

The Suffragette Bombers

Britain's Forgotten Terrorists



Evening News

**SUFFRAGETTES
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Simon Webb

**SUFFRAGETTE
EXPLOSION**

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BOMB
BLOWS
CORONATION**

**WOMAN
CHURCH
BOMB
KILLS**

OWN

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Terrorists***

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Introduction

History has been kind to the suffragettes. A century after their activities ended, they are almost universally regarded as having been heroic fighters for a noble and just cause. Hunger strikes, chaining themselves to railings, smashing windows, dying under the hooves of the King's horse at Epsom – these are the images that we associate with the suffragettes. There was another side to their struggle though, and it is one that has been almost wholly forgotten.

In addition to their legitimate political activity and more boisterous protests, they also conducted a widespread and sustained bombing campaign against targets throughout the entire country. These targets included the Bank of England and St Paul's Cathedral in London, theatres in Dublin and the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh, as well as other places as varied and disparate as the Liverpool Cotton Exchange, the Glasgow Botanic Gardens and a barracks in Leeds. The bombings reached a climax in the summer of 1914 with explosions at Westminster Abbey in London, Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland and a cathedral in Ireland.

The combination of high explosive bombs, incendiary devices and letter bombs used by the suffragettes provided the pattern for the IRA campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the first terrorist bomb to explode in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century, at Lisburn's Christ Church Cathedral, was detonated not by the IRA, but by the suffragettes in August 1914.

Criticising the suffragettes makes many people feel uncomfortable. They were so obviously justified in their anger at being deprived of the vote that it may seem a little small-minded a hundred years later, to be quibbling about the finer details of their methods. After all, the predominant image we have today of the suffragettes is of dedicated women suffering and even being prepared to die for a principle in which they believed, a principle which is today almost universally accepted – that men and women should have equal rights in a democratic society.

At the heart of the popularly accepted narrative about the suffragettes lies two intertwined ideas. The first is that the suffragettes were instrumental in helping British women to gain the vote. The second is that they did so by unconventional, but almost entirely non-violent means. The myth runs that the Pankhursts and their acolyte, Emily Davison, endured hardship and pain themselves in order to draw attention to the injustices of the society in which they lived. They were Victorian women who triumphed in the end by ensuring that it was they, rather than their opponents, who suffered. They sacrificed themselves for the greater good. True, they and some of their more enthusiastic followers might have broken a few windows or trashed pillar boxes, but this was pretty harmless stuff and they wouldn't have dreamed of hurting anybody. When we think of them, it is usually as victims, rather than as aggressors.

Open any book mentioning the suffragettes or visit a museum with a display about them and you are sure to encounter at least two posters created by the suffragette movement which epitomise how we view these women today. The first, entitled 'Torturing Women in Prison', shows a hunger striker being force-fed and the second, a response to the 'Cat and Mouse Act', depicts a lifeless woman in the mouth of a cruel animal. Undoubtedly, these are brilliant pieces of political propaganda; both posters intended to show women as helpless, cruelly mistreated creatures. These are women to whom things are *done*.

The general feeling now is that although these women may have shouted, thrown things, damaged letter boxes and made a nuisance of themselves, they are the ones who suffered and who were the objects of violence and oppression. It was the police who were aggressive towards them; the prison authorities who tortured them by force-feeding; the rough crowds of men who taunted and sometimes man-handled them at their public rallies; and the government who played cat and mouse with them.

This archetype of woman as suffering martyr is appealing, in a mawkish and sentimental way, with its selfless heroines who never need to resort to the masculine devices of violence and aggression to get their way. It's a harmless enough fairy tale, as long as we bear in mind that it bears little or no relation to the truth. The reality is very different. Not only were the suffragettes representatives of a profoundly undemocratic and arguably proto-fascist terrorist organisation, it is very likely that their actions delayed, rather than hastened, votes for women.

