

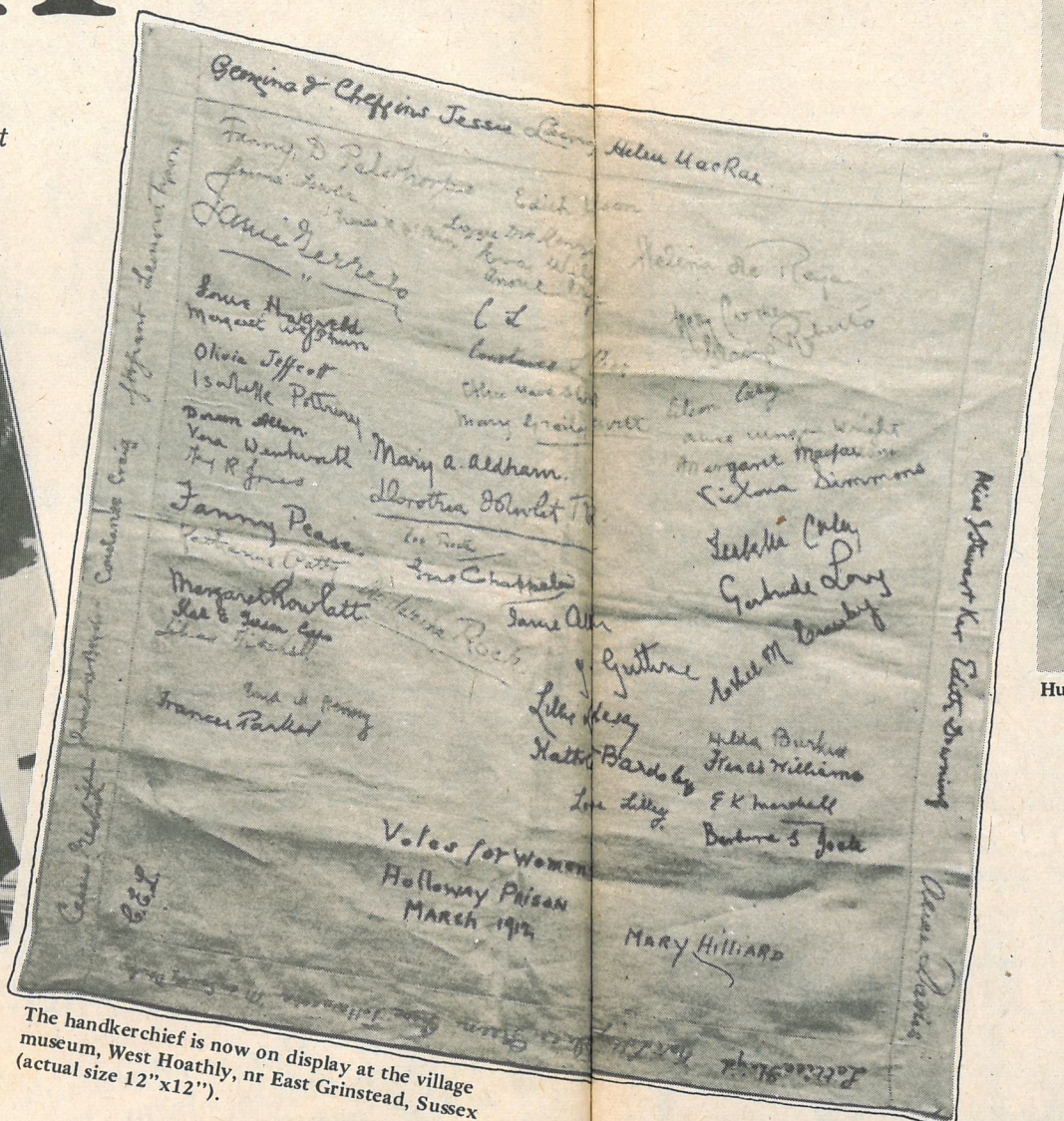
Smashing Handkerchief

Who embroidered this handkerchief?

Barbara Miller traces the women behind the signatures, what they said at their trials and why they were prepared to go on hunger strike.



