

The Campaign for Women's Suffrage in Basingstoke: 1908-1914

Introduction

One of the defining features of the years leading up to the First World War was the increasingly divisive campaign for women's suffrage, the impact of which was felt in every part of the country. There were strong feelings on both sides of the argument as to whether women should or should not be granted the vote in parliamentary elections. Moreover, amongst supporters there was a clear divide between the moderate suffragists of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the militant suffragettes of the Women's Political and Social Union (WPSU). In this short article, drawing heavily on reports from the *Hants and Berks Gazette*, the position in Basingstoke is reviewed, with a view to establishing the impact of the campaign on the town and surrounding area.¹

Initial Activity both for and against Women's Suffrage: 1908-09

It was not until 1908 that the campaign for women's suffrage made its first formal appearance in Basingstoke. In November of that year a meeting was convened by 'a small Committee of ladies keenly interested in the progress of the cause ... [with] the leading spirits being Mrs. and Miss Conran and Mrs. Forrester.'² Approximately 70 women attended and the keynote speaker was Dr Florence Armitage of Reading, 'a prominent worker in the cause of social reform'. In her opening remarks Mrs Forrester, who chaired the meeting, observed that 'it was ... about twenty-six years, she believed, that any Women's Suffrage meeting ... [had been] held in Basingstoke.'³ Dr Armitage ended her talk with the peroration that 'women could not

¹ It would seem that no records of suffrage societies in the Basingstoke area have survived or if they have they are not in the public domain.

² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 28 November 1908.

³ The speaker at that meeting had been Mrs Fenwick Miller. It was chaired by Rev Henry Barron, the minister of London Street Congregational Church, and 'was held in support of the amendment to be moved by Mr Woodall for including women householders in the franchise bill now before parliament.' *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 10 May 1884. There is also a press report of a meeting held in March 1890, when members of the Basingstoke Liberal Association 'had the opportunity of learning the pros and cons of the women's demands for the parliamentary suffrage.' One of the speakers was the Rev Capes Tarbolton, who had succeeded Barron as minister of London Street Congregational Church in 1887. He 'contended that the right of ... [women] to vote should be conceded as a matter of justice and equality ... and that their influence in politics would be a distinct advantage to the State.' *Hants and Berks*

fight without a sword, and that sword was the vote.’ The principal outcome of this meeting was the establishment of the Basingstoke and District Women’s Suffrage Society affiliated to the NUWSS. This was a clear indication that the vast majority of supporters of women’s suffrage in Basingstoke identified with the moderate suffragist wing of the movement, as opposed to the militant stance of the WPSU. Indeed there are few references to Basingstoke in *Votes for Women* the WPSU Newspaper. Insofar as there were meetings in the vicinity addressed by suffragettes most of these were organised by the Reading and Newbury branch of the WPSU.

Although there is no direct evidence to support the claim, it seems likely that one consequence of the mobilisation of the suffragists of Basingstoke, was that those opposed to women’s suffrage also felt the need to make their voices heard. It is perhaps no coincidence that a few months after the gathering addressed by Dr Armitage, in February 1909, a meeting was held at the Town Hall, at which the principal speaker was Miss Mary Angela Dickens of the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League (see Figure 1). In a letter to the newspaper a week later from an “Anti-Suffragist”, she was described as delivering ‘a dignified and restrained speech’ in which she presented many of the arguments against giving women the vote.⁴ Chaired by Lady Calthorpe, ‘there was a good attendance of ladies, amongst whom were several prominent local suffragists.’ At the heart of Dickens’ argument was the notion of separate spheres, with women being responsible for crucial aspects of family life that prevented them from having the time to devote to politics. As she put it:

The work of woman – not a bit less important [than that of man] – does not afford her the same opportunities for developing the political sense. Her education in this respect must lie outside her work. And if she be doing that work well and thoroughly; if she be a good wife, a good mother, a good friend; if she has as many interests, social, domestic, intellectual, as she ought to have, what time does she have to devote to Imperial politics!⁵

Gazette, 22 March 1890. For evidence of even earlier suffrage activity in Basingstoke and environs, see Terry Firth, ‘A Short Look at the Women’s Suffrage Campaign in the Basingstoke Area 1853-1919’, *Basingstoke Archaeological and Historical Society Newsletter* 224, August 2018, 13-7 at 13.

⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 6 March 1909. Miss Dickens was the grand-daughter of Charles Dickens.

⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 27 February 1909.

Although questions were invited none were asked, not even by the supporters of women's suffrage in the audience! At the conclusion of the meeting 'it was resolved ... that a branch of the League be formed for Basingstoke and district' with Lady Calthorpe as its President.⁶



Figure 1: Miss Mary Angela Dickens

With respect to those opposed to women's suffrage, it is interesting to note that in an article published in a 1912 edition of *Votes for Women*, Basingstoke was described as 'a distinctly "Anti" centre.' However, it went on to say that Miss March, presumably one of the few suffragettes in the town, was 'breaking down opposition daily.'⁷

In July 1909 supporters of women's suffrage organised a garden meeting at "Garryowen" in Hackwood Road, the home of Mr and Mrs Conran. On this occasion, Mrs Isabella Raynbird, who was to be a leading figure in the campaign locally, presided.⁸ She was 'a Basingstoke Poor Law Guardian and for 28 years churchwarden of her parish church.'⁹ At the meeting she reviewed the history of the campaign to secure women's suffrage from the mid-19th century onwards. Again Dr

⁶ It was also resolved that the members of the Committee should be Mrs McFarlan, Miss Violet Martineau, Mrs Courtenay Bruce, Mrs Bradbury, Mrs Prance, Mrs Northcote and Mrs Allnutt, all of whom had been on the platform at the meeting, together with Lady Knox and Mrs T.N. Burberry.

⁷ *Votes for Women*, 30 August 1912.

⁸ The 1911 census returns show Isabella (age 73) as living with her husband Hugh Edward (age 85), a farm produce agent, and two domestic servants at Hackwood in Old Basing. The household also included Lucy a daughter from Hugh Edward's first marriage. Isabella (nee Webb) and Hugh Edward had married in January 1890. Prior to this Isabella had been employed as a 'housekeeper' in Weston Patrick. Hugh died on 11 May 1914 and Isabella on 28 March 1925. A biographical essay on the life of Mrs Isabella Raynbird is currently being drafted.

⁹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 July 1912. Mrs Raynbird was one of two guardians representing the parish of Basing. She served from 1898 to 1922.

Armitage spoke and repeated her analogy of the vote being the sword without which ‘they were helpless in working for any great social reform.’¹⁰

Later in the year, on the last day in September, another campaign meeting was held in the Town Hall, when the speaker was Mr Baillie-Weaver of the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage. Held under the auspices of the NUWSS, it was ‘well-attended’ and chaired by Miss Edith Sutton of Reading.¹¹ Thus, it is probable that the audience was drawn from much further afield than simply Basingstoke and its environs.

Follow up Meetings: 1910 onwards

At the annual meeting of the Basingstoke and District Women’s Suffrage Society held at “Garryowen” in October 1910 ‘it was announced that Mrs Raynbird had accepted the chairmanship and Mrs Paul Springman (Itchell Manor) and Miss Brandon (Cookham) had ‘kindly consented’ to be Vice-Presidents. Reference was also made to the fact that Mrs Millicent Fawcett, ‘the well known president of the National Union’ would be speaking at the Town Hall later in the month (see Figure 2).¹²



Figure 2: Mrs Millicent Fawcett

Not surprisingly, the meeting addressed by Mrs Fawcett was ‘well attended’. It was chaired by Sir Owen Roberts of Henley and amongst the women on the platform was

¹⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 24 July 1909.

¹¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 2 October 1909.

¹² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 15 October 1910.

Mrs Frederick G. West the wife of the relatively new Baptist minister.¹³ Having rehearsed all the arguments in favour of giving women the vote, Mrs Fawcett concluded by arguing that 'their demand was based upon logic and reason, and their methods were constitutional, and she appealed earnestly to both men and women to give the movement their support.'¹⁴

Possibly in response, in early 1911 the anti-suffragists held a meeting at the Town Hall, with two high profile speakers, Mrs Greatbatch and Leo Maxse, editor of the *National Review* (see Figure 3). However, the *Hants and Berks Gazette* felt moved to observe somewhat caustically that:

The fact that there were only about sixty or seventy people present at the meeting which was held at the Town Hall on Thursday night in furtherance of the opposition to women's suffrage seemed to show that for the present at all events the general public does not wish to be further bored by controversy upon this particular question.¹⁵

