

SUFFRAGE

LITTLEHAMPTON AND THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The story of Littlehampton's suffrage movement is little known. Mary Neal, Millicent Fawcett, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Cicely Hale were key figures in the fight for a woman's right to vote, enfranchisement, and all had strong links with the area.

Their pioneering actions during the Edwardian era helped women gain limited voting rights in 1918 and equal voting with men in 1928.

The Suffrage movement developed in the mid 1800s. It was formed by a number of women's rights groups campaigning through protests, the media, and forceful activities. In 1897 Millicent Fawcett created the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), which united several smaller organisations. Fawcett's organisation was nonviolent and believed in peaceful protest. These members are known as 'suffragists'.

There were militant organisations such as the Women's Social and Political Union. The WSPU was founded in 1903 by several women, including the famous political activist Emmeline Pankhurst. Mary Neal, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Cicely Hale were all members of the WSPU. These women are known as 'suffragettes'.

The sometimes-violent tactics of the WSPU divided contemporary opinion. Some believed that it was necessary to generate public interest, and some believed it was detrimental to the long-term cause.

Many women and men would find themselves imprisoned for their beliefs, enduring humiliating punishments such as force feeding.



CECILY HALE

1884 - 1981

Cecily Hale was born prematurely in London in 1884. The youngest of six, Cecily's parents sacrificed her education for the sake of her three older brothers who were preparing for college. It was in her twenties that she saw Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst speak in Hyde Park and thus joined the suffragette movement. Much like Mary Neal, Cecily dedicated her life to caring for others through her work as a Health Visitor, later settling in South Terrace, Littlehampton.

Her life leading up to her move to Littlehampton was devoted to the enfranchisement of women. It was in 1908 that she began to work in the information department of the WSPU alongside women such as Emily Davidson. They gathered news stories on every aspect of women's rights and suffragism. Her earlier training in secretarial work proved useful here. In an interview in 1977, Cecily said that she felt that her job with the WSPU gave her the education her parents hadn't.

Whilst Cecily enjoyed her time spent with the WSPU, it had an unfortunate impact upon her social standing. Like many other girls of a middle-class background at the time, Cecily would have experienced a 'coming out' into fashionable society. As a suffragette, she found this a particularly difficult experience and encountered harsh treatment from those who disagreed with giving women the vote.

Cecily's influence upon Littlehampton began when in 1935 she took the post of Health Visitor in the town. By then she was a well-known figure in the public eye, and her previous experience of social reform work improved many lives in Littlehampton.



In her autobiography 'A Good Long Time', Cecily wrote of Littlehampton:

"Littlehampton may be overcrowded by day in summer and without charm for some, but still I love it and I do not want to live anywhere else."

EMMELINE

PETHICK LAWRENCE

1867 - 1954

Mary and Emmeline's partnership began when they met at the West London Mission in 1891. A few years later, in 1895, they moved into a flat in St Pancras, London. This made it easier for them to work together. Emmeline supported Mary throughout her time spent living and working in Littlehampton. She helped Mary to establish the Green Lady Hostel in Littlehampton, and frequently spent holidays there.

Emmeline had also assisted Mary in establishing the Esperance Club in 1895. Yet Emmeline saw that the club could be doing more. She went on to set up Maison Espérance, a cooperative allowing dressmakers to work reasonable hours with good wages.

In 1901 Emmeline married Frederick Lawrence, a Labour politician. They chose to combine their surnames, a rare act in the Edwardian period. In her autobiography, Emmeline claimed that Mary planned much of their wedding, and fishermen from Littlehampton were invited to the celebrations in London.



Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, 1890.
Photo curtesy LSE Library

Emmeline joined the WSPU in 1906, beginning her career as a suffragette. She was recruited as the organisation's treasurer and raised a substantial amount of funding. Emmeline and Frederick also co-edited the magazine 'Votes for Women'. The couple suffered imprisonment for their radical beliefs. Unfortunately, they were then ousted from the WSPU after questioning the Pankhursts' belief in violent tactics.

Through Emmeline and Fred's work for 'Votes for Women' at Clements Inn, London, they met Cecily Hale, then a young suffragette working for the WSPU. Cecily would also become a prominent suffragette and health worker here in Littlehampton.

