community, and it was even suggested that to do so would reduce the intellect of the electorate as, it was said at the time, women were less educated than men.

Demonstrations continued and militancy intensified, with attacks on pillar boxes, and an explosive device thrown from a train passing Reading station. The most notable locally was on 1st June 1914, when Wargrave church was attacked by arsonists, Percy Hermon finding a number of suffragette messages left by



the perpetrators.. It was believed that they were from elsewhere, the Vicar, Rev.d Batty, saying that “if the women of Wargrave caught them, they would have torn them to pieces”. As a response, however, many churches were kept locked except for the times of services., and the non-militant suffragists had to counteract the negative effects of such events.

Soon after, on August 4th, World War 1 began. This saw the end of militant action, and Mrs Pankhurst declared her support for the government, and most of the women worked to support the war effort, although the Women’s Freedom League continued to work for the female vote. The effect of the war was to bring all classes of people together, and so in preparation for the election at the end of the war in 1918, women were eventually granted the vote by the passing of the Representation of the People Act that year. Whether women would have been given the right to do so had it not been for the war is debatable.
