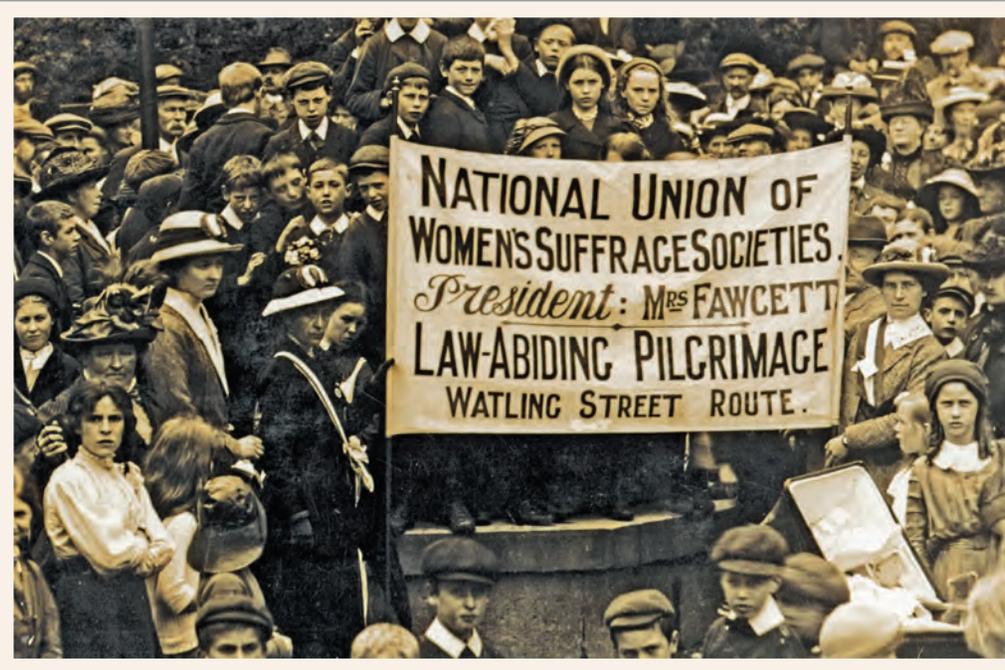


THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE PILGRIMAGE 1913

Toby Gavin

Suffragette pillar-box firings and window-smashing are dramatic components of the serious debate about the vote in Edwardian Britain. Amongst the political turmoil created by the militant suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) promoted a constitutional mode of agitation, including the Women's Suffrage Pilgrimage.



Members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies on the Watling Street route of the Suffrage Pilgrimage in July 1913.

The nationwide Women's Suffrage Pilgrimage marched through the West Midlands, including the Potteries, and carried a message to secure the vote to London. The NUWSS contingent that set out from Carlisle on 14 June 1913, later joined by suffragists from Manchester, marched through the industrial heartland of the region, and visited the poorly unionised and under-represented women of the Potteries, that 'Hell with the lid off'.

The idea for a mass public demonstration was first proposed at a meeting of the Executive Committee in April 1913. It would pass through and involve all of the Federations across England and conclude at a large meeting in London. Travelling the length of the country with neither hammers nor pyrotechnics, talking to people

Hanley by-election, the NUWSS already had a presence in the Potteries. Paid working-class speakers and organisers were drafted in over the coming months to help nurture a local society, one which engaged with local issues at the factory gates.

In some areas the pilgrims encountered sympathy from attentive audiences listening for two hours or more to various speakers, before passing the resolution that 'This meeting demands immediate Government action to enfranchise women'.

Most crowds, however, contained rabble-rousers who were eager to disrupt speeches and a number of crowds were openly hostile. Violence and dissent at meetings ranged from the nuisance of children (a problem solved by the hiring of a story-teller) to the heckling of speakers, and even missiles. However, the 'gallant spirit and

directly without misrepresentation from the press, the pilgrims would demonstrate and encourage a nationwide demand for women's enfranchisement.

