

## ELSIE LAGSDING – BASILDON’S SUFFRAGETTE

Elsie Caroline Lagsding was born to William and Louisa H. Lagsding on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1887 in a two-room miserable cramped tenement building in Star Lane Canning Town. Her father William was born in Latvia Russia in 1858 and was a Mariner before settling in this country and subsequently working in the East End docks. Her mother, Louisa Henrietta was born in Lewisham.

By 1893 already with siblings William and Kathleen having arrived, now soon to be followed by Clara, a move across Bow Creek was made to a larger house in Chilcot Street, where Elsie spent most of her school years.

At the time of the 1911 Census, both she and her sister Katherine born in 1892, were working as Kitchen Maids for a London County Council School close by. Elsie was one of fourteen children born to William and Louisa.

### **She records in her own words:**

*“After I left school and went into domestic service. I was always on the shy side and didn’t want to go mixing with a lot of people. I went local first of all but was soon cleared off there because the couple I worked for used to go on the booze. Very nice people they were but they did like a drop!*

*He was a Superintendent of the Prudential Company but used to go on the tiddly and she would get me to go out with the jug. I used to wear a cape and with the jug tucked under my arm beneath the cape, nobody saw it. It was a big house, and they were very decent to me. I’ve got no complaints about them.*

*From there I went to the West End, to Curzon Street Mayfair with a Major Arthur Griffiths and his wife. I was upstairs downstairs there: upstairs in the morning and downstairs in the evening to help the cook. I remember once the cook was ill, and they asked me to do the dinner. I was scared stiff, I had to fry whitebait. They looked like tiddlers to me, like the kids bring home on a Sunday afternoon when they have been fishing in the canal. I got these whitebait and put them in and anyhow the message came down from the dining room congratulating me on the dinner and I was only fifteen. I was there about a year but then they packed up and went abroad.*

*Before they left, she said her niece wanted a maid and would I think about it. Of course, I was only too glad. I didn’t like to go past a job and so I went there and was there about two years. Mrs. Marshall she was. She wrote to me afterwards that her husband had been killed in the First World War and he was such a nice man. He was the oldest son of Marshal Snedgrove. Of course, his father had money and he used to go up to London every day for the firm. They were quite comfortable, and she was a marvellous pianist – she used to play beautifully. They lived in a small flat, only about four rooms, and there was only me.*

*Then they moved to Watford and that was just an ordinary working man’s house, six rooms and I did it all. I even took the cooking on. Of course, I never had any washing anywhere wherever I went, nor any flights of stone steps like there were to do. I was pretty lucky really. I liked it there and Mr. Marshall too. He was really a nice chap – it seemed such a shame. They had a baby there that died at birth. Shortly after that I left them.”*

Her time with the Marshalls brought Elsie’s period in Service to an end. The cookery experience she had acquired enabled her to obtain work in a school kitchen in Poplar, so she returned to live with her family. Despite her father’s radical and revolutionary thinking, it was not any ideological commitment to the suffragette because that drew Elsie to them. The initial contact was accidental and causal:

*“It must have been at the end of 1911 or the beginning of 1912 when I first met Sylvia Pankhurst. She had rented a couple of rooms in a large house in East India Dock Road near Poplar Hospital facing the dock wall. I was passing with a friend, and she was speaking to quite a large crowd from one of the windows. She was a really passionate speaker and we stood outside listening for a while until she invited people to go in and join her. ‘Come on,’ I said, ‘Let’s go in and hear what she has got to say.’*

*So, in we went and after a bit of a talk, we both joined because we found it interesting. From then on, we would meet every week somewhere and go to a meeting with her. There was a lot of talk about the name but eventually they settled on the East London Federation of Suffragettes."*

Elsie understood that she herself had neither the education nor ability to further the cause on the platform or in print, but she was throughout a hard-working, enthusiastic and at times frightened worker, not only in the cause for votes for women, but later in Sylvia's fight for pacifism, and an end to the slaughter of the First World War:

*"I never spoke at any of the Federation meetings. I was always too scared, and I don't think I could have done it anyway. That was left to Sylvia and those who had it at their fingertips, but I was there for all the protests and activities.*

*The first turnout after I met her was at a meeting in Bow Baths. Sylvia was there with Daisy Lansbury and the meeting was going on with Sylvia on the platform speaking when all of a sudden, the police rushed in. They were after Sylvia to arrest her and in no time, chairs were being flung all over the place. I was really terrified because I had never imagined anything like it. I rushed and stood back against the wall under the balcony because the chairs were being thrown off the balcony at the police. While they fought back the police Sylvia disappeared, and they got safely away out of it. Of course, she was all right as she wasn't ill then. In the end Daisy Lansbury was arrested in her place. The police took her for Sylvia as she was about the same size, so she ended up at the police station and Sylvia got away that night."*

It is possible that Elsie's memory failed her here. There were two incidents at Bow Baths on 12<sup>th</sup> October and 5<sup>th</sup> November 1913. The confrontation with the police was at the first and the mistaken arrest of Daisy Lansbury at the second when a similar confrontation took place but outside the hall after the meeting.

