

Walking with suffrage in

Huddersfield



Huddersfield Station, St George's Square

By Jill Liddington

Though smaller than Leeds or Bradford, Huddersfield is perhaps Yorkshire's most remarkable centre for suffrage history. With two hotly-fought local by-elections in 1906-7, Huddersfield suffragettes were regularly in the national news. Alongside, an older-established suffragist organisation (which differed from the suffragettes in using only constitutional tactics) showed remarkable creativity and a talent for international networking.

Now, a century later, we can walk their streets, pace their neighbourhoods, visit their houses. Our first walk (A), a short circular route, takes us to the suffragettes' campaigning locations in Huddersfield town centre itself. The second walk (B) is a longer linear route, leading us out of the town and up into the industrialised Colne Valley, following the canal as it climbs through the countryside into the Pennines.

WALK A Huddersfield Town Centre

1 Huddersfield Station, St George's Square

Our walk begins at the station's impressive forecourt, its monumental façade little changed since it was completed in 1850. Its magnificence reminds travellers of Huddersfield's prosperity among West Riding's textile centres. By the early 1900s, the town centre was packed with great stone-built commercial offices and warehouses. In mills on the outskirts long wool fibres were spun into yarn which was then woven by women into worsted and woollen cloth – often tweeds to be sewn into ready-made suits and coats in nearby Leeds.

Huddersfield was a strongly Liberal town, returning a Liberal MP, Sir James Woodhouse, in the January 1906 General Election when a new Liberal Government swept into power. Every politician travelling up from Westminster, every visiting speaker arriving at this railway station, crossed its forecourt to reach the town centre.

2 The Market Cross, Market Place

Among those heading for Huddersfield in 1906 was **Emmeline Pankhurst**. In her Manchester home three years previously she had formed a small, new suffrage group, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The WSPU had recently captured newspaper headlines – interrupting politicians by shouting their 'Votes for Women' demands. This suffragette militancy, directed particularly at the Liberal Government, resulted in severe prison sentences. In October



1906, after a demonstration in the House of Commons lobby, a dozen suffragettes—including Oldham mill worker **Annie Kenney**—had been sent to prison for two months.

In November, Sir James Woodhouse MP was appointed as a Railway Commissioner. A by-election was called, and all eyes turned to Huddersfield. Suffragettes spotted a golden opportunity for political propaganda.

Emmeline Pankhurst was among the first to arrive; she spoke that night from the town's ancient market cross (still there, even if the Market Place streetscape has altered). As this was a Government that locked up women merely for demanding the vote, she stated angrily, the WSPU would oppose all Liberal candidates.

Other suffragettes also arrived, chalking the pavements and bill-posting the town. The Government panicked – and sprang the early release of the imprisoned suffragettes. This was a propaganda gift for the WSPU. **Annie Kenney** and others freed from Holloway jumped straight on a train, sped north and exploded into the by-election.

A crowd of 4,000 gathered outside Huddersfield station to greet the released suffragettes, to the delight of the popular press and news photographers. Yet polling day with its all-male electorate still resulted in yet another Liberal victory. However, suffragettes, buoyed up by their by-election experience, gained new local recruits in the town.

Walking: A few minutes along pedestrianised New Street brings us to the Town Hall.

3 Huddersfield Town Hall

The late-Victorian town hall might lack the spacious grandeur of the earlier station façade, but its interior certainly impresses. In December 1906 **Emmeline Pankhurst** returned to the town and addressed a meeting in its large hall. She was accompanied by the full WSPU panoply, including **Annie Kenney** and Emmeline's youngest daughter, twenty-one year old **Adela Pankhurst**.



Huddersfield Town Hall

Their aim was to found a WSPU branch in this key Yorkshire town. Emmeline proclaimed: 'Women went to prison... and will continue to go to prison until the Liberal party is compelled to carry the principle it professes, and to enfranchise women of this country.'

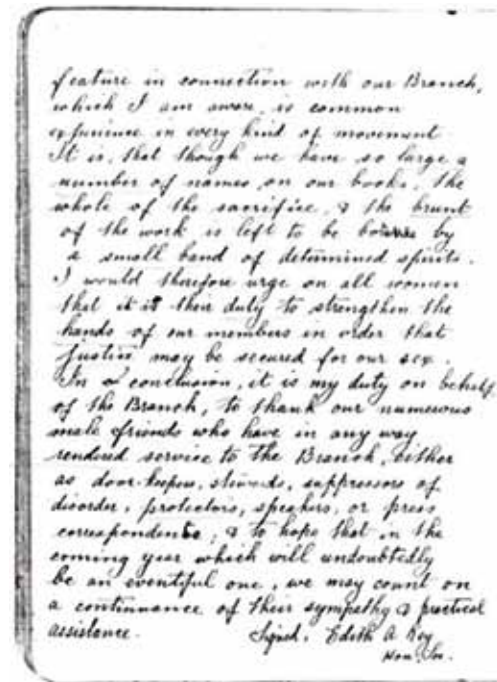
Adela proposed the women's citizenship resolution, and **Annie Kenney** urged 'young women of the town to... join the movement'—all to applause. At the end of the meeting no fewer than fifty local women put their names forward. The Huddersfield WSPU branch was formed and soon emerged as one of the most energetic in the country. So who were the local members?