Shop windows smashed by Suffragettes



The handkerchief is now on display at the village museum, West Hoathly, nr East Grinstead, Sussex (actual size 12"x12").

The handkerchief, signed by Suffragette prisoners in Holloway, was found among the left-overs from a jumble sale in a small Sussex village. The woman who ran the village museum showed the handkerchief to a feminist, Barbara Miller. She decided to borrow the handkerchief to try and find out what she could about its background. In her public library she read about the demonstrations of March 1912 and the ensuing arrests, but it wasn't until she read Antonia Raeburn's *The Militant Suffragettes* that she found references to some of the women who had signed the handkerchief. She wrote to Antonia Raeburn who advised her to go to the Fawcett Library and the London Museum. With the help of a London Museum curator she checked the handkerchief with signatures on Suffragettes' letters in the museum's collection. And at the Fawcett Library (now at the City Polytechnic), Barbara was shown all the 1912 issues of *Votes for Women*, the magazine of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which printed full accounts of individual women's trials and statements.

Most of the women who signed the handkerchief went to prison in 1912 for their part in a wave of window-smashing organised by the Women's Social and Political Union.

There had been a year's truce while the government debated the Conciliation Bill, a compromise which would have given the vote to a limited number of women. But the Conciliation Bill was shelved. Instead the government announced a new Manhood Suffrage Bill giving universal voting rights for men who had made no suffrage demands for forty years.

More provocation came from Hobhouse, the MP for Bristol, speaking at an anti-suffrage meeting: "In the case of the women's suffrage demand, there has not been the kind of popular sentimental uprising which accounted for the arson and violence of the earlier (male) suffrage campaigns — of Nottingham Castle in 1832 or the Hyde Park railings of 1867." The WSPU saw this as proof that polite persuasion and peaceful marches could never be effective.



Hunger strikers in Holloway prison exercise yard (Margaret Macfarlane second right)

For weeks the WSPU paper *Votes for Women* had been printing quotes from the hundreds of letters pouring in from women volunteering for the protest. So on Friday March 1st and again on March 4th, while the police were preparing for a demonstration advertised for the Westminster area, WSPU women set out in small groups for the West End, Knightsbridge, Kensington and Chelsea. They dressed "to kill" with stones and hammers hidden in elegant muffs or handbags. At a pre-arranged time they smashed the windows of all the large stores and offices. These mass protests started a new phase of militancy — attacks on property.

Two hundred women were arrested. They were either fined or bound over to keep the peace. Refusing that, they were sentenced directly for up to six months.

Holloway was full, and women were also sent to Aylesbury and Winsom Green, Birmingham. The prisons were so crowded with Suffragettes that normal conditions and discipline could hardly be maintained. Exercise times and work periods became occasions for singing songs, making banners and momentos like this handkerchief.

However, many women were denied facilities, and none given the status of political prisoner they were demanding. By April many of the women were on hunger strike in support of this demand. For those with longer sentences, things became really tough later on. Many were forcibly fed — in the most brutal way — and became very ill. Women barricaded themselves in their cells, and Emily Davison (killed the following year when she threw herself under a horse at the

Derby) was seriously injured when she jumped over the prison staircase. By the end of July, most of the hunger strikers were being released on medical grounds. It was not till 1913 that the Home Secretary introduced the "Cat and Mouse Act" empowering the police to re-arrest convicted Suffragettes once they had recovered sufficiently outside prison.

The handkerchief bears 68 signatures. A few of the women were militants like Vera Wentworth, Eileen Casey and Katherine Gatty, who had often been in prison. Others were activists from all over the country, organisers like Margaret Macfarlane, Lillias Mitchell, Fanny Parker, Janie Terero, Grace Tollemache, Nelly Crocker. But many were unknown rank and file members who had responded to the call for mass action. They came from a variety of class backgrounds and age groups, but they were all drawn together to make great personal sacrifices for the Cause, which meant not only "Votes for Women" but also an attack on the whole of women's role in society and on the extreme exploitation of working class women.

These are some of the women who signed the handkerchief, with what we know about them.

Janie Allan Sentenced to four months. At her trial she talked about the White Slave traffic, the sweating of women, the shamefully small punishments for those who "outraged" little girls — about these there were no outcries, she said — that was reserved for broken glass.