*"Most of our demonstrations started from the dock gates and members from other branches like the Canning Town people would come over to Poplar and join us. We would line up there, get organised and then march off wherever Sylvia wanted us to go. We had quite a lot of marching about to do and I remember one day we had just lined up and were ready to go when this woman came up, spat at me, called me some very choice names, and pulled my hat off just as we were ready to start off in the procession.*

*Of course, we always dressed nicely and properly for those affairs. If it were summertime we'd be in summer dresses, white shoes, white stockings like we wore then, and all made up. It was summertime when I got arrested in Hyde Park where we went for lots of our demonstrations and meetings. I was there as usual with my bundle of Dreadnoughts. I knew it wasn't allowed to sell them in the park, so I just had them hanging over my arm, casual like. Of course, if anyone came up and asked for one, I didn't refuse them. I just took the tuppence and anything more they liked to give, and I sold quite a few before I got caught.*

*Well, I was standing there, and this man came up to me. He was a smart chap, well dressed in a straw hat and buttonhole. He asked me for a paper, so I sold him one and got a shilling for it. A shilling – I thought I was well away. Shortly afterwards a policeman came up and took hold of my arm. 'Will you come down to the station with me?' he said. 'What for?' I asked, and he said, 'You're breaking the law.'*

*So, I called out to Sylvia. 'I'm pinched,' and off we all went for they all followed me to the station.*

*I must say everyone was very nice and the police too. There was a sergeant there and when we had been sat waiting for a very long time he said to me, 'I'm sorry I can't offer you a cup of tea.' I sat there for a couple of hours until one of my friends, Miss Smythe, came along and bailed me out.*

*A little later I had to appear at one of the West End police courts and who turned up but the well-dressed chap I'd seen with the straw hat and buttonhole. He turned out to be a detective and gave evidence that I was selling the Dreadnoughts. Then I was sworn in and told the magistrate that I hadn't been selling papers.*

*'You sold him one,' he said, meaning the detective. 'Yes, but I didn't offer it to him. He came up and asked me for it and gave me a shilling for it. 'Well, that didn't wash. If I wasn't offering them for sale, I suppose in a way I was selling them.'*

*'If we gave you permission to sell your Dreadnought in Hyde Park, they'd be selling peanuts and winkles before it was finished, and we can't have that. You'll be fined five shillings.' So, I stood down and Miss Smythe paid the fine for me.'*

*The affair which really put the wind up me was at the Albert Hall. I knew roughly what the idea was but didn't fancy it and hadn't volunteered until I hear my friend Daisy calling out, 'We'll go, me and Elsie,' and so of course I was stuck with it.*

*We were given a banner which we were told to hold up at a certain time. So, we got the bus up to the hall and got ourselves in and sat down with the rest of the girls who were there as well. We found out then that it was a patriotic meeting that was taking place, not an anti-war meeting, and the hall was packed. Well, I don't mind admitting I'm a bit of a coward and I was frightened. I sat there shivering and feeling sick, whispering to Daisy every few minutes, 'Are we going to hold it up now?'*

*It was a good size banner with a couple of short poles to hold it up. The girls had prepared its message a couple of days earlier painted in red and black on white calico, 'British War Ships are firing on the Soviet Republic.' Well, I didn't know whether they were or not, but I suppose they must have been.*

*Anyway, the times comes round and up we stand with our banner shouting out our message. That causes a right rumpus, and the first thing is the woman in front of me turns round and gives me a right mouthful. Then attendants arrive and take us to the back of the hall. They were very kind; they didn't push us about at all but just kept us there until a policeman came up. 'Had you got permission to hold that banner up madam?' he asks. 'Now ask yourself, I said, feeling a bit cheeky by now. Well, they took the banner, led us downstairs and saw us safely out, but they didn't touch us or harm us in any way. We went across the road and sat by the Albert Memorial chatting until the others came out and we all went home. I didn't realise we had been photographed but the next day there we were in the papers with our great big banner.*