THE ESPERANCE CLUB

Mary Neal was a pioneer of women's rights. She lived in Littlehampton from 1922 to 1940. Before coming to the town, Mary set up the Esperance Club in 1895. The club improved the lives of impoverished working women. One of the ways in which she did this was to introduce the women to physical activity.

Mary believed that folk dancing, such as Morris Dancing, would help women to express themselves and ultimately give them the confidence to improve their lives.

You can find out more on the Mary Neal panels.

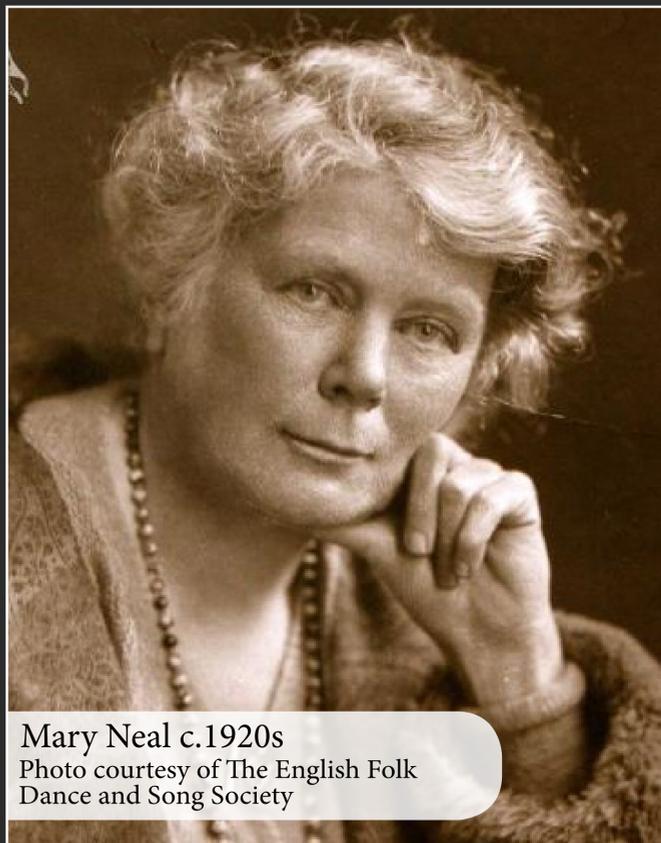
MARY NEAL

THE SOCIAL REFORMER

1860 - 1944

Mary Neal was born in Birmingham in 1860 to a prosperous button manufacturer and enjoyed a comfortable upbringing. In 1886, Mary joined the West London Methodist Mission, working with vulnerable people. The Mission also had numerous connections to the suffrage movement. Mary went on to establish a club for working women 'The Esperance Club' and a women's hostel in Littlehampton called the Green Lady. She lived in the town between 1922 and 1940, residing in 'Green Bushes', St. Flora's Road.

Early on in life, Mary developed a deep enthusiasm for improving the lives of working women, who lived in shocking poverty. Mary met Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence at the Mission in 1891. Four years later, in 1895, Mary and Emmeline founded the Esperance Club in London when they found that the Mission was too constrictive for their ambitions.



Mary Neal c.1920s
Photo courtesy of The English Folk
Dance and Song Society

The club aimed to improve the lives of working women by employing them as dressmakers with set hours and a good wage. The club ran for 20 years and provided both Mary and those under her care with the confidence to change society.

In 1900, Mary established the Green Lady Hostel in Littlehampton. The Hostel welcomed women of all ages, means, and churches to holiday in Littlehampton. Mary eventually became a Justice of the Peace in 1934. Her focus was on improving the lives of juvenile criminals.

MARY NEAL

THE FOLK DANCER

Mary had a deep interest in traditional English folk dances and saw it as an opportunity to better the lives of working women. In 1905, Mary met the renowned collector of English folk music, Cecil Sharp. The two were introduced at the Hampstead Conservatoire of Music in London. Cecil began to help Mary to teach women to express themselves through Morris dancing.

Whilst Mary and Cecil shared an enthusiasm for popularising the British folk movement, their working relationship was not always strong. Cecil was not a vocal supporter of women's enfranchisement, which conflicted with Mary's headstrong nature. Cecil's sister, Evelyn, had previously caused their family distress due to her active participation in the suffrage movement. Mary's and Cecil's relationship worsened during a trip to America to promote folk dancing in 1910. Cecil had cancelled many of her appointments scheduled for the trip, which upset Mary.

