

***“Cheap and easy railway traffic”*: Suffragettes and the Railways**

A talk given at the West of England and South Wales Women’s History Network Annual Conference 3 October 2020, “Women and Transport: Historical Perspectives”

In February 1912 the Bristol Liberal MP Charles E H Hobhouse addressed a meeting of the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage in the Bristol Beacon (formerly Colston Hall). During his speech he remarked,

“In the present days of cheap and easy railway traffic they [the suffragettes] could always arrange numerous deputations or demonstrations and they could be as noisy as their funds permitted – (laughter)...” (*Western Daily Press*, 17 February 1912)

Hobhouse remained opposed to women’s suffrage even after the passage of the 1918 Representation of the People Act gave the vote to some British women. Although he had no understanding of or sympathy with the suffrage movement, his statement does show that he understood one thing: the importance of the rail network to the suffrage movement.

The importance of the UK railway network to the suffrage campaign falls into three main categories:-

- It enabled the campaign;
- It provided places of protest;
- It was a focus of suffragette militancy.



Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928)
Founder, Women’s Social and Political Union

Enabling the campaign

The railway network enabled the campaign in a number of ways. Most obviously, large national organisations with their headquarters in London relied on being able to move people easily and quickly around the country in order to function. Welsh suffragist Winifred Coombe Tennant often caught the train from her home in Neath, South Wales to go to London meetings of the national executive of the non-militant National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies.

Suffrage workers travelled throughout the kingdom setting up and running a network of local branches, and organising demonstrations, events, fund raising, and talks at local level. Speakers and campaigners moved around the country as they were needed to support local organisers. When Winston Churchill visited Bristol in 1909, workers were deployed from London and Exeter to help Annie Kenney, the organiser of the Bristol and West of England WSPU, arrange a number of protests.

The network was also essential for carrying out protests. As horrified Hobhouse noted, trains took protesters to demonstrations. On 13 June 1908, for example, special trains to London were put on all over the country to allow women to travel to join a march from the Embankment to the Albert Hall organised by the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). A week later, thirty extra trains were provided to carry suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) to a demonstration in Hyde Park that attracted over 250,000 people.

Suffragettes also travelled to London to take part in deputations to the House of Commons, when their attempts to deliver suffrage petitions to the government were usually met with brutality, both from the police and bystanders, and followed by scores of arrests.

The militants also used the rail network to facilitate their more disruptive acts. When suffragettes interrupted a speech by the Prime Minister, H H Asquith, at Bletchley Park in August 1909, they went by train to Leighton Buzzard and walked to the Park from the station. Probably the most famous rail journey made with militancy in mind was that taken from London Victoria to Epsom by Emily Wilding Davison when she went to the 1913 Derby. Days later she died of her injuries after running out in front of the King's horse.



Emily Wilding Davison's return ticket, London Victoria to Epsom.

During by elections, trains carried both militant and non-militant suffrage workers to contested constituencies where they supported or opposed candidates according to their attitude to votes for women.

In addition to facilitating all these organisational activities, the railway system played a large part in propaganda work. It enabled the distribution of suffrage publications such as *Votes for Women* or *The Common Cause*.

It was a way of making the campaign visible. When Lillian Dove Willcox and Mary Allen returned to Bristol after a spell in Holloway in 1909, they were met at Temple Meads Railway station by a procession of women wearing suffragette colours and carrying banners. From here, the two suffragette heroines were driven in decorated carriages through the centre of the town.

Winifred Coombe Tennant once spent a day standing in the Neath and Brecon railway yard from nine in the morning to ten at night, handing out leaflets to miners, to help advertise a meeting in Neath the following day. She wrote in her diary,¹ “Never did anything I hated more”.



Emmeline Pankhurst and Lady Constance Lytton, two popular WSPU speakers, at Waterloo in 1910.

And a visit by Mrs Pankhurst, Christabel Pankhurst, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and other well-known figures as part of a speaking tour brought publicity, new members, and much-needed cash.

The importance of the rail network was especially noticeable when it was not available. During the 1911 railwaymen’s strike, a WSPU meeting in Devizes was probably not the only one deprived of its main speaker – in their case Mrs Mansel – because of the strike.