*When it came to the big processions, the police were always looking for an excuse to break them up and it could turn very nasty, although most of the time I must say that I enjoyed it. I was a bit of a coward and always cleared off if there was any fighting, so I didn't get hurt at any time, although there were a few near misses like the time I got my hat bashed in.*

*That was during the war, and it was one of the worst ones for me. It was a good, big procession because all the men were joining in as well. The plan was to march down one of the roads off Bow Road and hold a meeting outside a councillor's house. There was the railway on one side and rather nice houses with steps and basements on the other. It all started out nice and orderly with a band in front to keep us swinging along.*

*Well, the police were there in full force and a bloke on a white horse nearly always met the procession, When he did, you knew you weren't going to get very far. We got nearly to the bottom of the road before it turned really nasty. Then the police in front turned round their horses and charged the crowd and the police behind charged from the back.*

*Everybody ran and scattered all over the place and we lost one another. It was a pretty mad scramble, and I was shouting out, 'Where's my sister? I want my sister.'*

*I was holding a red flag when we started and that was yanked out of my hand right away. Then a man pulled me inside the gate to one of the houses and shut the gate. Lots of others were doing the same, rushing into the front areas of the houses and shutting the gate because there was nowhere else to get away from the police who were lashing out left and right. One of the on a horse came up on the pavement and tried to open the gate and pull us out but this man called out, 'Leave them alone,' and kept the gate shut. So, there I was with the old horse leaning its head over the gate and spitting in my face. I started out the day with a lovely black, velvet hat nicely wired all round with two beautiful bows. Well, by the time I got clear that was in a right mess.*

*Finally, it quietened down, and we all picked up with one another in Bow Road and ended up having a good laugh while we try to straighten out the wire and tidy up the bows in my poor old hat. Nobody was really hurt and at the end of the day but all of the band's gear went for a Burton. They smashed the drum*

and the flags, the instruments, the lot. They were all thrown down the embankment onto the railway line.

They were all a great crowd and there were good times of course as well as bad. We got together from time to time for the evening and at one of the concerts Sylvia organised. Elsa Lanchester, the wife of Charles Laughton, came along and danced for us. In 1915, a few of us met up in Railway Street for a party on my birthday when we heard the sound of an air-raid warning. No sirens then of course, just someone going round the streets blowing a whistle or calling out. I saw Arthur Dinham standing in the doorway gazing up and asked him what he was looking at. He told me to get inside but of course they all went tumbling out to have an eye-full and there was this great elegant thing sailing calmly through the air like a huge silver cigar. It looked such a beautiful, peaceful site but as we learned later it killed quite a few people and did a lot of damage in the city.

When the war started in 1914 Sylvia started a restaurant. The Cost Price Restaurant as it was called in Railway Street Poplar, and she asked me if I would go and work there. Well, I didn't want to go really because I was quite settled in my cookery job with the council.

It was just before Christmas and my father said, 'Why don't you go? You keep missing about with the woman. Why don't you tell her what you are going to do one way or the other? So eventually I said that I would leave, I was getting about 14 or 15 shillings a week then working for the council, well, that was a good wage really at that time. They offered me one pound at the canteen and that was a bit of an attraction, four or five shillings a week extra, so I went.

But it wasn't much of a job, you could get vegetables and things like that, but you couldn't get meat. The girls working there wouldn't give up their food coupons naturally and so it was mainly offal that we had. We used to mince it up and make pies, pudding, and stews. It was all right at the time I suppose, and they liked it. We also used to get pots of jam from time to time that one or other of the girls would bring in. There were a few other workers but few working there, and I had a young girl of about fifteen working with me in the kitchen. They were all a Jolly good crowd together and it could be hectic really.

The dinners were not free. They paid about threepence or fourpence for a dinner and that was a two-course affair. Then they had a Cup of tea afterwards that was about a ha'penny, but of course a ha'penny was a ha'penny in those days, it wasn't like we've got now. I suppose about thirty or forty people came in at any one time. We didn't have waitresses. They came up and were served from the bar. All we did were the midday dinners from twelve to two and then they had a Cup of tea if they wanted it. We cleared up, which took us all afternoon till finishing up time.

That went on through the war in Railway Street in Poplar in an old-fashioned little pub that had been empty for years. It had one big room that had been two bars and there was another big, long room with an old-fashioned stove in it that was used as an office. Upstairs there were three small rooms where Sylvia opened up a clinic, which was another of her operations. There was a doctor's room and a nurse's room. The nurse used to come every day and the doctor twice a week and they looked after the children and examined them there. The mothers would come in and sit out in the big room where they could have drinks while they waited.