Mary's enthusiasm was not weakened by this and she continued to support the folk revival. She wanted folk dancing to enrich the lives of the girls she supported. Regardless of social standing, anyone could attempt folk dancing. Mary believed this pastime was transformative and enlisted teachers. Soon, the Esperance Club became well-known for their performances, and travelled around the country. The Club even performed by the seafront in Littlehampton in 1905.

MARY NEAL

THE SUFFRAGETTE

Mary became involved with the Suffrage movement later in life when Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence introduced her to the movement. This was a natural step for Mary who believed in the enfranchisement of women and had already witnessed the detrimental effects of poor rights for women. Although Mary would later describe her activities with the WSPU as “not very active” because of her involvement with folk dancing, she was an enthusiastic supporter.

Emmeline was a more active member. She invited Mary to the first meeting of the ‘New Committee’ to take the minutes. The committee was formed by the WSPU in 1907 when its leader, Emmeline Pankhurst, disagreed with the previous constitution. From then on, Mary supported the suffrage movement by raising awareness of poor rights for women. She also found the time to write for ‘The Suffragette’, a newspaper edited by Emmeline and Frederick Pethick-Lawrence.

Mary also used the Esperance Club to spread the idea that women deserved more legal rights, such as the vote. The Esperance Club proved to be important for the Suffrage movement, and the club performed at WSPU events and venues, promoting the benefits of empowering women.

In 1908, Mary invited the aristocratic Lady Constance Lytton to visit the Green Lady Hostel in Littlehampton. The famous suffragette Annie Kenney also attended their meeting. Mary and Annie persuaded Lady Lytton to join the Suffrage movement. Lady Lytton’s involvement showed how influential the movement was becoming.

MILLICENT FAWCETT

1847 - 1929

Millicent Fawcett is celebrated as a pioneer of women's suffrage. Although born in Aldeburgh in Suffolk, in the 1880s Millicent lived with her sisters in Rustington, a village within the Littlehampton area. It was during her time spent in Rustington that Millicent carried out peaceful campaigning for the enfranchisement of women.

Millicent was raised in a middle-class family who supported their daughters' involvement with the women's rights movement. Millicent's sister, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, was the first woman to qualify as a physician in Britain, whilst her sister Agnes and cousin Rhoda ran an interior design business.

Millicent took over leadership of The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1890. The NUWSS brought together the nation's smaller groups. It was under Millicent's leadership that the union grew to more than 500 branches nationwide.

The NUWSS was open to all. Unlike the WSPU, they also allowed men to join. Because of this, their campaigning reached a wider range of people. Alongside her NUWSS campaigning Millicent also supported campaigns to end child marriage, the 'white slave trade', and child neglect, amongst many others.



Millicent in Hyde Park, 1913. Image courtesy LSE Library.

In 1918, just a few days after women were granted the right to vote, Millicent chose to hold a public meeting in a Lecture Hall in Littlehampton's Congregational Church to celebrate the groundbreaking event. The Littlehampton Observer reported "Mrs. Fawcett, who was enthusiastically relieved, said it had been her privilege to take a fairly active part in women's suffrage since 1867."

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Timeline

1834

Mary Smith presents the first women's suffrage petition to Parliament.



1866

The first women's suffrage committee is formed in London.

1897 National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) is founded.



1903 Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) is formed by Emmeline Pankhurst and two of her daughters.



1909 Hunger strikes and force-feeding begin in prisons.

1910 The WSPU organise the 'Black Friday' protest, which quickly turns violent, killing a number of women.

1913 Thousands of suffragists march to London to peacefully protest, some of which pass through Littlehampton.

1913 Suffragette Emily Davidson is killed by a horse at the Epsom Derby.

1918

The Representation of the People Act is passed and allows property-owning women over 30 to vote legally.

1918

Millicent Fawcett, leader of the NUWSS, gives a triumphant speech at the Lecture Hall in Littlehampton's Congregational Church.

1928

The Representation of the People Act (Equal Franchise) allows all women to vote regardless of age or class.