

THE FIGHT FOR THE VOTE

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While most people might be familiar with the name Pankhurst, there has been less focus on the campaign for the right to vote outside of London. Many incidents have been forgotten, including one dramatic event in Birmingham's Art Gallery.

On 9 June 1914 Bertha Ryland, a 32-year-old woman living at 19 Hermitage Road, Edgbaston, walked into Birmingham Art Gallery with different intentions from those of her fellow visitors and slashed a painting, *Master Thornhill*, by the well-known eighteenth-century artist George Romney. Bertha was a suffragette, a member of the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU), an organisation she had joined, with her mother Alice, in 1908. Alice Ryland had been a former committee member of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society (BWSS) but had grown disenchanted with the slow progress being made by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), led by Millicent Garret Fawcett, to win women the right to vote.

Similar feelings had prompted Emmeline Pankhurst to form the WSPU in 1903, a women-only organisation which would campaign for social reforms, initially largely in conjunction with the Independent Labour Party. 1906 saw the start of demonstrations and lobbies of Parliament, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of WSPU members.



Banner of the West Midlands Federation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Many suffragettes became disenchanted with the organisation's slow progress.

The slogan 'Deeds not Words' was quickly adopted: something that the women lived by.

The Bingley Hall Incident and Forcible Feeding

One of the earliest incidents of WSPU protest in Birmingham occurred in 1909 when Prime Minister Asquith visited Bingley Hall to address the Liberal meeting. No women were allowed to attend. Members of the WSPU tried to gain entry but were prevented from doing so by a heavy police presence. Alternative tactics were then employed by the suffragettes: two of the women climbed onto the roof of a nearby house and threw roof slates at Asquith's car (the newspapers contain stories of "fragile" women climbing out of windows onto ladders).

Ten women were arrested in connection with the incident, including Hilda Evelyn Burkitt, a WSPU committee member from

Sparkbrook and one of Bertha Ryland's close colleagues. Unfortunately, Burkitt's militant activities resulted in a custodial sentence and



Nellie Hall's suffragette sash. At Asquith's visit to Bingley Hall in 1913 Nellie was arrested for smashing windows and underwent forcible feeding at Winson Green Gaol.

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Many women who campaigned for the vote suffered forcible feeding whilst in gaol.

she was sent to Winson Green Gaol, where she was one of the first hunger-striking suffragettes to endure forcible feeding.

The prison minutes record contradictory statements by Burkitt and the other women:

'I complain that I have not been treated properly since I have been here.'

'I have been forced to take food against my will. I protest against it.'

'I have been told that it is illegal to have a nasal pipe used.'

'I complain of being wrapped in blankets with hands tied down and forced to take food.'

'No more force was used than necessary.'

'Kindness was used.'

She continued militant action after her release: she was arrested across the country on numerous occasions and was involved in window-smashing and arson campaigns. Shockingly, between 1909 and 1914 Hilda was forcibly fed 292 times.

The Suffragists

While many women were impatient with the NUWSS, their membership actually continued to grow during this time, particularly amongst middle-class women, and there were local branches across the country. But while their membership increased alongside the expanding WSPU campaign, they were given far less attention in the press.

The leader of the BWSS, Catherine Osler, recalled a journalist asking her if her organisation was going to do anything extraordinary, for if not then he was too busy to stay. They also made the following point in their annual report for 1910-1911; 'our steady educational work is not sensational enough to supply striking headlines and nothing else is of use unless backed up by power and influence'.

The frustration of Catherine Osler at not being allowed into the Asquith meeting in 1909 was reported in the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* on 18 September:

Osler had written a letter in which she observed that:

women citizens had undoubted reason to feel insulted and injured when denied the right of listening to the exposition by the Prime Minister of proposals which affected them equally with men, and on which they were refused the expression of an opinion through the vote. The injury and insult would be most keenly felt by those who like herself strongly condemned disorder and violence as a means of public agitation.

Osler had grown up in the midst of liberal politics and the fight for enfranchisement; her parents were founding members of the BWSS and by 1901 Catherine was President, and presumably friends with Alice Ryland. Although she did not condone the militant actions of the WSPU, Osler did condemn the practice of forcible feeding, indeed, she resigned her presidency of the Birmingham Women's Liberal Association in protest at the government policy (although this reason was not reported in the press).

Escalation in Militant Activity

The years leading up to 1913 saw a dramatic escalation in militant activity. In response to continuing hunger strikes the Prisoners' (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Bill, or 'Cat and Mouse' Act as it came to be known, was passed in 1913. This meant that women who had been on hunger strike were released just before they got seriously ill and then re-arrested once they had partially recovered.

The national arson campaign began and a house that was being built for Lloyd George in Surrey was partially destroyed by a bomb in February 1913, for which Mrs Pankhurst took personal responsibility. More locally, in April that year a cannon was fired at Dudley Castle; on the gun was painted the slogan 'Votes for Women', but it is unclear who the real culprits were and there is some suggestion it was local men sympathetic to the cause. In June Rowley Regis church was burnt down, although the WSPU did not claim responsibility and there was no proof of their involvement. Militant action intensified during 1914.

