

Elizabeth Wilks (1861-1956)



The daughter of John Bennett, a corn merchant in Leicester, Elizabeth overcame parental opposition to qualify as a doctor at the age of thirty three. She supported her sister Nellie Taylor when she was imprisoned for smashing a window but like many female doctors felt that she herself could not undertake militant action. Instead, she turned to tax resistance, becoming treasurer of the Tax Resistance League when it was formed in 1909. Believing that women who had no vote, should not be taxed, she refused to pay income tax in 1908 and 1909 and her furniture and jewellery were distrained and sold at public auction. In 1910, when the bailiffs arrived once more, she pointed out that under the Married Women's Property Act her property could not be touched and that it was her husband who was legally responsible for payment. After much prevarication by the authorities, her husband Mark Wilks was duly arrested in 1912 and thrown in to Brixton Prison for not paying his wife's income tax...

Mark Wilks (1861-1945)

Mark, a school teacher, fully supported his wife's campaign for women's suffrage and was a member of the Men's Political Union for Women's Enfranchisement. He was sent to Brixton Gaol on 18th September 1912. The Suffragettes held protest meetings outside the prison until he was finally released on 2nd October. At the time, this was thought to be the most powerful tax resistance protest of all but today it is forgotten.



Mark Wilks with his daughter Helen.

Elizabeth Wilks at her 90th birthday party, 1951

Elizabeth and Mark retired to Headley Down in Hampshire but they did not give up campaigning. When she died in 1956, an obituary said of the couple: 'They loved humanity and hated injustice. In their own lives they set a remarkable example of selfless generosity and service to the community... They left the world a little better than they found it and their friends will remember them with deep affection and gratitude.'

A Threatened Arrest.

Seeing that a warrant has been issued for my arrest and commitment to Brixton Gaol "during the King's pleasure" for my inability to pay my wife's taxes, I wish to place before the public the gross injustices of the case.

My wife, as a medical woman, has for many years earned an independent income, which by the Married Women's Property Act, I am unable to touch. In 1908 and 1909, she refused, as a Suffragist, to make any return of her income either to the Inland Revenue or to me. She further refused to pay Imperial taxes while the Parliamentary Vote was withheld from her, and in consequence, the furniture, which is hers, was seized and sold.

In 1910, she claimed that such distraint was illegal, asserting that under the Income Tax Act, she, as a married woman, was exempt from taxation. The authorities then waived in their claim, making it sometimes on her, sometimes on me, sometimes on us both conjointly, finally on me alone.

On my pointing out that her liability had already been established by forcible distraint upon her property, I was informed that for the future I should be held liable as that by the Income Tax Act the "wife's property for purposes of taxation is the husband's," although by the Married Women's Property Act it is entirely out of his control. Thus I am to be held liable for a tax on property which does not belong to me. I am now told I am to be committed to prison until such time as I shall pay the "Duty and Costs" over £127. It would be unjust to tax a wealthy man for money which he does not possess and cannot touch. But the injustice becomes intolerable in the case of one whose income like mine is utterly inadequate to meet such a charge.

Although I sympathise with the attitude of passive resistance adopted by my wife, I should not feel justified in taking such a course myself since I have the Parliamentary Vote denied to her. For that reason I have paid the tax on my own income as distinct from that of my wife. We claim that men and women should before the law alike be regarded as persons, having equal rights and equal liabilities. If this were the case such a miscarriage of justice could never have occurred.

Particulars about public protests proposed in case of my arrest will appear in "Votes for Women," "The Standard" (Women's Platform) and also in "The Voice."

You are requested to take part in these protests.

MARK WILKS,
47, UPPER CLAPTON ROAD,
N.E.

One of the documents which the pupils looked at when they visited the Women's History Library.

Dr Elizabeth
WILKS

RESEARCH
Booklet

By Florrie And Emma

Elizabeth Wilks

1861-1956

She was ten when her mother died and her father sent her to boarding school where she began the aspiration of becoming a doctor. Her father saw her as a disgrace and disowned her. He sent her to live with her uncle in Bedford, where she lived for a while. She married her partner, Mark, on the 31st of July 1896. When she turned 33 she registered as a doctor and worked in a hospital in London.

In 1900 she adopted a baby called Helen. They lived as a family in Leicester. She had a huge passion for suffrage however never acted physically as she wanted to devote her time and attention to her patients. Her mum Sarah Annie Swain became ill at a young age. Her husband John was a corn merchant and sometimes mayor of Leicester. She practised as a nurse in the east end of London. She sacrificed a lot for women.

Emma Martin On Elizabeth Wilks

"The story of Elizabeth Wilks is so inspiring to me because she wanted to be a doctor and I want to go into the medical field too. She had to fight so hard to do what she loved and still wasn't able to practice as a female doctor. Because of her fight and many other suffragettes I am able to freely follow my dreams and be part of shaping our country through the power of voting."



Elizabeth Wilks facts

Born on 17th July 1861 at Demonfort square Leicester

Daughter of John Bennett and Sarah Annie Bennett
In 1896 she left the University of London with a degree in surgery and as a qualified Doctor. The same year she got married to her husband Mark Wilks.

Her husband Mark was a teacher at a London country school

They adopted a daughter Helen. Unfortunately Helen died in 1919
From 1908 Elizabeth refused to comply with the demand for payment of her income tax.

In 1910 the authorities illegally seized some of her goods in an attempt to levy the tax on her income.

In 1923 Elizabeth moved to Open Land Force Vale Road Headly down Hampshire with her husband Mark.

In 1933 she set up Headley public Utility society, which built 16 new cottages for urgent need of housing.

Elizabeth Wilks died on 16th November 1956 aged 95 at Headly Down.

When she died she left her home and ten acres of woodland to the Headley public utility society.

Elizabeth was not liable to pay tax and her husband was nominally willing to pay the tax but he said the he had no idea how much to pay.



April 18th 1914

I am in the paper this morning, over breakfast, that some women burned down the junction on Gurnworth Pier. I guess that I am pleased that people are fighting this hard for the vote but sometimes I wish that we hadn't started it all. It takes too much out of me and I can't talk about it to anyone. I have to say a strong for all the younger people who are taking on the role from our hands. All the old ones is a great stress because I never believed that this was the answer. Doing things in a more good natured way seems easier but it didn't work. At least this seems to be working a little bit. All I wish is that no-one gets seriously injured or worse, they cause so much damage (both to the cities and to our society) that it is irreparable. I can hold open my eyes no longer. What will happen will happen. I am too old now to interfere. I just have to stand back and watch, and hope.

Elizabeth Wilks