

## 6 February 2018

**A century ago on this day the *Representation of the People Act* passed into law. In the following December, women were allowed to vote in Parliamentary Elections.**

BUT not all women – only those over 30 and who possessed certain property qualifications. In the same election all men over 21 had the right to vote for the first time. 8.4 m women could now vote and they comprised 43% of the electorate. Had there been equality then women might have outvoted men!

There were two major groups who worked for votes for women – but they had contrasting methods:

**The Suffragists**, led by **Mrs. Millicent Fawcett** – wished to prove that women deserved the right to vote because of their inherent qualities and their struggle was via peaceful means;

**The Suffragettes**, led by the **Pankhursts**, took the view that peaceful means had achieved little in 50 years and turned to militant and violent means to get the vote. The consequence was that many were imprisoned and force fed if they went on hunger strike.

### **What about Tewkesbury and Gloucestershire?**

**Jennifer Slack** wrote an article for *THS Bulletin 15 [2006]* on [Mrs] **HARRIET MCILQUHAM: A TRUE PIONEER?** She was the wife of a wealthy landowner in Staverton/Boddington and in 1881 became the first married woman to be elected a **Poor Law Guardian** and in 1889 was manoeuvred out of her victory as a County Councillor. She was, therefore, a *suffragist*.

However, in 2015, **Derek Benson** in *Bulletin 24 [2015] WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE ACTIVITIES IN TEWKESBURY* argued that, towards the end of her life in 1910, Mrs. McIlquham was supporting the suffragettes financially and voicing support. Derek put the local suffrage activities into perspective and does show that locally there was support for female suffrage from male religious leaders and politicians, especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Although there were meetings locally, there did not seem much local fervour before 1914, though some visiting *suffragists* were fined in 1909 for a motoring offence while trying to arrange an open-air meeting in Tewkesbury!

Gloucestershire did not witness violent scenes but there was one major case of arson when, in December 1913, the empty Alstone Lawn Manor-House in Cheltenham was set ablaze by two suffragettes who toured the country trying to inflict similar damage. They were easily caught, tried and jailed.<sup>1</sup>

In 1914 both groups suspended any militancy to join the war effort – indeed in 1915 the last suffrage demonstration was to force the government to give women the **Right to Serve** in the War – and serve they did in vast numbers; women munitions workers perhaps ensured that the army had the means to win the war.

### **So why did some – but not all - women win the right to vote in 1918?**

Many argue that their war work won them so much respect that only 55 MPs opposed the bill. However, the very women who worked in the munitions factories were too young and poor to be rewarded. It is argued that the government feared that, with all men over 21 having the vote, *Universal Suffrage* would upset the social balance. Strangely perhaps, the unenfranchised women did not fight being cheated out of their victory.

**However, universal suffrage for all women came in 1928 – and only 10 MPs opposed the bill.**

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<sup>1</sup> History Press online & Derek Benson, *Women's Suffrage Activities in Cheltenham* (2014, Kindle ebook)

**It was not until 1970 that Gloucestershire voted in its first female MP [Mrs. Sally Oppenheim in Gloucester] - and Tewkesbury has yet to be so blessed!**



*On 6 February 1918 female munition workers under 30 did not win the right to vote [Photo D. Round]*