4 Huddersfield Library and Archives



Just below the Town Hall, Huddersfield Library (opened in 1937) houses key evidence about Votes for Women campaigners. The excellent Local Studies Library includes street directories and local newspapers, plus the autobiography of Colne Valley suffragist Florence Lockwood (see **Walk B**). In an adjoining room, Kirklees Archives holds not only Florence Lockwood's manuscript diaries 1914-8, but also an extremely rare minute book which has rather miraculously survived and which records the early years of Huddersfield WSPU branch. This handwritten minute

book, kept in the family sideboard for decades, was only deposited very recently by the granddaughter of **Edith Key**. Edith was branch secretary (see **Bradford Road**, below) and a highly efficient business woman. Edith's minute book opens with a meeting held on Tuesday 14 May 1907, and includes her annual report 1907-8.



Edith Key's annual report 1907-8, Huddersfield WSPU branch. West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS)

5 Clarion Club rooms, 27 Albion Street

Edith Key's WSPU minute book carefully lists where the branch held its meetings, including open-air venues such as the Market Cross and St George's Square. One of the favourite meeting places was just above the Town Hall on Albion Street. Sadly, this street was completely rebuilt in the late-1960s.

Number 27 was the site of the Clarion Club rooms, named after the *Clarion*, a popular labour movement paper, reminding how close the links were between the early WSPU and labour politics. In her minute book, **Edith Key** also kept a list of WSPU members and their addresses so we know a great deal about the early WSPU suffragettes and can visit their neighbourhoods. We will go and look at the house of two key branch members, pausing on the



Huddersfield's older buildings often feature attractive and enigmatic decorations such as this one

old **Dora Thewlis**. Her mother **Eliza Thewlis** was a key member of the WSPU branch, and a ten-minute walk takes us to their family house.

Walking: at the foot of Northumberland St cross the dual carriageway and turn left along this main road (which becomes Northgate). Pass under the viaduct into Bradford Rd, then branch right into Alder Street, towards an open space with a small playground.

7 Hebble Street and Alder Street area

At last, we have left behind all the town-centre rebuilding and entered a neighbourhood that Edwardian suffragettes would recognise. It was in stone-terraced streets like these that most Huddersfield WSPU members lived. The branch sprang from such tightly-knit textile communities, here sandwiched between trams going up busy Bradford Road, the noisy railway viaduct and beyond it the canal dotted with woollen mills.

Among such a 'nest of suffragettes', women could pop round to see a neighbour or could discuss a political emergency in the open space between the rows of houses. Hawthorne Terrace is further down Alder Street, third terrace from the end.

8 29 Hawthorne Terrace



Hawthorne Terrace still provides family accommodation, just as it did a century ago. In one of the central houses lived the Thewlises, a family who had migrated to Huddersfield from the Holme Valley (see **Walk B**) and who worked in the woollen mills.

Dora Thewlis, born at Honley in 1890, probably left school at eleven to twelve years old; by 1907, sixteen year old Dora was living here, working as

weaver in a local mill and earning nearly £1 a week. Her mother Eliza had joined the WSPU branch and Dora followed her.

Then, in March 1907, the WSPU invited women to march on Parliament. Ten Huddersfield women decided to go, including Dora. But in the scrimmage, a handful of local suffragettes were arrested, including Dora, the youngest. She was remanded in Holloway and the magistrate wrote to her mother and father, both of whom remained unrepentant. But Dora found her photograph on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*, and herself dubbed 'Baby suffragette'. She was sent home in the care of an elderly wardress. Dora's notoriety did not end there; the image of her arrest was turned into a picture postcard—albeit inaccurately labelled—by a firm seeing popular interest in suffragettes as a marketing opportunity.



Dora Thewlis postcard (Shamrock).

Walking: from Hawthorne Terrace, walk down Calton Street back to the junction with Bradford Road, and the row of nine shops built in the 1880s. Second shop on the left (now a Caribbean café) was the home of Edith Key, WSPU branch secretary. Backing onto the railway viaduct, it must have been noisy.

way to look at another WSPU venue.

