

Emmeline Pankhurst

2018 marks the centenary of women in the UK first being entitled to vote. How much do you know about the campaign for votes for women? Maybe you've heard of one of the leading campaigners, Emmeline Pankhurst, who was the founder and leader of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), one of the major organisations in the fight for women's suffrage.

Who Was She?

Emmeline Goulden was born in Moss Side, Manchester in 1858 to parents involved in radical politics. As the eldest of ten children, Emmeline had the task of reading the newspaper to her father at breakfast which led to her early interest in politics. At the young age of 14, she was introduced to the women's suffrage movement which supported the right of women to vote and became interested in the cause. Despite her father's support of votes for women, she later recalled hearing him say it was a pity she wasn't a boy which cemented her belief in the campaign for women's equality. She realised that women were essentially seen as less important than men. At the age of 21, she married Richard Pankhurst who was 24 years older than her and a friend of the MP and suffragist, John Stuart Mill. He was a barrister who supported women's right to vote and had been involved in women's suffrage Parliamentary bills and had published works on the subject. Together they had four children, Christabel, Sylvia, Frank and Adela. In 1889, Emmeline and Richard founded the Women's Franchise League which campaigned for women to be allowed to vote in local elections. When the organisation broke apart, she sought membership of the Independent Labour party but was initially refused, in spite of her friendship with its leader Keir Hardie, as she was a woman.



Did You Know?

Emmeline worked as a Poor Law Guardian in a workhouse and was shocked at the terrible conditions there. She was convinced that women in particular got a rough deal in the workhouse and described heavily pregnant women scrubbing the floors.

Who Were The Suffragettes?

In 1898, Emmeline was forced to move to a smaller house after Richard Pankhurst died. Five years after the unexpected death of her husband, in 1903, she founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Her daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adela were active in the organisation which was more militant than other organisations supporting women's suffrage. Founded on the motto, 'deeds, not words', the WSPU went to great lengths in pursuit of their cause. Instead of the peaceful marches and public speeches of other suffragists, the WSPU held demonstrations, smashed windows and set buildings on fire. As a result of their militant activities, they came to be called 'suffragettes'. Many of their protests were illegal and several of the suffragettes, including Emmeline Pankhurst, went to prison repeatedly. Whilst in prison, the suffragettes often went on hunger strike and refused to eat in an aim to raise further awareness of their fight. Emmeline Pankhurst was imprisoned several times and force-fed whilst on hunger strike herself. The WSPU was not connected with any political party and only women could be members. Whilst other organisations supported universal adult suffrage, meaning equal votes for all men and women, the WSPU wanted to keep the requirements of property ownership necessary for votes at the time. This was criticised as being not votes for women, but votes for ladies.



Did You Know?

In 1913, a suffragette called Emily Davison died when she was trampled by the King's horse, Anmer, at the Epsom Derby. It is believed that she was trying to drape a suffragette banner on the horse. Since 2017, the banner has been on display in the Houses of Parliament.

What Changed In 1914?

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Emmeline's political focus quickly changed. She turned to the war effort and called for the suffragettes to do the same. The WSPU encouraged women to work in factories producing munitions for the soldiers and encouraged young men to enlist in the armed

forces. When the bill was passed in 1917 to grant women over 30 the vote, Pankhurst dissolved the WSPU and a year later the bill came into force. Later on, in 1918, she changed her political views and became a Conservative Party candidate. Emmeline Pankhurst died just weeks before all men and women over the age of 21 were granted the vote by Parliament in July 1928. Two years later, a statue was unveiled in London's Victoria Tower Gardens to commemorate the leader of the suffragettes.

**Did You Know?**

Emmeline Pankhurst supported the White Feather Movement which aimed to make men who didn't volunteer to fight feel ashamed and join up to fight in the First World War. This movement would give a white feather to men not in uniform in an attempt to shame them.