That the suffragettes were prepared to suffer themselves, and also to inflict suffering upon others, seems a strange idea, running counter to all that we think we know about the campaign for women's votes. So deeply embedded in the national psyche is the notion of suffragettes as tireless campaigners and sometimes selfless martyrs, so powerful is the mythology surrounding them, that one feels instinctively that they could not *really* be described as 'terrorists'. This is certainly the view of almost every modern author who mentions them. Andrew Marr, for instance, writing in *The Making of Modern Britain*, cites one relatively innocuous bomb attack upon an unoccupied house belonging to Lloyd George, and then claims that the suffragettes 'were not terrorists in any serious modern sense'.

It would be interesting to know what people in London's West End would have made of the above assertion if they were among those who happened to be in the vicinity of Trafalgar Square on 5 April 1914. At 10.30pm that evening, a bomb planted by the suffragettes in the Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields exploded, blowing out the windows and showering passers-by with broken glass. The explosion started a fire inside the church and hundreds of people soon flocked to the scene, many voicing their anger at the suffragettes who had carried out this attack.

The best way to consider the true nature of suffragette activity in the years leading up to World War One is to take a few random incidents from that time, transplant them from Edwardian Britain to the present day and then see what we would think of them now.

Imagine for a moment that the leader of a militant group has been jailed. Comrades on the outside decide to mount a protest against the imprisonment by placing two powerful charges of dynamite against the wall of the prison where their leader is being held and then detonating them without warning. The only damage to the prison is the partial demolition of a surrounding wall, but nearby houses have all their windows blown out. Jagged shards of broken glass narrowly miss two young children asleep in their beds. Would this be defined as terrorism?

Or consider this: a bomb is planted in an empty train, which is standing beside a busy railway line. It explodes as another train is passing. The force of the explosion blows apart the carriage in which the bomb had been placed and a beam of wood is hurled into the cab of the other train, nearly killing the driver. Is this terrorism?

A final example should be enough to make the point. Petrol is splashed around the carpets and curtains of a crowded theatre, then set alight. At the same time, several bombs are detonated inside the building. Fortunately, the fires are extinguished before they get too great a hold, disaster is averted, but it is a close thing. Terrorism?

These were not isolated incidents but part of a coordinated campaign of bombings and arson designed to put pressure on the government in Westminster. Such attacks were instigated by the leadership of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), whose members were commonly known as the suffragettes. Paid workers from the organisation were involved in acquiring explosives, transporting them about the country and constructing bombs. It is hard to know what this could possibly be called, other than terrorism.

The definition of terrorism currently used by the British government might help us decide how to describe the activities of the suffragettes. According to this definition, taken from the Terrorism Act 2000, terrorism is:

The use or threat of action designed to influence the government ... to intimidate the public or a section of the public, made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause and involving serious violence against a person, serious damage to property, a threat to a person's life, or a serious risk to the health or safety of the public.

This seems straightforward enough and if you count the planting of bombs in public places, attempts to sabotage the water supply to cities and the destruction by fire and explosives of various churches, railway stations and houses as being serious violence against property undertaken to advance a political course of action, then you will probably accept that some suffragettes were terrorists. When we discover that Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the suffragettes, was convicted at the Old Bailey of inciting others to explode a bomb at the house of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, then it is hard to avoid the conclusion that she was in fact the leader of a terrorist group.

The real question to ask is why the first organised terrorist campaign in twentieth century Britain seems to have been airbrushed from history. From attacks on the transport infrastructure and water supply, to the explosion of a bomb at a public hall in Manchester, from letter bombs to politicians and judges to the attempt to flood a valley in the Midlands, this was a ruthless and determined strategy designed to force political change by the constant threat of violence. Books on the

suffragettes invariably skim over this aspect of the movement, usually making only brief mention of fires in pillar boxes and the breaking of windows. We read about the slashing of a painting in the National Gallery, but know nothing about the planting there of a bomb; we have all read about Emily Davison falling beneath the King's horse at Epsom, but not everybody knows that she initiated a campaign of arson and had earlier that year set off the first terrorist bomb to be exploded in England in the twentieth century.