The March

Pilgrims could 'tramp' as far as they pleased, perhaps just from one town to another, or the whole way with intermittent motorcar travelling. Beyond the miles that their legs would carry them, family commitments and domestic duties held the tightest grip on how long a pilgrim could be away from home.

The routes depended as much on the contours of the land as on where hospitality from existing societies would be available. As a result of its action in support of the Labour candidate at the 1912



As well as peaceful pilgrims, the Potteries also produced tea sets for the more militant Women's Social and Political Union. This service was produced by H.M. Williamson of Longton.

pluck' demonstrated by the resilient pilgrims often won over hostile crowds. It seems that crowds were most often influenced by an intelligent statement of the case, though admittedly some hecklers were happy to settle with a quip about the women's knowledge of laundry work.

A Personal Testimony

Marjory Lees, one of the Manchester contingent, wrote a diary which details the journey from the great northern city to London. The road was dangerous when the marchers were away from the hospitality of a local society. One night a drunk harassed the women and he only left them alone when they gave him sandwiches.

In Stratford, men linked arms and charged the crowd to disperse it, but more than this, the Lees diary records 150 men slashing tents and striking matches around the pilgrims' camp at night in Tiddington, Warwickshire – an example of unprovoked violence endured by pilgrims throughout the march.

Entering the Potteries

Bringing a message of hope to those 'poor sweated workers', the sixty Watling Street Pilgrims entered the Potteries on 9 July, where some of the contingent drove to the mining village of Goldenhill. Here a police officer took Marjory Lees away, telling her that there was someone who wanted to see her. She was paraded at a window – suffragists perceived by some as wild and hysterical – and an old woman stared at her and started to grimace. Later, one Potteries woman spat that the pilgrims were a disgrace to their sex, apparently unsympathetic to the cause for which they were campaigning.

From here, the contingent enjoyed tea with the local society in Burslem before an evening meeting in the local Market Square. Two thousand people, mostly men, gathered, though the reportedly dull reception the pilgrims received suggests that more were there to witness the spectacle than lend support.

Marching on, accompanied by the Old Artillery Band, the pageantry of colour progressed to Hanley, cheered on by some but with unmistakable derision shown from others. They were met by up to ten thousand people, the suffragists dividing into three groups to address the crowds in local squares.

Local celebrities such as Major Cecil Wedgwood and his wife, Lucy Wedgwood, President of the local NUWSS, spoke at the



Camp breakfast at Kineton. Elsewhere in Warwickshire, pilgrims' tents were slashed at night.

meeting. The pilgrims, however, faced a tougher reception, with insults and missiles thrown at them, including stones and eggs, and when this progressed to hustling and pushing, the pilgrims were forced to retreat into the police station. The local paper accredited the Major with single-handedly rescuing one of the pilgrims from a crowd of rowdy youths. That the pilgrims were practically chased from Stafford the following evening by a mob removes any hope that the women received a fairer hearing elsewhere in the area.

The Aftermath

The march concluded in front of 70,000 people at Hyde Park in late July. Though Prime Minister Asquith acknowledged the impressive feat by hosting a pilgrimage deputation, the inaction that followed was further evidence of his personal reluctance to enfranchise women.

The Women's Suffrage Pilgrimage was a mass demonstration of non-violent constitutionalist activity, which showed the strength of the movement to secure votes for women. Less dramatic than the actions of the suffragettes, the pilgrimage nevertheless revealed the hostility and indifference of many to the cause, alongside a countervailing mass support for women's suffrage. Unsuccessful in 1913 and interrupted by the start of the First World War in 1914, women over 30 secured the right to vote in 1918. In 1928, all adult women over 21 gained the suffrage and thereby acquired the same voting rights as men. Peaceful mass pressure by the pilgrims as well as law-breaking by the suffragettes contributed to this important legal change which enabled women to elect and become Members of Parliament. ●

Toby Gavin is a graduate in History and Politics from Keele University.

Further Reading

Sandra Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Jill Liddington & Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us: Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Virago, 1978).

Jill Liddington, *Vanishing for the Vote: Suffrage, Citizenship and the Battle for the Census* (Manchester University Press, 2014).