She came from Glasgow where 10,500 people signed a petition protest-

ing against her imprisonment. In May she barricaded herself in her cell and it took three men 45 minutes to get in with crowbars. She also went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed.

She took other militant actions; at a Glasgow meeting in 1914 she fired a blank at a policeman trying to arrest Mrs Pankhurst.

Hilda Burkett Sentenced to four months. She said the militants did not want to spend their lives in prison, but that they did want to remove the stain and stigma upon women. She refused to be bound over, saying she would consider it a disgrace to womanhood to do so. She was imprisoned instead, went on hunger strike, and put up a fierce resistance to forcible feeding. During one struggle with the wardresses she called out, "They will kill me sooner than letting me starve." Throughout the month-long hunger strike she only slept four nights.

Eileen Casey Sentenced to four months, went on hunger strike, forcibly fed. Later she was arrested in Bradford and sentenced to nine months. She escaped in men's clothes, but was arrested in Nottingham for possessing explosives.

Georgina J Cheffins Sentenced to four months. Went on hunger strike, forcibly fed. At her trial she said she was a suffragist by conviction because after living and working among the very poor for more than twenty years, she had come to the conclusion that all efforts were absolutely futile without the vote. She made her protest "because of the sweated women,

and the women and children broken every day of the year".

Constance Craig Sentenced to two months hard labour. She wrote, "There were so many of us that the authorities got muddled, and I served only three days — someone else did my sentence."

Nelly Crocker Sentenced to four months. At her trial she said she was there as a result of the brutality practiced on women on "Black Friday" (when women marching to the House of Commons had been attacked by the police). She wanted also to protest against the "vindictive sentences passed on the women of this movement".

Alice Davies Sentenced to three months. Aged 42, she said at her trial that women were determined to wrest the same human rights as men enjoyed. They were sick and tired of being treated as aliens, and they would persist in their efforts until they had gained their object.

Edith Downing Sentenced to six months. Went on hunger strike, forcibly fed. At her trial she said that she regretted that peaceable and law-abiding women were forced to do these things but that women were prepared to die in this agitation.

Lettice Floyd Two months hard labour. She'd worked in Coventry as a children's nurse: "I was there some years, but as most of the cases seemed to be due to bad housing, bad feeding and immorality, it was not entirely satisfactory work and did not go to the root of the matter."

In 1908, the WSPU's first limited militant actions and the harsh treatment they received roused Lettice Floyd to leave home — at the age of 42 — to become a full time organiser for the women's movement. She went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed.

Katherine Gatty Sentenced to six months. She pointed out that men were allowed to break women's hearts and homes, and that was not in general a punishable offence. She would probably be given six months, so that for breaking £42 worth of glass she was getting four months more than a man in Edinburgh for breaking his wife's skull. She also talked about a woman who had been in prison with her last time she was convicted, a shirtmaker whose earnings had been between 4s. and 7s. a week, on which she had to support a mother and child. She had come to prison as she had only the alternatives of prostitution or theft. Katherine Gatty went on to say that as long as she saw this wall of misery around her, she would gladly break law if by that means she could obtain for her sex some voice in the making of the law.

Alice Green Sentenced to four months. Went on hunger strike, forcibly fed. Refusing to be bound over to keep the peace she said, "Let me tell you what I have gone through lately on behalf of this cause. I have given up my home, my husband and my child, and I shall not go back until women get the vote." She was aged 40.

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Suffragette farming and dairy school in Berkshire (Fanny Parker right)



Vera Wentworth

Mary Hilliard Sentenced to two months hard labour. She appears to have written "Votes for Women" on the handkerchief.

Alice J. Stewart Ker Sentenced to three months. She was 58 and a doctor from Birkenhead. She said she was the mother of daughters and was ready to do all she could to get this reform: "There is only one way to prevent lawlessness and that is for you to act as a man, not as a judge, to force the government to place our Bill on the statute book."

Margaret Macfarlane Sentenced to four months. Went on hunger strike, was forcibly fed. She said that all her life she had been something of a reformer. She was a nurse, and when she found nurses under-fed or under-staffed, she always made her protest. She found that the only argument listened to by those in power was inconvenience. Asked to be

bound over she replied, "I prefer to agitate in a way that will be successful. If it means six months or six years, I prefer to go on."