I was working there all through the war and right through to 1919, but then I went on holiday to Yarmouth and had a bad accident. When I came back, I couldn't get back to work again so Sylvia closed it up just like that. It wasn't making any profit or anything, if it paid its way and the wages, they were lucky. Of course, the wages were very small. I never got more than the £1 I started with all through the war, but I wouldn't have gone on munitions, so I suppose I wouldn't have earned much more anyhow. Although they did get more money on the council, they paid out extra increases and that, but they knocked down knocked them off after the war when the food began to get a bit more normal.

We had a few strange turnouts while I was there. A woman came in one day and asked for a dinner which we served up for her. She had a baby in her arms, looked around her and suddenly said, 'Oh will you hold my baby, I've left my bag up at Bromley station'. Well, I was a right mug. I took the baby as she bunged it in my arms and stood there waiting. Of course, she never came back.

*We phoned Sylvia and asked her what to do and she said go to the police station. So down we trotted to the police station with the baby, and they sent us on to the workhouse in Poplar High Street. That's where we left the baby, but I never knew what happened to the poor little thing after that. The police came and questioned me, but we never heard anymore or saw the woman again.*

*We left the canteen about four o'clock and went home for a meal and of course at weekends the canteen was closed but there was always plenty to do when we weren't there, collections, meetings, demonstrations or selling the Dreadnought. We used to go down to the docks at Millwall and stand outside shaking our boxes. One was for babies' milk and the other for the Dreadnought. There was one man who gave me five shillings every week when he bought the Dreadnought. We got quite a bit that way, collecting for milk. Of course we weren't the only ones doing that sort of thing.*

*We walked from Poplar right up to Trafalgar Square no end of times and from there on to other places with the processions. I'd been up for Sylvia's trial when she got the six months and remember her saying, why should I be arrested for saying what my father said years ago that if all men held the view that war was wrong there would be no more War. But I think she had said a bit more than that. One of the processions went up to Holloway where she was in prison. It was winter and a shocking, mucky night as we walked up in mud and slush with all the snow melting. When we were there, we all assembled outside calling out for the release of Sylvia Pankhurst. Much good that did us. It was so bad we all ended up coming back on the train.*

*Of course, if they went on hunger, they had a terrible time in and out of prison on cat-and-mouse licence. Out when they started to get to ill and then snatched back in as soon as they were a little better. We all went to a big demonstration in Victoria Park where Sylvia was just out on licence and wanted to speak. Well, that was a proper do then and it got very rough. One of my friends ended up with a terrific black eye. Sylvia was so bad she had been brought to the park on a stretcher, but the police took her again in the park, stretcher, and all. That was what it was like for them, in then out and in again.*

*All the girls like Sylvia and thought a lot of her. To her face or if she was about, they spoke of her as Miss Pankhurst but behind her back amongst ourselves it was always 'Old Pank'. She was a good, kind person and if anyone was in trouble she would help them out as she did me.*

*When I had the accident that stopped me working in the canteen, I had been in Yarmouth with the suffragette friends who lived there. We were walking back home when I got caught and dragged against a wall by a wagon and horses carrying a load of copper ore and ended up with both shoulders and my collar bone fractured. A borough councillor told us to write to the firm and what to do, and I got a reply, but it didn't get me very far. When Sylvia heard what was going on she came along to see me and said that she would put it in the hands of her solicitor. She also sent me to her doctor, and he gave a report. I went to the solicitor to talk to him two or three times. The firm had offered me £15 but Sylvia's solicitor took it further and they offered me £73 which he advised me to take but I had been out of work for eight months so that didn't go very far. That was the sort of thing Sylvia did.*

*But she liked her own way too. Always wanted to be the one and get what she wanted and if people didn't agree with her she didn't like it. She could be difficult to work with in that way.*

*By about the time of the General Strike I wasn't seeing so much of Sylvia, and we only met a few times. I went over to see her in Woodford once where she had a house in Charteris Road. I went over because she had borrowed a book from me. It was the French Revolution by Kropotkin. My father said it gave a very different view from the other ones. But I didn't get it back from her and she still had it when she went out to Abyssinia. We never had it back.*

How that Kropotkin book, her father's treasure, rankled with Elsie. There she was more than fifty years later, putting her own thoughts on that time together, and she still hadn't forgotten it. The events and people she referred to were discussed time and time again.

### **Sylvia Pankhurst, her influence on Elsie Lagsding and its legacy.**

Throughout her life Sylvia Pankhurst was involved in a broad range of campaigns including the suffragette movement, the campaign against the First World War, the Communist movement, anti-fascism and support

for the freedom of Ethiopia. One of the apparent contradictions in her shifts of emphasis took place in the course of the First World War.