This perhaps was a little misguided since campaigning in Basingstoke by both sides continued apace until the outbreak of the First World War. Notwithstanding the relative smallness of the audience, it was a lively meeting with Mr Maxse asserting 'that the men of the country and still more the women, were dead against the demand, and that the agitation was confined to a very limited class of women.' Interestingly the vote of thanks to the speakers was seconded by a suffragist in the audience, 'who thus adroitly contrived to get in a few words on the other side.' On a show of hands, 22 were in favour and 36 against giving women the vote in parliamentary elections, an unsurprising result given the occasion.¹⁶

¹³ Others on the platform included Mrs Raynbird, Mrs Conran, Mr Jeffery Edwards (Fleet), Miss D Edwards and Mrs Forrester.

¹⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 29 October 1910.

¹⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 18 February 1911.

¹⁶ *Hants and Berks Gazette* 18 February 1911.

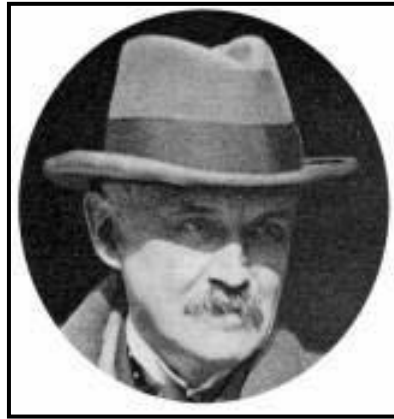


Figure 3: Leo Maxse

Less than a month later, at the same venue, a meeting in support of women's suffrage was held. This was chaired by the Revd Frederick West whose wife, as mentioned previously, was a leading suffragist. In his remarks, West:

... controverted the statement made by anti-suffragists that women could take no part in matters relating to the finance, the commerce or the defence of the country, and maintained that in each of these departments women were taking their honourable share. He pointed out that the Free Churches were not afraid of allowing women to vote and take part in the management of church affairs, and they ought not to let them be afraid to take part in political matters on the same terms as men.

The other two speakers were Miss Nina Boyle of the Johannesburg Women's Suffrage Society and Mrs Cooper, 'a Lancashire working woman.' At the end of the meeting the following resolution was passed:

"That this meeting greatly regrets that the Conciliation Bill for granting the suffrage to women householders was not passed in the last Parliament, and wishes to express its earnest desire that a similar Bill might be brought in the present session of Parliament, and that it may become law."

There were no dissentients.¹⁷

During the summer months of 1911, both sides sought to engage directly with the public by holding open-air meetings. In June gatherings in favour of Women's suffrage were held in Market Square and Winton Square. These were followed up by a garden meeting at "Garryowen", which was addressed by Mrs Renton of Portsmouth and the Rev A.H.G. Creed, the vicar of Ewshot.¹⁸

Two other open air meetings held at "The Tree" and in the Market Place were addressed by a leading suffragette, Mrs Leigh (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Mrs Leigh

It was at the Market Place meeting that an unfortunate incident occurred, which was reported at length in *Votes for Women*:

... while a closely-packed mass of people were listening intently to Mrs Leigh, a boy, without any warning, threw a stone at her, hitting her on the head ... why such a thing was done cannot be explained unless it can be put down to hysteria on the boy's part. Without an instant's hesitation, Mrs Leigh leapt from the wagonette, caught the boy by the collar, held him until he humbly apologised before the crowd, released him, and was back in the wagonette

¹⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette* 11 March 1911.

¹⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette* 10 June 1911.

finishing her last sentence before the astonished audience realised what a narrow escape she had had.¹⁹

Interestingly, this episode does not appear to have been mentioned in the *Hants and Berks Gazette*.²⁰

It is also noteworthy that during June suffragists and suffragettes from Basingstoke and district took part in the 'great' women's suffrage procession in London. While this only gets a passing reference in the *Hants and Berks Gazette*, it does indicate that local campaigners for women's suffrage were keen to engage with what was happening on a larger stage.

In late September 1911 an advertisement appeared for open-air meetings in various locations organised by the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (see Figure 5). Two were scheduled for Basingstoke on Thursday October 5th, one in the early afternoon at the bottom of Station Hill and the other in the early evening in Market Square.