Holiday resorts were favourite settings for getting the word out. The WSPU urged its followers to volunteer to “spend their holiday...in holiday centres...paying their own expenses, and giving as much time as possible towards helping with the campaign” (*Votes for Women*, 23 July 1909).

In North Wales, Rhyl, Llandudno and Colwyn Bay were amongst the most popular centres. Mrs East, honorary treasurer of Chiswick WSPU, took her holidays there every year, combining suffrage work with a change of scene. Southport in Lancashire was another attractive location. It was, said leading WSPU campaigner Mary Gawthorpe, a good place for “members wishing to take first steps in open-air work” (*Votes for Women*, 23 July 1909).

Travelling around organising, speaking and protesting was a life that took its toll on the women involved. I’m currently writing a biography of the suffrage campaigner Millicent Price, née Browne, who in 1909 was sent by the WSPU to campaign in North Wales. She characterises her journey to Llandudno as a “nightmare”. She was suffering from period pains; when she called on the local activist whose name she had been given, the woman could not even suggest anywhere for Millicent to stay; and the only boarding house Millicent knew was full and the best the landlady could do was let her sleep in an armchair.

¹ *Between Two Worlds: The Diary of Winifred Coombe Tennant*, edited by Peter Lord (National Library of Wales, 2011)

Kate Parry Frye worked for the New Constitutional Society for Women's Suffrage, which was founded in 1910 and positioned itself between the WSPU and NUWSS by advocating anti-government action but rejecting WSPU-style militancy. Her diary is full of references to train travel,² and amply illustrates how much campaigners relied on the network. It also shows how the constant travelling, often at short notice, contributed to the exhaustion, discomfort and difficulties these women endured. The stress of illness, homesickness, bad food, and comfortless lodgings were compounded by rushing to catch trains, over-crowded carriages, and having to lug bags around or entrust them to left luggage offices.

In 1911, Kate Parry Frye travelled to the Women's Coronation Procession in London. There were, she wrote, "So many people travelling...at Norwich, where I had to change, it was quite a pandemonium, and so hot. The train was half an hour late". On a later journey, "I lost my luggage. Two porters were very rude...I told an official I had been travelling since the early morning and had come to the conclusion that the Railway companies made it as difficult as possible for people". By 1913 it had all become too much for her. After a journey to Dover she declared, "I simply cannot bear these journeys and arrival in places. And such a pouring wet night and such a filthy station".

Places of protest

But the network was not just a way of getting organisers, speakers, protestors, and militants from A to B. They were also places of protest for the militants. In 1907 Mary Gawthorpe and Annie Kenney were on their way to the Riviera for a holiday. On the train to Cannes they went to the dining car for tea and spotted the prime minister, Henry Campbell Bannerman. They immediately seized on the opportunity to talk Votes for Women to him and plonked themselves down beside him. "The dear old man", as Mary Gawthorpe called him, was puzzled but polite, though when they told him who they were he refused to be drawn on the issue. He would only advise, "You should adopt different tactics".

Trains were also good places for tracking down VIPs. In March 1909 Bristol Liberal MP Augustine Birrell was approached at Bristol Temple Meads Railway Station by suffragettes Elsie Howey and Vera Wentworth, but he refused to speak to them. John Redmond, MP, had two bags of flour thrown at him by a suffragette on a train to Newcastle in November 1913.

In 1912 King George visited Bristol to open the King Edward VII Memorial Infirmary, named after his father. The home secretary, Reginald McKenna, who accompanied him, was accosted by Helen Craggs when he got down from the King's carriage at Llandaff. She jumped over a wall, ran towards him, grabbed his arm, and was immediately arrested.

Helen Craggs later told the arresting officers that McKenna should not have been "jaunting about the country while women were starving in prison". In Bristol, Miss Billings, who was waiting for the royal carriage, was recognised and prevented from carrying out any protest by being detained in one of the station offices until the end of the King's visit, when she was put on a train back to London.