Between February and June a string of incidents occurred in the Midlands. The Carnegie Library, now Northfield Library, was completely destroyed by fire (the culprits left one of Mrs Pankhurst's books with a note saying 'this is to start your new library'); Cannon Hill Park refreshments pavilion was burnt down; there was an attack at Birmingham Cathedral where painted slogans were daubed throughout, including on the Burne-Jones stained glass; and an arson attack was made on a train carriage at Kings Norton station.

'I Attack this Work of Art Deliberately!'

It is likely that Bertha Ryland was involved in some of these incidents. She was an active organiser within the WSPU and travelled around the Midlands setting up local branches. In 1911 Bertha (and Alice, her mother) along with many other members of the WSPU, had evaded the census enumerators. She had spent a week in Holloway Prison in November 1911 and, after taking part in the March 1912 window-smashing campaign in London, had been sentenced to six months' imprisonment, spending four months in Winson Green where she was forcibly fed.

This did not deter her from participating in further militant activities, however, and on 9 June 1914 at around 1.20 pm (a year and a day after Emily Davison had died after running in front of the King's horse at Epsom), Bertha walked into Birmingham's Art Gallery. She approached the painting, *Master Thornhill*, which was on loan to the museum by a distant relative of Thornhill's, and took a meat cleaver to it, slashing the canvas three times.

The museum minutes record that her handbag had been examined at the turnstile on entering the museum, but 'the damage was committed by means of a chopper concealed beneath her jacket'. Bertha had with her a note with her name and address and an explanation of her conduct:

I attack this work of art deliberately as a protest against the government's criminal injustice in denying women the vote, and also against the government's brutal injustice in imprisoning, forcibly feeding, and drugging suffragist militants, while allowing



Catherine Osler, President of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society.
Mrs Catherine C. Osler, by Edward Steel Harper II, 1917-1918.

Ulster militants to go free.

The Gallery was immediately closed for six weeks. The museum's authorities had been expecting an attack like this. From March 1914 the records show intense discussion about insurance for works of art and arrangements were made for the continuous attendance of a detective officer at the museum entrance. In April that year the Keeper had noted that 'I have made arrangements with the Detective Department and the editor of the *Birmingham Daily Mail* to kindly telephone me at once in the event of the decease of Mrs Pankhurst, and I think it would be advisable that the Gallery should be immediately closed in the event of her death.'

The *Birmingham Daily Post* on 11 June reported that when the Magistrate called out her name during the court hearing, Bertha exclaimed 'I refuse to have anything to do with the trial. I refuse to be tried' and was

said to have cried 'No surrender' as she left the court. She was committed for trial and while on remand in Winson Green went on hunger strike and was again forcibly fed.

A week later Bertha's father applied for bail, which was given after Bertha made a verbal undertaking that she would not commit a similar act or attend suffragette meetings. Her gaunt appearance was reported by the *Birmingham Gazette*. On 17 July the *Daily Post* reported that Bertha's trial had been postponed: Mr William Billington, surgeon to the Queen's Hospital, stated that her nervous and mental condition was very unsatisfactory.

After her stint in prison in 1912 her doctor had discovered a gross displacement of her kidneys and advised that an operation was necessary. Billington stated that a court hearing at this time would 'gravely jeopardise her mental condition'. The WSPU mouthpiece, *The Suffragette* carried the headline: 'The inquisition in England: Miss Bertha Ryland's experiences in prison, torturing a sick woman, utter agony and misery'. It was reported that Bertha's treatment in 1912 had entailed her being 'seized around the waist by wardresses, and once tied around the waist in the operating chair.

This mauling of the unprotected kidney, together with the retching and choking strained and twisted the kidney and caused chronic inflammation’.

The trial had not taken place by the time war broke out in August 1914 and suffragettes were granted amnesty. The charges against Bertha were officially dropped in October 1914. Although she suffered permanent kidney damage as a result of forcible feeding, Bertha lived until 1963.

The Legacy

So what happened to the painting? *Master Thornhill* is now part of the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but there is no mention of its history. Similarly, the plaque outside Northfield Library tells us the original building was burnt down, but not by whom or the reasons they had for doing this. Why is that?

The Felixstowe Society recently unveiled a plaque that commemorates the burning down of the Bath Hotel in Felixstowe on 28 April 1914 by Hilda Burkitt. She received two years’ imprisonment for this incident (during which time she was forcibly fed again) but was later released under the amnesty granted after the outbreak of war. She died in the 1950s.

Whether you agree or disagree with the type of tactics employed by the militant suffragettes, women, and particularly protesting women, are often written out of history. Deliberate

acts of vandalism, and other similar incidents, while perhaps unwise and carrying serious consequences, were a desperate attempt to achieve equality. There was nothing gratuitous in these acts: the women who carried them out simply wanted a basic human right, the right to vote.

Bertha Ryland summed up the reasons women had for committing these acts in her court hearing on 10 June 1914:

Let all sensible men and women enquire into the cause of militancy instead of condemning the militants. We are militant only so the vote can be won. We need to vote because only by it can the women’s movement become a truly effective power. ●

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Further Reading

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