

## **A Bristol Women's History Walk: Central Area 1840-1920 (Revised 2024)**

We begin the walk at *Narrow Quay (1)* at the George V fountain. This fountain, containing sculptures of working men from the Co-operative Wholesale Society building that used to stand nearby, is also a monument to the invisibility of women's contributions to the life of the city. This is especially striking because the Co-operative Women's Guilds have been said to represent both the conscience and the common sense of the Co-operative movement.

The first guild in Bristol was formed in the winter of 1889-90. The Bedminster Guild, formed in 1892, passed a unanimous resolution in November 1893 on votes for women. The guilds discussed women in local government, women workers, children under the poor law, war and peace and many other subjects. Bristol's first woman doctor, Eliza Walker Dunbar, worked with them on health and sex education. Nationally, campaigning for equality in divorce lost them their Co-operative Society grant in 1915. They were on committees of enquiry, helped to run local health services and in 1933 began the white poppy peace campaign which was revived again in the 1980's. A Guild motto was "Women's place begins at home, who knows where it ends?"

From Narrow Quay, walk up to *47 Park Street (2)* once the home of Mary Estlin, secretary of the Bristol and Clifton Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, which was formed in 1840. The society consistently supported the radical abolitionists in the United States from the 1850's. They left the British Anti-Slavery Society which was divided on whether to help slaves escape and to work for the immediate freeing of slaves in all states of the Union. There was also conflict about whether women should continue to be allowed to be full voting members of the society. Prominent abolitionists including William Garrison and black campaigners Frederick Douglass and Miss Remond visited Bristol on their speaking tours. The Bristol women raised money and sent goods to help the slaves freed by the "underground railway".

Cross the road to *40 Park Street (3)*, the offices of the Women's Suffrage Society. There were close connections between the anti-slavery movements and the movements for women's rights in both the USA and Britain. A number of women who were committee members of the anti-slavery society became members of the Bristol and Clifton Society for Women's Suffrage after it was formed in January 1868. The 1867 Reform Act had given the parliamentary vote to male ratepayers in the towns and an amendment gave the municipal vote to women ratepayers, but it took 60 years before women and men voted on equal terms in parliamentary elections.

The society organised speaking tours through the South West, Wales and Gloucestershire after 1871, which involved women in the shocking act of speaking from public platforms! Action in support of women's suffrage reached a peak in 1893 before the third reform bill again left women out. Then it slackened and revived again in 1904. By 1912 the National Suffrage Society were supporting pro-suffrage Labour MPs. In that year, the largely working-class East Bristol Suffrage Society was formed as an offshoot

of the Bristol Society with Annie Townley, later to become one of the first Labour Party women's organisers, as secretary.

From Park Street, turn into Great George Street, and walk up to *Brandon Hill (4)*. This was a meeting place for the Chartists in the late 1830's and early 40's. Men and women in huge numbers attended meetings to demand the vote for all. Some Chartists, though not all, argued that this included the vote for women. Brandon Hill remained a site for meetings, e.g. May Day rallies, until the 1950's.

From Brandon Hill, walk up to Queen's Road and cross to the Museum. Look across at *37 Queen's Road (5)*, at one time the offices of the Women's Social and Political Union (the Suffragettes). The WSPU was founded in Manchester in 1903 at the beginning of a revival of activity for votes for women. By 1908 they had begun to organise nationally, and Bristol became the centre of the WSPU in the South West with Annie Kenney as organiser. In contrast with the Society for Women's Suffrage, the WSPU actions included harassment of ministers of the Liberal government. In 1913, they turned to attacks on property. A Bristol woman, Lilian Dove Wilcox, was imprisoned and went on hunger strike in London for smashing a shop window. Others went on hunger strike in Horfield prison. In Bristol suffragettes burned a timber yard, mansions in Frenchay and Stoke Bishop and the University sports pavilion. After this, their shop and headquarters at 37 Queens Road was gutted by fire and looted by students.