This ignorance of the true nature of suffragette activity permeates our society. Danny Boyle, the man who choreographed the historical pageant at the opening of the 2012 Olympic Games in London, said that it was inspired by Emily Davison. It is probably fair to say that few of the 25 million or so people in this country and the hundreds of millions in other parts of the world, who watched this spectacular exhibition realise that Emily Davison was a suicidal terrorist bomber! The result of this ignorance is that we are left with a bowdlerised version of history, with many of the suffragettes' activities hidden from view.

While looking at the violent activities of the suffragette movement, we shall also be exploring the thesis that they did more harm than good to the cause of women gaining the parliamentary vote. They were, after all, only one small group working to that end in Edwardian Britain and the other, larger groups were actually achieving more politically than the suffragettes. While the suffragettes were burning down churches and blowing up trains, other women were negotiating patiently for the extension of the franchise. Their efforts bore fruit, but because they made less of a noise than the militants their role tends to be overlooked today.

Some readers might have been taken aback to see the suffragettes described above as an undemocratic and possibly proto-fascist group. This is because just as many of their actions have now been conveniently forgotten, so too has the essential nature of their organisation and the details of what they were actually fighting for. For instance, the Women's Social and Political Union was certainly not hoping to see the vote given to all women. In their literature, they specifically denied that this was their intention and made it clear that they only wanted female ratepayers, property owners and university graduates to be given the right to vote. They were not fighting so that working-class women should be included in the franchise.

Such views bring into question the extent to which we can accept that the suffragettes were fighting for democracy, at least as we think of it today. After all, what would we think of a modern, British political movement whose stated aim was to restrict voting to men and women who owned their own homes or were well educated? Would we think of this as a group fighting for democracy?

Before looking at the women who carried out the bombings and incendiary attacks during 1913 and 1914, we will need to examine Edwardian society in general, thereby placing the suffragettes in context and seeing what it was that made them so different from all the other groups working at that time to acquire the vote for women. In the course of this investigation, it will be necessary to explode a number of myths. We will begin with two of the most deeply rooted of these wholly mistaken ideas. One of these is that at the beginning of the twentieth century, men in Britain had the vote and women did not; the other, that the suffragettes were fighting so that all women might have the vote.

Chapter One

Suffragettes and Suffragists

**‘ *The Women’s Social and Political Union are
NOT asking for a vote for every Woman ...* ’**

(Outline of the aims included in all WSPU publications)

One of the commonest and strangest misconceptions about the suffragettes is that they were struggling for the right of all women in the United Kingdom to be able to vote in parliamentary elections. In fact, as they made very clear in the booklets, newspapers and pamphlets they published, most suffragettes wanted the vote to be limited only to middle and upper-class women, those who owned property, paid rates or who had attended university. Gaining the vote for working-class women was never their intention. Some socialists at the time, who were working to gain the vote for every adult in the United Kingdom, regardless of gender or social class, remarked that the suffragette slogan should have been not 'Votes for Women', but rather 'Votes for Ladies'!

In the front of their publications the Women's Social and Political Union, whose militant members were known as suffragettes, printed a brief outline of their aims. This began with the firm declaration that 'The Women's Social and Political Union are NOT asking for a vote for every woman, but simply that sex shall cease to be a disqualification for the franchise'.

This could hardly be plainer. The suffragettes were not interested in extending the franchise to working-class women who did not fulfil the property qualifications necessary at that time to be included on the electoral register, they simply wished for those within their own social class to be allowed the vote. To understand why, we must look at who the suffragettes actually were and how they began. We will also need to examine the difference between *suffragettes* and *suffragists*.

During the final 30 years or so of the nineteenth century, there was a good deal of agitation in the United Kingdom for political reform which would enable women to vote in parliamentary elections. Those who worked towards this end were known as 'suffragists', this term being formed from the word 'suffrage', the right to vote in elections. These campaigners achieved considerable success, although progress was being made in small increments, rather than in leaps and bounds.

