

FORGOTTEN SUFFRAGETTES

On Friday 18 November 1910, over 300 suffragettes marched in protest through Westminster to Parliament, angry the government had abandoned a Bill that proposed granting women the right to vote.

Amongst the protesters that day were three courageous women from three very different backgrounds who, despite their differences, joined together to fight for a shared cause.

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh (1876 - 1948)

Princess Sophia was the daughter of Duleep Singh, the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, whose lands in India had been seized by the British when he was just 10 years old.

The Maharaja and his family became favourites of Queen Victoria when they were forced into exile in England. A house at Hampton Court Palace was given to Sophia as one of the Queen's goddaughters.

After witnessing society's deep inequalities, both in England and in India, this glamorous society figure became a leading women's rights activist. She threw herself at the Prime Minister's car carrying a sign that read 'Give Women the Vote'.

Sophia refused to provide her details for the national census and pay her taxes. She was taken to court for this but demanded to know why she should pay tax when she was not considered fit to vote.

The Princess donated large sums of money to further fight for the vote, and could often be seen outside the gates of Hampton Court Palace selling the suffragette newspaper.

This promotion of a cause seen by some as radical and controversial, by a princess on royal grounds, was shocking to society and the newspapers of the time.

However, Sophia's actions inspired women to continue their fight for the right to vote, both in Great Britain and in her father's homeland of India.

Annie Kenney (1879 - 1953)

Annie Kenney was born into a large working-class family in Lancashire. From the age of 10 she had to work long hours at a local cotton mill.

Annie's life changed in her twenties when she went to see the inspirational Christabel Pankhurst talk about women's right to vote. She became passionately devoted to the cause.

The two women became friends, campaigning and protesting together. They disrupted an important political meeting in Manchester, where they heckled politicians - including Winston Churchill - demanding to know if they would give women the vote.

The women were arrested and fined; when they refused to pay they were sent to prison. Annie would be arrested a further 12 times before women were granted the vote.

Annie travelled up and down the country giving passionate speeches, popularising the cause among working-class women and recruiting them, and gaining the support of wealthy donors.

Annie was a militant, believing 'deeds not words' were necessary to win women the right to vote. During several of her prison stays for such protests, Annie was one of many suffragettes who went on hunger strike.

A new law, designed to prevent deaths in custody, gave Annie a temporary release from prison when she became too weak or unwell, but required her to return to prison again when she was well enough.

Annie repeatedly avoided the return to prison, evading police who were waiting for her outside rallies, and using elaborate tricks or disguises to sneak inside, where she would be greeted with wild applause.

(Rosa) May Billinghamurst (1875 - 1953)

May Billinghamurst contracted polio as a baby, leaving her paralysed from the waist down. In spite of her disability, she dedicated herself to helping others who were less fortunate, working in London's slums and workhouses.

Her first-hand experience working with London's poor and vulnerable - particularly women - led her to join the suffragettes. She soon became a well-known figure at rallies, on her distinctive tricycle decorated in suffragette colours.

May, like Annie Kenney, believed in militant action: smashing windows and destroying the contents of post boxes as a way of protesting.

After her third arrest May was sentenced to eight months in prison. She went on hunger strike and suffered violent force feeding.

Suffragettes were outraged at this treatment of a woman with disabilities. Emmeline Pankhurst led a campaign that increased awareness of the situation. Eventually May was released.

Sophia, Annie and May were all at the march to Westminster in 1910. As they reached Parliament, police met the protesters with unexpected violence. Women were beaten and pushed to the ground, earning this day the name 'Black Friday'.

In Westminster today, a large statue celebrates the suffragettes and their campaign. Without the action of these women, and thousands like them, women might never have won the right to vote.