² *Campaigning for the Vote: Kate Parry Fry's Suffrage Diary*, edited by Elizabeth Crawford (Francis Boutle, 2013).

The speed with which the police pounced on Helen Craggs and others is understandable given that these encounters often degenerated into violence. When Winston Churchill visited Bristol in 1909 he was attacked at Temple Meads Railway Station by Leeds suffragette Theresa Garnett. She broke through the cordon of detectives surrounding him and lunged at him with a whip crying, "Take that you brute!"

In 1910 Churchill was assaulted in a train to London from Bradford by male supporter, Hugh Franklin. In 1912 Emily Wilding Davison whipped a clergyman at Aberdeen station, having mistaken him for Lloyd George. In 1914 Lord Weardale, a joint president of the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, was also assaulted with a whip at Euston station having been mistaken for the prime minister, H H Asquith. He was struck on the back of his head, fell to the ground, and was repeatedly hit. His wife, Lady Weardale, was also struck during the scuffle.

Asquith had several violent encounters with suffragettes on the railways. In 1910 he was greeted at Burnley station by what his daughter Violet called a "Suffragette mêlée". After a crossing from Boulogne in 1912, Violet reported that her father was "abordéed by a Suffragette...At Charing Cross...a horrible mêlée with Suffragettes ensued – I had the pleasure of giving one an ugly wrist-twist!"

In April 1914 while he was travelling to his East Fife constituency, a woman jumped on the footboard at the front of his carriage and threw a letter protesting about forcible feeding through the window. She was still clinging to the train when it set off, but a railway police officer pulled her off. On the prime minister's return journey from Cupar, two women jumped off the opposite platform, ran across the lines, and scrambled up to shout "woman torturer!" at him.

At the same time as using the railway network as a setting for their protests, the suffragettes also used it to justify their methods. At the outbreak of the railway workers' strike in 1911, the management refused to meet with the strikers. The government declared it could not intervene, but only two days later did a U-turn and persuaded the railway directors to negotiate. The suffragettes were quick to cite this concession as another instance of the value of militancy. Emmeline Pethick Lawrence declared:-

"The Liberal Government that has pretended to Suffragists that there is and can be no answer to militancy but stern repression yielded very quickly to the application of militant methods on behalf of the strikers...the very Government that has refused to "recognise" the representatives of the Women's Social and Political Union, and has imprisoned fourteen deputations of unenfranchised women, was forced by the militant methods of men to intervene and to compel the [railway] directors to give way on this crucial point." (*Votes for Women*, 1 September 1911)

During the strike, railway men attacked signal boxes, tore up tracks, vandalised trains and goods yards, and ninety seven carriages were destroyed in arson attacks. There were running battles between soldiers, the police and strikers which resulted in the fatal shooting of a number of workers.

Focus of suffragette militancy

Inevitably, and perhaps with the striking railway workers' example in mind, the railway network became a focus of suffragette militancy.

In March 1913, Hugh Franklin (who, as mentioned earlier, assaulted Winston Churchill on a train) was sent to prison for nine months for setting fire to a carriage at Harrow Station the previous October. In April an explosion blew out doors and windows at Oxted Station. In the same month a carriage was wrecked by an explosion at Stockport and another at a siding in Cricklewood. Three compartments of a train at Teddington were destroyed by fire and others damaged.

In May, a bomb containing nitro-glycerine was discovered in an empty third class carriage of a passenger train which had recently left Waterloo at Kingston. The fuse had been lit but had fizzled out. Attached to the device was a note saying, "Lloyd George is a rotter". In the same month, there was a bomb hoax at Macclesfield railway station. A fire was started at South Bromley Station, but extinguished before the Fire Brigade arrived.

Fires were started in two ladies' waiting rooms at Shields Road Station in Glasgow, and timber in a railway goods yard at Nottingham was destroyed by fire. Kenton Station in Newcastle was destroyed by fire. A note was found nearby which said, "Asquith is responsible for militancy. Apply to him for damage [sic]".

