

Emmeline Pankhurst Transcript Season 4, Episode 12

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Emmeline Pankhurst.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: @GudrunLauret, or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

I chose Emmeline Pankhurst because she's one of the most well-known names in the fight (often literally) for equal rights for women, but I could have picked several others, including her own daughters.

Before we start, I wanted to explain the difference between suffragettes and suffragists, which is something that has often confused me. If you know this, apologies, but I think it's helpful to make the distinction, especially if you look further into the movement.

The suffragist movement began in 1866, when a group of women took a petition for equal political rights to men to two MPs they knew were sympathetic to their cause. Their attempt to change the law failed, but it led to the formation of the London Society for Women's Suffrage, suffrage meaning the right to vote in political elections.

Several similar groups were formed around the country, leading to an overall body headed by the wife of one of the MPs, Millicent Fawcett. The approach of the early suffragists was peaceful and non-confrontational.

However, some women felt that the softly, softly approach was getting them nowhere, and a more direct approach was required. They favoured more militant tactics and their motto was 'deeds, not words.' And this is where Emmeline Pankhurst - along with daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adele - comes in – she founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903.

Born in Manchester's Moss Side in 1858, Emmeline Goulden was introduced early on to the important causes of the day by her politically-active parents, who themselves were descended from agitators of all kinds. Somewhat surprisingly, although her parents were happy for her to learn about politics, they expected Emmeline and her sisters to get married and keep house, rather than have any formal education.

In 1878, Emmeline met Richard Pankhurst, a barrister more than twice her age. Richard advocated for educational reform, votes for women and freedom of speech, and, although had sworn to remain a bachelor to better serve the public, fell in love with Emmeline and they married a year later.

They had five children, but had agreed that Emmeline was not simply a 'household machine' and a butler was hired to look after the Pankhurst offspring so she could be involved in politics. It seems a bit odd to give that job to a butler, especially as the couple were living with her parents...

She spent almost a decade in various municipal roles in Manchester, but became busier and more involved with the women's movement. After Millicent Fawcett's group splintered in 1888, Emmeline aligned herself with the more radical half, who became known as the Parliament Street Society.

The PSS, however, weren't radical enough for Emmeline and some of her friends. Arguing that husbands voted on behalf of their wives, the PSS favoured helping unmarried women to secure suffrage.

The Pankhursts disagreed, and in 1889 hosted the inaugural meeting of the Women's Franchise League. The WFS were in favour of not only votes for women, but greater rights for them in divorce and inheritance matters. Over the next decade, Emmeline worked tirelessly as an activist, and later joined Kier Hardie's Independent Labour Party, one of its first female members.

In 1898, Richard died of a gastric ulcer, leaving Emmeline in charge of their family. In need of money, she took a job as the Registrar of Births and Deaths in Chorlton, where she gained greater insight into the realities of life for lower class women.

By 1903 Emmeline was fed up of the attempts of MPs to fob off the campaigners, and of the grs themselves for not taking decisive action. Her WSPU produced a regular newsletter to share information, and held 'women's parliaments' when the government was in session.

Her three daughters all joined the WSPU, and were enthusiastic in pushing the movement further. Eldest daughter Christabel was arrested for spitting on a policeman outside a Liberal Party meeting in 1905, and Sylvia and Adele were arrested in 1906 protesting outside parliament.

Emmeline herself was first arrested in 1908 after trying to get into parliament to deliver a protest resolution to the Prime Minister. For that, she spent six weeks in prison. On her release, she detailed her experiences of solitary confinement in a filthy cell.

The experience didn't put her off, however. She was arrested several more times, and at one protest slapped a policeman's face to guarantee he'd arrest her. She saw

going to prison as a way to promote her cause, and told her trial, “We are here not because we are law-breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers.”

The WSPU escalated their protests and Christabel, who had fled to Paris to avoid conspiracy charges, organised several arson attacks in 1912. Many of the members were arrested at one time or another, and went on hunger strikes to attract press attention.

At the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the WSPU called a halt to their attacks, although they kept busy by handing out white feathers to conscientious objectors and other men they regarded as cowards for not enlisting in the military. Emmeline organised rallies and travelled the world to promote the war effort.

The introduction of the Representation of the People Act 1918 coincided with the end of the war and introduced voting rights for women over the age of 30, as well as several other measures.

Emmeline and Christabel turned the WSPU into the Women’s Party, to advocate for things such as equal pay and job opportunities. The Party collapsed not long after Christabel failed in her attempt to become a Labour MP.

In 1922 Emmeline moved to Canada, although returned home three years later, having run out of money and tiring of the cold winters. Astonishingly, given her previous political leanings, she became a Conservative Party member and ran for MP.

Her new career was short-lived, though. In 1926 Sylvia had a child out of wedlock and the scandal ended Emmeline’s hopes of becoming an MP, and also ruined her health. She moved into a nursing home and continued to decline; she died in 1928.

Thank you for listening to today’s episode! This is the final show in season four, although if you tune in next week for my bonus interview with Paul Couchman, the Regency Cook, you’ll hear about another remarkable woman.