Deeds Not Words: Emmeline Pankhurst in Coulsdon 1911

by Eric Jenkinson



This year marks the centennial of the Representation of the Peoples Act, which allowed women over 30 years of age, who satisfied minimum property requirements, the right to vote. This meant that for the first time 43% of women in Britain had the right to vote. The same Act granted a vote to all men over the age of 21 without any qualification criteria. The 1918 Act was the result of a sometimes violent struggle by women and their supporters which had lasted throughout most of the previous century. A small blue plaque on the wall of the Comrades Club, erected by the Bourne Society, commemorates the occasion over 100 years ago this April when the prime mover of the movement, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst, addressed a packed meeting to spread the suffragette message of women's suffrage.



The women's suffrage movement began to gain traction during the 1860s with the formation of local societies in towns and villages around Britain with the common aim of raising public awareness of equal rights for women to vote. The Great Reform Act of 1832 had extended that right to adult propertied men, approximately 1 in 7 of the male population. It was not until the formation of The Women's Franchise League in 1889 by Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst, based in Manchester, that the movement began to lobby nationally for married women to be given the vote as well as single women and widows. Millicent Fawcett, an educationalist and activist for workers' rights as well as universal women's suffrage, formed the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) to bring together the network of local groups to work towards equal votes for all women. The new organisation, together with its constituent groups, was intended to use peaceful means to change public opinion and to influence the views of politicians through protests and marches. This movement was known as the Suffragists.

In 1903, disillusioned by the refusal of successive governments to support equal rights for women and the peaceful tactics of the NUWSS, Emmeline Pankhurst split from the movement and, with her daughter Christabel, she formed the militant, Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The term suffragette was born. Mrs Pankhurst also moved the WSPU (motto: Deeds Not Words) from Manchester to London. At around the same time, having lost faith in the Conservative and Liberal parties over their lack of official support for women's equality, the NUWSS turned towards the infant Labour Party which was seeking increased membership among the working class. With the support of leading Labour figures such as Keir Hardie, the Party's founder, by 1912 women's suffrage had become official Labour Party policy. At around the same period, Mrs Pankhurst became increasingly convinced that the future for attaining votes for women lay with the educated middle class and from 1907 Mrs Pankhurst moved towards the political right, gradually disassociating the WSPU from the Labour Party and working class women.

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On 25 April 1911, Emmeline Pankhurst, the political activist and leader of the militant suffragette movement, spoke in Coulsdon on "Votes for Women" to packed audiences at the invitation of the local suffragette societies (which, despite their and suffragist approach, frequently worked differences of Mrs Pankhurs.t. Pankhurst spoke together). first in the Smitham Parish Hall, then three times; hall behind and finally to a large overspill audience gathered outside on in the wooden Brighton Road.

Mrs Pankhurst spoke passionately about the role of women; men and women should be comrades, she said, but women had a duty to themselves. So long as women depended on men for every penny women would remain in a state of slavery. The vote for women was the first step towards economic independence for women. Male Members of Parliament did not know about the needs and feelings of women. The vote might be a small issue, but it would be the beginning of freedom for all women, Mrs

Pankhurst argued. Mrs Pankhurst's remarks, including her speeches outside the hall, were well received by her audiences, which included many men sympathetic to the suffrage cause.



This was not the first publicity encounter between the people of Coulsdon and the suffrage movement. In 1909 Miss Muriel Matters, an Australian activist member of the Women's Freedom League, flew over London in an airship emblazoned with the legend "Votes for Women". Miss Matters had intended to reach the House of Commons and the State Opening of Parliament by King Edward VII. Unfortunately, her airship was blown off course and landed in a tree in Coulsdon. Miss Matters was one of two women who had protested in Parliament in 1908 by chaining themselves to the grille of the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons.

The passing of the 1918 Representation of the People Act was not the end of the fight for women's suffrage. Unlike men, who could vote at 21, women still could not vote until the age of 30 and they remained subject to property qualifications. In November 1918 Parliament passed the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, which allowed women to become MPs for the first time from the age of 21. Yet the voting age for women remained 30. The Act therefore meant that women could stand to be elected as a Member of Parliament before they were able to vote! Seventeen women stood in the December 1918 General Election. One was elected as the first woman MP. She was Constance Markievicz. As a member of Sinn Fein, however, she did not take her seat. The first woman to take her seat was Nancy Astor (Viscountess Astor - Conservative) who won the by-election in December 1919 for the Plymouth Sutton constituency. Nancy Astor held the seat until she stood down in 1945. It was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that women over 21 were able to vote and women finally achieved the same voting rights as men.

The present day Coulsdon (Comrades) Club on Brighton Road sits on a site of historic importance in Coulsdon Town Centre. In 1886, a corrugated iron building was constructed on this site to house the Cane Hill Mission School. This later became the Smitham School (Coulsdon was then known as Smitham Bottom) which later moved to premises on Chipstead Valley Road in 1892. In 1899, the corrugated iron building was taken over by St Andrew's church, which was the first church in Coulsdon. When St Andrew's Church moved to its present site, the hall became the Smitham Parish A finail as part of Coulsdon Art Trail commemorating Emeline Pankhurst speeches at Smitham Parish Hall in 1911 was placed on top of the finger pole by Sew perfect in the Brighton Road in 2022.