There were arson attacks at Heaton station in Newcastle; Hadley Road, Northfield, and Newton Road Stations in Birmingham; at Streatham Hill; and Castle Bromwich. At Oldbury Station a note was left saying, "Militancy will go on." In addition, railway telegraph wires were cut in a number of locations. The London Underground was targeted too. A parcel containing nitro-glycerine was found at Piccadilly Tube Station in May 1913.

The railway attacks continued into 1914. At Porthcawl the words "Votes for Women. You cannot govern women without their consent" were discovered scratched on a carriage window. There were fires at Wigan Station and Bangor Station, and a bomb was found in a goods train at Wellingborough. In July 1914 the *Morning Post*, cataloguing suffragette militancy since 1913, cited ten arson attempts on railway carriages.

At the same time as the arson attacks were being carried out, some suffragettes were raising funds with collections or sweet sales outside railway and tube stations. You can't help wondering how popular these were with commuters. Inevitably, the WSPU blamed any hostility on the British press and lauded the courage of women standing outside railway stations "not knowing what they may have to face at any moment owing to the incitement of the Press to hooligans to attack them" (*The Suffragette*, 7 March 1913). The WSPU also launched a poster campaign at railway stations aimed at increasing sales of *The Suffragette*. Surprisingly, these were displayed at many stations.

We must remember, though, that suffragettes were blamed for almost any act of vandalism during this period. For example, when cushions were slashed in a railway carriage on the Chatham line in February 1913, militants were said to be responsible. A month later, cushions were slashed on the North Eastern and North British Railways and labels saying "Votes for Women" were stuck to them. The presence of such labels was not always conclusive proof that suffragettes had left them.

However, the WSPU leaders did claim responsibility for some of the incidents. At a speech at the London Pavilion in March 1913, Annie Kenney noted the arrest of five women “for the constitutional action of trying to present a petition while the women who burnt down the railway station have got off scot-free” (*The Suffragette*, 14 March 1913). On the other hand, although many of these attacks were reported in the pages of *The Suffragette*, it was often with the comment that they were “supposed” to be the work of suffragettes. The WSPU leadership did not always know what its followers were doing, but they always defended their right to do it.

In June 1913 the WSPU issued a statement denying involvement in an attempt to wreck the London to Plymouth express saying that it “would be contrary to the policy of the Union”. This is presumably a reference to the policy that no life should be endangered by militancy. Rather disingenuously, they added that “no interference with the railway system is sanctioned by the WSPU” (*The Suffragette*, 27 June 1913).

But in spite of the WSPU’s protestations, the public can hardly be blamed for fearing injury or death might be the result when people planted bombs on trains. Travellers could not have been reassured by the Aisgill tragedy in September 1913, when fourteen passengers died, many after being trapped in burning carriages, after two Scottish express trains collided.

On 23 October 1913, David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, speaking in Swindon, commented,

“It is no good burning down churches, pavilions, and railway sidings, and menacing the lives of poor workmen, who after all are not responsible for the present condition of things. You don’t gain anything by that.” (*Manchester Courier*, 24 October 1913)



Mrs Pankhurst and others, 1911

Whether or not suffragette militancy did more harm than good to the women’s suffrage campaign is still as fiercely debated today as it was during the militant campaign. Nevertheless, suffragettes continued both to destroy railway property, and to rely on the smooth running of the railway network, to the end of their campaign in August 1914.

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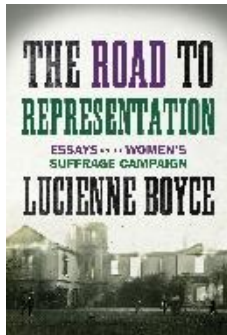
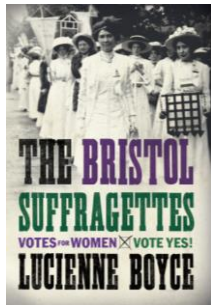
This talk was based on a three-part series of articles published on my blog:-

[“Cheap and Easy Railway Traffic”: Suffragettes and the Railways, Part 1](#)

[“Cheap and Easy Railway Traffic”, Part 2: The Battle to Free Mrs Pankhurst](#)

[“Cheap and easy railway traffic”, Part 3: Arson on the Railways](#)

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