

Suffragettes

Suffragettes

How did British women make progress towards full political rights?

Throughout the nineteenth century, women played a prominent role in the fight for political rights. In the second half of the century, three major acts were passed extending political rights - but not to women. Women made only limited progress towards being able to control their own affairs and they did not have the right to vote.



Campaigns for equal voting rights did not become effective until the end of the century, when Millicent Fawcett formed the moderate National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. The NUWSS was based on a network of local suffrage groups, many of which had been created since the 1860s, when they had attempted to get women included in the terms of the 1867 Reform Act. They lobbied politicians, staged demonstrations and campaigned to get the support of the public for their cause.

The campaign gained an even higher profile through the actions of the Women's Social and Political Union, formed in 1903 by mother and daughter Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. The WSPU disrupted public meetings, broke shop windows, set post boxes and buildings on fire and staged noisy protests. When they were arrested, they went on hunger strikes.

The protesters often clashed with police and with the public. For example, at demonstrations outside the Houses of Parliament on 18 and 23 November 1910, there was violence and arrests. The police were accused of behaving with unnecessary brutality and the 18th became known as Black Friday. In 1913, the campaign stepped up and Emmeline Pankhurst was imprisoned for three years for her part in planning protests. On 4 June, Emily Davison was killed at the Epsom Derby.

However, protests were put aside as the women joined in the war effort between 1914-18. In 1918, women were able to vote in general elections for the first time.

Find out more from these original sources:

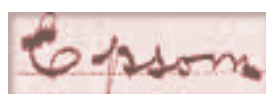
Force-feeding of suffragettes, 1909



Demonstrations at Parliament, 1910

Article called 'Sensational Derby', 1913

Extract on what happened to Emily Davison



Police report on the Derby incident, 1913