

Magna Carta - 800 Years

Ladies Take Liberties

Not to be outdone, the women of both the county and city took up the struggle to gain the right to vote: a movement which grew out of campaigns to abolish slavery. At the time of the 1832 Reform Act few men and even fewer women had the vote. Leicester's Radical MP P.A. Taylor presented female suffrage petitions to Parliament in 1866 and 1868, the first of many more petitions, resolutions and bills which were all ignored.

The suffrage movement gathered pace and in 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel. The new slogan 'Votes for Women' was adopted, together with more radical campaigning methods. As the suffragettes became more militant, so did the government who allowed the force feeding of women on hunger strike and the ill-treatment of those in prison.



Outside the WSPU. Jane Wyatt (Front Left) and Dorothy Pethick (Front Centre)



Local women were at the forefront of the crusade and were willing to risk family life, employment, intimidation and violence to achieve their aim. The Leicester branch of the WSPU was formed in 1907 and its members and followers attracted national attention. Other branches were established in Loughborough and Market Harborough and in 1910 a WSPU shop was opened in Bowling Green Street in Leicester.



Jane Wyatt



Bertha Clarke



Agnes Clarke

The many brave women (and some men) who were active in the movement cannot all be mentioned here; however, they include sisters Agnes and Bertha Clarke, Alice Hawkins, Jane Wyatt and Dorothy Pethick. Although some were uncomfortable with the escalating violence of the campaign, the courage of these local ladies cannot be doubted.

With the advent of World War One, the suffragettes agreed to direct their efforts towards war work, whilst the government released those in prison. However, their campaign had succeeded in highlighting the continuing injustice and convincing many that the exclusion of women was manifestly unfair. Recognising this the 1918 Representation of the People Act enfranchised men over 21 and women over 30. Finally in 1928 true equality was achieved with all citizens over 21 able to exercise their vote in elections: a right we take for granted today.