Figure 5: Advertisement for anti-Suffrage Meetings

The evening meeting proved to be a lively affair. It was addressed by Mr Borrodaile of the Men's Branch of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. In the

¹⁹ *Votes for Women*, 30 June 1911.

²⁰ This may have been due to the fact that it took place at the time of the Coronation celebrations to which a considerable amount of copy was devoted.

audience were a number of supporters of women's suffrage including 'a male advocate of their cause', who:

... interpolated various comments and questions in the course of Mr Borrodaile's speech, and unfortunately the controversy, as it is apt to do under these circumstances degenerated into vulgar personal abuse, the interrupter being ultimately told that he was a "fathead," while he, on his part, in the course of a counter speech ... denounced the champion of the "Antis" as a humbug and liar.

Although he had originally intended to wait until Mr Borrodaile had finished his speech, the male suffragist got tired of waiting and 'commenced a vigorous reply to the Anti-Suffragists' arguments' at the Church Street corner of the Town Hall. Thus, for a time there were 'two meetings going on in close proximity to each other'.²¹

During the first half 1912 there was a rare occurrence of the WPSU holding a meeting the Town Hall. Chaired by Miss Marian Isabel Seymour of Winchfield and addressed by the Hon. Mrs Evelina Haverfield (see Figure 6) and Mr Cameron Grant, 'the attendance was very small'.²²



Figure 6: Mrs Evelina Haverfield

²¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 7 October 1911.

²² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 May 1912.

Both speakers tended to focus on the economic plight of women. Haverfield with ‘extraordinary fluency and earnestness’ highlighted the appalling conditions within which many women had to work and argued that ‘if women had political power there would be at once any number of Members of the House of Commons’ ready to address these evils.²³ In support, Cameron Grant made the point that ‘women had not the same protection as the men, and it was absolute nonsense that votes had no connection with wages.’

For the suffragists a high point of 1912, was a meeting on 10 July with Arthur Clavell Salter, the Conservative MP for Basingstoke from 1906 to 1917 (see Figure 7), who can be said to have been moderately sympathetic towards the cause of women’s suffrage

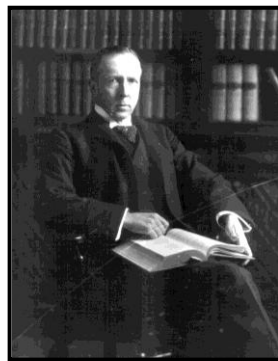


Figure 7: Arthur Clavell Salter MP

The deputation was led by Miss Dorothy Edwards, the Honorary Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee for Women’s Suffrage in North Hampshire, and included Miss Dorothy Palliser, the Honorary Parliamentary Secretary of the Executive Committee of the NUWSS, and Mrs Raynbird.²⁴ Because of limited time, Miss Palliser acted as the spokesperson and reviewed the various amendments to the Franchise Bill that was to be brought before Parliament and that were designed to enfranchise at least some women. She ‘begged him to favourably consider them and hoped he would see his way to giving his support to one of them, the most likely to

²³ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 11 May 1912.

²⁴ The other members were Mrs Kayser (Fleet), Dr Edyth Lindsey (Aldershot) and Mr Jeffrey Edwards.

secure general acceptance ... [and] to attend a meeting of Conservative Suffragists in the House.’ Clavell Salter responded by making it clear that:

... while strongly condemning militant tactics, he ... [intended] to vote for the amendment to Clause 1. to insert the words “or female” and ... to speak to that effect ... he [did] so to enable the question of Women’s Suffrage to be discussed and not because he ... [was] a supporter of an indiscriminate measure of enfranchisement.

He also mentioned that he had already attended a meeting of Conservative suffragists. The deputation seems to have been reasonably reassured by the MP’s stance. However, it is clear that he was fairly circumspect in his replies.²⁵

While supporters of women’s suffrage were lobbying their MP, opponents were holding a garden meeting at the Manor House, the home of Mr and Mrs John Mares. There was a ‘good attendance’ and the two speakers, Mr McConochy and Miss Gladys Potts, both expressed their opposition to the Conciliation Bill.²⁶ At the end of the meeting a resolution ‘condemning the proposals to extend the franchise to women, and objecting to it being passed into law until it had been submitted as a clear issue to the country’ was passed by a ‘large majority’ with just seven voting against.²⁷ This was the last reported event in Basingstoke organised by the anti-suffragists.