Walking: this is a five-minute walk – over Kirkgate, alongside the churchyard, to the foot of Northumberland Street.

6 Huddersfield Friendly and Trades Club, Northumberland Street



This Victorian building might now be designated 'Creative Lofts', but its stone inscription proclaims it as 'Mechanics Institution' and by the turn-of-the-century it was the Friendly and Trades Club. The WSPU branch meetings were occasionally held here, and the issue of affiliation to the Club was discussed by members. But questions of party political allegiance proved vexatious. The WSPU in Huddersfield might have strong labour movement links, but suffragettes valued highly their independence.

An even trickier issue erupted in spring 1907. WSPU marches to Parliament led to mass arrests, including those of a number of suffragettes from Huddersfield. With local women sentenced to seven days in Holloway, townspeople suddenly discovered that suffragettes lived down their street, even on their very doorstep. Huddersfield suffrage notoriety grew – at the centre of which was sixteen year

9 **68 Regent Place, Bradford Road**



68 Regent Place, Bradford Road, home of Edith Key, Huddersfield WSPU secretary.

Edith Key lived here with her talented blind husband, Frederic Key and their two sons, and here the Keys ran a music shop. A century ago, other shops in the row included a Post Office, a tripe dresser and a hairdresser. It is here that Edith wrote her minutes after branch meetings, and here that one of the early WSPU meetings was held, on 28 May 1907.

By the time of the 1911 census, resourceful Frederic was recorded as a self-employed 'Musical Instrument and Sewing Machine Dealer', with thirty-nine year old Edith Ann Key 'assisting in the business'; their teenage sons worked as a tailor's cutter and as a cycle shop assistant. Unusually, it appears to be Edith who has signed the census form, rather than her blind husband.

The house had five rooms, and years later Edith's sons remembered how, in its rambling attics, 'our house became a refuge and hiding place' for sheltering fugitive suffragette 'mice' after the 1913 'Cat and Mouse' Act. (This controversial piece of legislation, the Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill-

Health Bill, allowed women out of prison to recuperate for a specified number of days; when the licence expired the security forces could pursue them again.) With its skylight, the attics were perhaps pokey rather than rambling.

Walking: take the footpath up the Bradford Road slip-road, past retail outlets, to Castlegate. Cross at the traffic lights, and branch right up suburban Cambridge Road. At the top, continue on, up a narrow footpath. At the top, turn left, then immediately right into Highfields Road.

10 **New North Road and Edgerton**

Highfields and New North Road are at the lower end of Edgerton Road. Here can be seen the grand houses of the town's merchants and bankers. Indeed, the residential suburb of Edgerton was even dubbed 'the Kensington of Huddersfield'.

Here lived one of the few well-to-do members of the WSPU branch **Bertha Lowenthal**, daughter of a prosperous German-born wool merchant in Huddersfield. The Lowenthals lived at the spacious Grange (about 1/3 mile further up Edgerton Road). With Bertha and her brother lived another unmarried sister and three domestic servants (with undoubtedly outdoor staff living nearby as well). Bertha had originally been a NUWSS suffragist (see **Walk B**), later joining the WSPU branch and becoming one of its very few members who could help with its financial difficulties.

Walking: back down New North Road and turn left into Fitzwilliam Street over the Castlegate flyover, keeping to the pavements. Turn right into John William Street to return to the station.

Bradley Street South (opposite Huddersfield University)

One final suffragette house is not marked on the map as little of this area survives, so close is it to Kingsgate shopping centre and the ring-road.

After her notoriety, 'Baby suffragette' **Dora Thewlis** went very quiet. By 1911, when she was twenty, she and her elder sister Evelina (also a woollen weaver), had left Hawthorne Terrace. The five-room house was still home to her parents, two younger sisters at school, plus a cousin. Perhaps wishing to escape the domestic congestion, and preferring town-centre independence, they moved to Bradley Street South.

Here the Thewlis sisters became boarders with a widow, a theatrical landlady whose twenty-two year old daughter worked as charwoman for a nearby theatre. One of the other boarders in 1911 was even a professional music hall artiste. But this taste of urban glamour was just a step on a more ambitious journey for the sisters. Some time before 1914, along with about twenty other Huddersfield girls, they both emigrated to Australia in search of a better life. Dora worked in blanket-weaving near Melbourne, not far from where Dora's elderly daughter and other Thewlis descendants still live.

WALK A ENDS





From left to right:
A typical house on New North Road;
Highfield House, New North Road;
The Grange, Edgerton Road

Maps of Suffrage Walk

A - Huddersfield Town Centre and start of Walk B, to Canal



-  Pedestrianised or limited access areas
-  Inner Ring Road

