



The National Archives

Press release
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Hidden files reveal true suffering of early suffragettes

Hidden files uncovered at The National Archives shed new light on the extreme hardships that some women endured in their fight for the vote 100 years ago.

The two Home Office files date from late 1909 – a significant period in the history of the suffragette movement – but they have only recently come to light during a major cataloguing project at The National Archives.

The documents relate to the arrest and imprisonment of nine suffragettes in Winson Green Prison, Birmingham, in 1909. These women, who included Mary Leigh and Charlotte Marsh, went on to be the first suffragettes to be subjected to force-feeding after going on hunger strike – a practice which had gained popularity among the Suffragette Movement earlier that year.

Professor June Purvis, Professor of Women's and Gender History, University of Portsmouth says: "These documents shine some new light on this poignant episode of the Suffragette Movement. The hunger strikes, and ensuing force-feeding of the protestors, represented a real turning point in the struggle.

"The files reveal defiant statements from some of the protestors, as well as moving letters, to the prison authorities, from some of their worried loved ones. It is really wonderful that cataloguing projects such as this one continue to reveal new details about this important part of our history."

The files were uncovered as part of a major cataloguing project at The National Archives involving more than 2,500 Home Office files. These files had no descriptions on the catalogue, and were therefore incredibly hard for social historians and academics to find.

Sarah Hutton, a Records Specialist in Modern Domestic History at The National Archives, says: “Thanks to the hard work of the cataloguing team here and an intern from the American University in Richmond, some rich social history sources have been revealed, which may help to further research in the field of British domestic history.”

The files contain medical opinions on force-feeding – which continued to be used until the outbreak of the First World War – along with signed letters from Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, and various petitions.

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Notes to Editors

About The National Archives

The National Archives is a UK government department and executive agency of the Ministry of Justice. As the official archives of the UK government, it preserves and protects one of the most important collections in the world, holding public records dating back almost 1,000 years.

The National Archives, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk, is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archives of the UK government, it cares for, makes available and ‘brings alive’ a vast collection of over 1000 years of historical records, including the treasured Domesday Book.

Not only safeguarding historical information, The National Archives also manages current digital information and devises new technological solutions for keeping government records readable now and in the future. It provides world class research facilities and expert advice, publishes all UK legislation and official publications, and is a leading advocate for the archive sector.

At the heart of information policy, The National Archives sets standards of best practice that actively promotes and encourages public access to, and the re-use of information, both online or onsite at Kew. This work helps inform today's decisions and ensures that they become tomorrow's permanent record.

The National Archives brings together the Public Record Office, Historical Manuscripts Commission, the Office of Public Sector Information and Her Majesty's Stationery Office. See also www.opsi.gov.uk

For more about suffragettes

Log on to www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education and click *Exhibitions* and *Britain 1906-18*.