Not to be outdone, the next day those advocating an extension of the franchise to women held an open air meeting in Market Square. Addressed by Mr Reginald Stables, ‘a young gentleman, with a gift of persuasive speech ... he especially emphasised the desirability of obtaining the franchise for women as a lever for raising the level of women’s wages and bettering the conditions of their employment.’ Although one or two working men indicated their hostility towards the movement, in the main most of the audience were in sympathy with the speaker’s point of view.²⁸

²⁵ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 July 1912; *The Common Cause*, 18 July 1912.

²⁶ Defeated by 14 votes this would have enfranchised about 1 million women householders.

²⁷ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 July 1912.

²⁸ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 20 July 1912.

A more substantial meeting of suffragists ‘in connection with the NUWSS’ was held in the Coronation Hall in November 1912. This was to have been chaired by the Rev J.D Carter the vicar of All Saints, Alton. However, he was ‘compelled by clerical etiquette to give up his part in the meeting’ and Mrs Raynbird took the chair at an event that ‘was much better attended than many previous ones in support of the same cause, the room being nearly full.’ The speaker was Miss Margaret Ashton, Manchester’s first female city councillor (see Figure 8).²⁹ She argued that ‘the woman’s point of view, which had never yet been given a chance, would affect legislation so as to make England more wholesome, healthy and moral.’³⁰



Figure 8: Miss Margaret Ashton

To reinforce her stance she moved: ‘That this meeting urges the House of Commons not to pass any electoral reform Bill which does not include some measure of enfranchisement for women.’ In seconding the motion, Miss Fisher ‘extended a warm welcome to any anti-suffragists who might be present, and appealed to her fellow townsfolk to show more enthusiasm for the issue either one way or the other.’ Apart from the ‘glorious exception’ of this one, she claimed that she had not been at a pro or anti-suffrage meeting in Basingstoke ‘that had been really well attended.’³¹ It is not recorded how this apparent slight was received by the inhabitants of Basingstoke.

²⁹ She was first elected to the city council in 1908.

³⁰ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 9 November 1912.

³¹ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 9 November 1912.

A further meeting in support of women's suffrage and organised by the NUWSS was held in the Coronation Hall in March 1913, when about 50 were present. It was chaired by Mrs Dempster and the Rev Llewellyn Smith proposed the following resolution: "That this meeting holds that the passing into law of a measure extending the Parliamentary franchise to women is just, expedient, and necessary for representative government."³² After discussion, the resolution was carried with just two dissentients.

On 3 June 1913 another NUWSS sponsored meeting was held at Mrs Raynbird's house when the speakers 'were Mrs Dempster on the Pilgrimage and Miss Ridley on the coming Church congress in Southampton.'³³ The very last women's suffrage meeting in Basingstoke, prior to the outbreak of the First World War, for which there is a report, was held in late July 1914. It was an open air event at which Mrs Rogers of the NUWSS spoke. 'There was a fair number present, but a small disorderly element made the speaker's task a difficult one.'³⁴

Conclusion

In the absence of opinion polls it is difficult to judge the balance of views in Basingstoke on the issue of 'votes for women'. To what extent all the campaigning influenced matters is also somewhat opaque, as is the degree of interest displayed. In the newspaper reports, there are occasional hints that the population as a whole was relatively apathetic and disengaged.³⁵ That said, what can be claimed is that few, if any, could have been unaware of the issue and the arguments advanced by supporters and opponents alike. It is also noteworthy that some of the leading figures in the campaign, such as Mrs Millicent Fawcett and Miss Margaret Ashton, on the one side, and Miss Mary Angela Dickens and Mr Leo Maxse, on the other, felt it worth their while to promote their point of view directly to the residents of Basingstoke.

Roger Ottewill (September 2018)

³² *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 8 March 1913.

³³ *The Common Cause*, 11 July 1913. The Great Pilgrimage of 1913 was organised by the NUWSS. It involved women marching to London from every part of the country, with 50,000 attending a rally in Hyde Park.

³⁴ *Hants and Berks Gazette*, 1 August 1914.

³⁵ Firth, 'A Short Look', op.cit. suggests that activity in other parts of North-East Hampshire was more pronounced than that in Basingstoke.