Lilias Mitchell Sentenced to four months. Went on hunger strike. She said the situation was discreditable to British statesmen, but she would afterwards be proud that she had taken part in militant tactics.

Fanny Palethorpe Sentenced to four months. She came from Ainsdale and was not a member of the WSPU or any other suffrage society. At her trial she said she had always worked on constitutional lines, but after the Manhood Suffrage Bill and Hobhouse's speech she realised peaceful protests would have no effect on the present government.

Francis (Fanny) Parker Sentenced to four months. She ran a suffragette dairy and farming school to raise money for the WSPU and to train women to be economically self sufficient. At her trial she said: "If I had thrown a stone as a striker, or even as a man intoxicated, I suppose I should have received a very light sentence. For I have noticed that men in Swansea, when they were held up for rioting, got a fortnight's imprisonment. Of course I admit that the whole difference is the difference of motive, but I think the long sentences in our case prove that the motive is recognised, and I contend that if you recognise the motive you should also recognise the provocation."

Alice Maud Shipley Sentenced to four months. Went on hunger strike, forcibly fed. "More than half my life I have been doing what lies in me to help the poor and unfortunate. I know the condition of our women and girls, and the dangers that lie about them, and that they have no power to protect themselves. That knowledge has made me take up the attitude I have today. I feel our case is

a most urgent one, and I feel that only a woman can understand a woman's needs, that women suffer for want and care of men, and their salvation lies in looking after their needs and demanding the vote."

Grace Tollemache Sentenced to two months. In 1911 she had taken part in a census in protest at women's lack of political rights. In 1914 she smashed a window at Buckingham Palace while a banquet was taking place. She was arrested, but the king did not prosecute.

Vera Wentworth Sentenced to six months, went on hunger strike. She was a shop girl, and involved in some of the most militant actions. At her trial she said smashing windows was very unpleasant, and they would not have done it if they hadn't been incited by Mr Hobhouse, and as long as the Liberal Government behaved like that, they would have to do it. She would have done a great deal more had she not been restrained and she would probably do the same thing again and possibly worse. The prosecution pointed out that she had been convicted in 1909, 1910 and 1911.

In 1909 she had been arrested with two others while leading a protest crowd of 2,000 to the doors of Lord Carrington's budget meeting in Exeter. The crowd tried to prevent the arrests and troops were called in.

In 1914 Vera Wentworth was one of the women who interrupted Asquith's holiday in Clovelly — they broke windows, shouted at him in church, and decorated the gardens with "Votes for Women" badges. They also caught Asquith and Gladstone out golfing and questioned them. Asquith tried to run back to the clubhouse but Gladstone "fought like a prize fighter. I must say he is a better fighter than he is a politician," said one of the women after the incident, "The Suffragettes have often been called hooligans, but the two cabinet ministers certainly showed that they too could be hooligans when no one was listening."

Frances Williams Sentenced to four months. She went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed. She said it was a political protest against injustice, made in her old age, and not with malice. □

Not much is known about the other signatories. Perhaps readers might have heard personal accounts of them, or could find out more? The remaining names are: *Mary Alaham, Doreen Allen, Kathleen Bardsley, Janet Boyd, Isabella Casey, Kate Cardo, Grace Chappelow, Constance Collier, Ethel Crawby, Emma Fowler, G H Grant, J Guthrie, Louise Hargeld, Mary Granly Hewitt, Edith Hudson, Olivia Jeffcott, Barbara Jocke, May Jones, Jessie Laing, Louise and Kate Lilley, Lillie Linderay, Gertrude Lowy, C E L, C L (not Constance Lytton), Helen MacRae, Frances and Margaret McPhun, Emily Marshall, Cassie Nesbit, Fanny Pease, Isabella Pottery, Zoe Procter, M Renny, Helena de Reya, Gladys Roberts, Dorothea Herlet Rock, Gladys Rock, Margaret Rowlett, M de Santay Newby, Victoria Simmons, Leonora Tyson, Eva Wilson, Alice Morgan Wright.*