

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2004

The History of the Suffragettes

For Wargrave Local History Society January meeting, Margaret Houlbrooke gave a fascinating talk on The History of the Suffragettes. Margaret was suitably dressed in green, purple and white - the suffragette colours! The activities of the movement have become part of 20th century folklore - women chained to railings, being killed under a horse at the Derby, or knocking off policemen's helmets. However, the campaign for women to have the vote began rather earlier, and peacefully - in 1867, at the time of the second Reform Act, when men of the poorer classes in towns got the vote - their rural counterparts getting it in 1884. It was not until 51 years later (in 1918) that women got the vote, and the young 'flappers' had to wait till 1928.

For the first 30 years or so, the women campaigned by talking to MPs, trying to persuade them of the justice of their cause. Every year a suitable motion was presented in parliament - and always turned down. By the end of the century, the women started to get impatient, and re-organised themselves as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies - with people such as Millicent Fawcett at the head, and increased the volume of their activities. Another group, the Women's Social and Political Union - starting in Manchester with Mrs Pankhurst, however embarked on more militant activities, such as putting acid into pillar boxes, jumping out at concerts or sermons, damaging golf courses, etc. - and were good at getting themselves noticed at times when people did not want to hear their message. If the Wargrave church fire was caused by suffragettes, they were almost certainly WSPU members.

In 1906, the women met with Campbell-Bannerman, the then Prime Minister. He agreed that what they said was right - but that he would not do anything about it, which made the women angry. Later, when the agitation got stronger, the government introduced forced feeding - which damaged some women's health - and the 'Cat and Mouse Act' (just a year before the Wargrave fire), whereby they were let out of jail when they became frail, and re-arrested when back to health. This did the government no good - the suffragettes went gladly to prison, but made them become more violent. Margaret mentioned the Wargrave fire - just one such incident, as recorded in *The Book of Wargrave*.

All this effort was a failure. The women never got the support of men in general, no political party took up their cause, and parliament was totally unresponsive. The women persevered for over half a century - the 4 forces driving them being demography, education, democracy and socialism (all the suffragettes swore they would vote labour - though not all of them did!). The men thought that women's "failure to realise man is the master, and why he is the master" lay at the core of their cause, whilst Dr Maudsley believed "women's minds inferior to men". Women were seen as dangerous, women were temptresses". It was even suggested that a woman who went into university education - especially mathematics - would have "an adverse physical reaction, with stress and overheating the brain". Even Queen Victoria thought it "mad folly" for women to have the vote. - and the campaign a "hobby of disappointed old maids who nobody wanted to marry".

However, the part women played in the 1914-18 war did lead to the inclusion of votes for women (over 30) in the Representation of the People Act of 1917 - although Asquith, the Prime Minister, was not convinced that this should happen - thinking that the women voters on the register were "dim, unget-at-able element, ignorant of politics, and credulous to the last degree".

Margaret illustrated her talk with contemporary illustrations, and also spoke of various other ways in which women were then seen as 'unsuitable' people at that time to have the vote, and the 'sex discrimination' practiced at that time.