On Park Row, at the junction with Woodland Road, stand the remains of the *Coliseum or Princes Exhibition Hall (6)*. This was the site in 1908 of an exhibition held to draw attention to low-paid women's work. Women working for the vote believed that votes for women would be a key step in ending such exploitation.

Continue along Park Row to Lower Church Lane and walk up to *St Michael's Church (now The Mount Without) (7)*. Very near here, in 1874, in a house "at the back of the church", a hospital was opened for women suffering from venereal disease who had been refused treatment by the other Bristol hospitals. The men and women who ran the hospital were putting into practical action their opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860's and 1870's. In trying to protect the armed forces from infection, the government had brought in these Acts which permitted the police in certain districts to detain women on suspicion only of their being prostitutes, and to imprison and to compulsorily treat them. Opponents of the Acts fought them as an example of unequal treatment of men and women, as well as on the grounds that the state was implicitly supporting regulated prostitution.

Returning to Park Row, cross to *Red Lodge (8)* where Mary Carpenter set up a girls' reformatory in 1854. Mary Carpenter is one of the few Bristol women who is known and written about. She worked with the Anti-Slavery Society and it was in the Red Lodge that Miss Remond, the black American anti-slavery campaigner, spoke in Bristol. But her main work was in the education of poorer working class children. She set up a "ragged school", a free day school for the street children of the docks area, in St James' Back in 1846 and worked to keep children and young people out of prison through the Reformatory movement and changes in the legal system. Although not free of the

prejudices of her time and class, she did not believe that the children of poor people should automatically be taken away from them if they were unable to support them, nor that the education offered them should only be in basic reading, writing and obedience. She opposed corporal punishment for children and imprisonment of child offenders.

Walk down Lodge Street and Pipe Lane and turn left to *The Colston Hall (now The Bristol Beacon)* (9). It was here in 1880 that the West of England Suffrage Society organised a meeting with a woman chair and speakers and an audience of thousands of women which overflowed from the main hall into a second meeting below it. Later, suffragettes twice hid in the pipe organ to avoid being excluded from cabinet ministers' meetings, shouting "Votes for Women" from inside the organ until they were eventually hauled out and ejected from the hall.

Where Colston Street meets St. Augustine's Parade is a double-gabled building, formerly the offices of the *Bristol Tramways Company* (10). This was the site in April 1920 of the last of many demonstrations by unemployed men, many of them ex-soldiers, which led to women being removed from their war-time work on the trams. In violent scenes throughout Bristol earlier that year tram windows had been smashed and the young women stoned.

Crossing over the Centre, walk down into *Queen Square* (11). No 4 Queen Square was the address of the first delegate to the National Union of Working Women (NUWW) to the TUC in 1875. The NUWW was formed in Bristol following the Social Science Congress of 1874, where Emma Patterson had read a paper stressing the need of working women to improve their conditions of work through forming Unions. (In the same year the Bristol Trades Council had rejected a plea for help in organising a union for women at the Barton Hill cotton mill.) By October 1875 the NUWW claimed 3,300 members. It was active for at least ten years.

From Queen Square, cut through Grove Avenue to *The Grove* (12). The Grove was once a major open-air meeting place for dockers and other workers, and makes a good place to recall two major strikes involving women workers. The Barton Hill cotton workers came out in 1889 against their long hours and low pay. They marched daily through Bristol to gather support, and on Sundays marched to their employers' various places of worship. Women working for the vote were divided on whether to support them by working with the strike committee, or whether to consider them sadly "misguided". The strikers won nearly all their demands. The Grove itself was the starting point for a demonstration in 1892 of confectionery workers, deal runners and dockers. December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1892 became known as Black Friday when police, and later in the day the Dragoons, ended their procession with violence. The confectionery workers or "sweet girls" ended their strike after 26 weeks, without gaining union recognition, but with some wage gains.

If you would like to know more about women's part in this period of Bristol's history, see *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol Broadsides 1983).

**Leaflet by Ellen Malos, Janet Brewer and Sarah Braun (1989)**  
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