Some women were not content with what they saw as the slow and halting pace of change resulting from the constitutional efforts of the suffragists. In 1903, the middle-class widow of a radical lawyer founded a new group called the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Emmeline Pankhurst, aged 45 at the time, had already been involved in an organisation called The Women's Franchise League and had fallen out with many of the more moderate suffragists as a consequence of her militant ideas. From the beginning, the motto of her

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WSPU was 'Deeds, not Words'. It was also the WSPU that came up with the most famous political slogan of the Edwardian Era: 'Votes for Women'.

Members of the WSPU were far more vociferous in their demands than any suffragists had previously been and they were prepared to engage in direct action, instead of merely working patiently behind the scenes. Their demand was for immediate change, not gradual, haphazard and piecemeal progress. The change they wanted was nothing radical, such as the right of all working-class people to vote. It was simply that women should be able to vote on the same terms as men. Many men and women, those in positions of authority, as well as the general public, regarded the predominantly young, women activists of the WSPU as being wild and irresponsible.

On 10 January 1906, the popular newspaper the *Daily Mail* coined a new word to describe this type of campaigner. They called them 'suffragettes', a diminutive term that was meant to be patronising and even faintly insulting; but the women themselves seized upon it and claimed it for their own. In the years following the end of the First World War, the suffragists were almost forgotten and all those who had fought for the right for women to vote in general elections during the years leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914 became known as suffragettes. For many people today, any woman who campaigned for the right of women to vote in Edwardian Britain must, by definition, have been a suffragette. This is in spite of the fact that the vast and overwhelming majority of women working peacefully for a change in the law were not suffragettes at all, but suffragists, people who restricted themselves to lawful and constitutional methods.

Before we examine further the story of the struggle for female emancipation, let us look at some of the many misunderstandings that have emerged. The following is typical of the narrative that is widely accepted by most people in this country today:

At the beginning of the twentieth century men in the United Kingdom had the vote and women did not. The government and parliament were opposed to the idea of women voting and refused to listen to reason. Many brave women were therefore forced to take action to call attention to the injustice of the situation. These people were called suffragettes. Their actions included breaking windows and going on hunger strike. One dedicated woman, Emily Davison, even gave her life for the cause of women's suffrage. Eventually, the movement for change became so

widespread and powerful that it could no longer be ignored. As a consequence of the suffragettes' actions, together with the work that women did during the war, the vote was granted to women in 1918. We have Emmeline Pankhurst and her suffragettes to thank for this.

The above account is a pretty standard one and may be found not only in schoolbooks but also in many modern reference books. Here is a random example, taken from *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, second edition, revised in 2005:

Suffragette – a woman seeking the right to vote through organised protest. In the UK in the early 20th century the suffragettes initiated a campaign of demonstrations and militant action, under the leadership of the Pankhursts, after the repeated defeat of women's suffrage bills in Parliament. In 1918 they won the vote for women over the age of 30 and 10 years later were given full equality with men in voting rights.

There is no doubt here who is responsible for women gaining the vote in this country – it was all down to the Pankhursts and their supporters, the suffragettes. Perhaps if we work our way methodically through some of the confusion which has grown up around the struggle for women's suffrage in this country, it will help us to understand what motivated them. It might also enable us to find out why they felt compelled, unlike all the other women fighting for the franchise, to resort to terrorism. Indeed, no other women's suffrage movement, either in this country or anywhere else in the world, ever felt the need to plant bombs in theatres or to set fire to people's houses in order to gain their ends. This lack of militant action did not appear to harm the prospects for female enfranchisement in those other countries, some of which gave women the vote much earlier than the United Kingdom. Violent action undertaken for this cause was a purely British phenomenon.

It is sometimes assumed that men in this country had the vote at the beginning of the twentieth century, while women did not. In fact, the situation with regard to voting in this country at the time that the WSPU was founded in 1903 was not at all straightforward. Following the Reform and Redistribution Acts of 1884–1885, the right to vote in parliamentary elections had been granted to some men in the United Kingdom – those who fulfilled certain property and residence qualifications or those who had attended university. What this meant in practice was that when the Pankhursts set up the WSPU over a third of