

Teesdale U3A Monthly Meeting – February 2019

The speaker at the April meeting was local author Carol Dean and her topic was 'The Age of the Suffragettes'. During Victorian times there had been growing concern from many in the country that women should have the same rights as men and should be able to vote in public elections. There were campaigns of support. Voting rights were given to women over 21 in New Zealand in 1893 and in South Australia in 1894. Initially, campaigning was very civilised but it became clear that no progress was being made. This lack of progress eventually led Emily Pankhurst in 1903 to set up the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a much more militant organisation. This radical change in tactics involved damage to property, disruption of meetings, the placing of bombs in churches including Westminster Abbey, spitting at policemen and a 'rush' to Parliament. The suffragettes were arrested, refused to pay the fine and were then sent to prison.

The authorities found dealing with 'respectable' women difficult and not what they were used to or trained for. Prison conditions were poor and prison matrons were anti suffragette. In 1909 Marion Dunlop went on a hunger strike which she maintained for 91 days. Other women adopted a similar strategy. To avoid the possibility of a suffragette dying in prison, a regime of force feeding by tube was introduced. Many women became ill as a result, so the authorities began a new practice of releasing the women from prison to recover before rearresting them again. Also, the police were given more powers to deal with the suffragettes which led to accusations of sexual assault. It is reported that Churchill gave orders for photographs showing physical restraints to be destroyed although at least one is still in existence which Carol displayed. In 1913, Emily Davison was killed by the King's horse at the Epsom Derby probably as she was trying to pin the movement's colours to the horse. At her funeral, 5000 people walked behind the coffin. WW1 led to great changes in the traditional roles of women when many carried out work previously done by men. This led to a serious shift in attitudes and in 1918 women over 30 with certain property qualifications were given the vote. Nancy Asquith was the first female MP to take up her seat in Parliament. However, it was not until July 1928 that all women over 21 were given the vote.

The speaker was passionate about the key role which the Suffragettes had played in the campaign for equal rights for women and felt that she would not be speaking today without their influence. The vote of thanks was given by Annie Clouston.

Ian Reid