In 1914, Sylvia Pankhurst was a leading militant suffragette campaigning for the representation of all women in Parliamentary democracy. However, when women were granted the vote over the age of 30 in 1918, far from celebrating this as the culmination of the struggle in which she had campaigned, Sylvia was unconvinced that this measure could achieve the kind of democracy she hoped for. Instead, she championed the Bolshevik Revolution which she believed was creating a far more developed form of democracy and she asked British socialists to:

## 1. The Worker's Dreadnought.

Workers' Dreadnought was a newspaper published by variously named political parties led by Sylvia Pankhurst. The paper was started by Pankhurst at the suggestion of Zelig Emerson, after Pankhurst had been expelled from the Women's Social and Political Union by her mother and sister. The paper was published on behalf of the newly formed East London Federation of Suffragettes.



Provisionally titled Workers' Mate, the newspaper first appeared on 8 March 1914 (14 March according to one source, 21 March according to another), the day of suffragette rally at which Pankhurst was due to speak, in Trafalgar Square, as The Woman's Dreadnought, with a circulation of 30,000, subsequently (on number 10, of May 1914) stated as 20,000.

When the editor was imprisoned, Norah Smyth alternated as acting editor with Jack O'Sullivan. For many years, Smyth had used her photography skills to provide pictures for the newspaper of East End life, particularly of women and children living in poverty.

In July 1917 the name was changed to Workers' Dreadnought, which initially had a circulation of 10,000. Its slogan changed to "Socialism, Internationalism, Votes for All", and then in July 1918 to "For International Socialism", reflecting increasing opposition to Parliamentarism in the party.

On 19<sup>th</sup> June 1920 Workers' Dreadnought was adopted as the official weekly organ of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). Pankhurst continued publishing the newspaper until June 1924.

## The Worker's Dreadnought. 16 February 1918, p. 948.

... consider very seriously whether our efforts should not be bent on the setting aside of this present Parliamentary system under which the peoples suffer, and the substitution of it by a local, national, and international system, built up on an occupational basis, of which the members shall be but the delegates of those who are carrying on the world's work; and shall be themselves workers, drawn from the bench, the mine, the desk, the kitchen, or the nursery; and sent to voice the needs and desires of others like themselves.

The changes in Sylvia Pankhurst's political activities in these years even confused and frustrated her fellow activists. Helena Swanwick, who in the First World War campaigned for peace alongside Sylvia Pankhurst in the Women's International League, would later recall that Sylvia:



## 2. H.M. SWANWICK.

Helena Maria Lucy Swanwick CH (née Sickert; 30 January 1864 – 16 November 1939) was a British feminist and pacifist. Her autobiography, *I Have Been Young* (1935), gives a remarkable account of the non-militant women's suffrage campaign in the UK and of anti-war campaigning during the First World War, together with philosophical discussions of non-violence.



Swanwick's name and picture, along with 58 other women's suffrage supporters, are on the plinth of the statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square, London, unveiled in April 2018.

Swanwick worked as a journalist, initially as a sort of protégée of C. P. Scott and wrote articles for the *Manchester Guardian*. In 1906 she joined the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in preference to the Women's Social and Political Union (the suffragettes), because of her belief in non-violence. Quickly becoming prominent within the NUWSS, she served as editor of its weekly journal, *The Common Cause*, from 1909 to 1912. Despite her pacifist views, she wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* in November 1910, on behalf of the NUWSS, in defence of the suffragettes arrested during the Battle of Downing Street. While regretting the suffragettes' violence, she blamed the confrontation on Prime Minister H. H. Asquith's "continual evasions" on the matter of women's suffrage, calling him a "past master in evasion". She remained on the NUWSS Executive until 1915. She was also a member of the Labour Party.

On the outbreak World War I, Swanwick began campaigning for a negotiated peace. From 1914 she was active in the Union of Democratic Control. In 1915, together with such other prominent suffragists as Catherine Marshall and Agnes Maude Royden, she resigned from the NUWSS over its refusal to send delegates to the International Women's Congress at the Hague. She was one of the founding members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

G. K. Chesterton criticised her pacifism in the 2 September 1916 issue of *Illustrated London News*: "Mrs. Swanwick ... has recently declared that there must be no punishment for the responsible Prussian. She puts it specifically on the ground that they were promised, or promised themselves, the conquest of the whole world; and they have not got it. This, she says, will be punishment enough. If I were to propose, to the group which is supposed to inspire the Pacifist propaganda, that a man who burgled their strong boxes or pilfered their petty cash should suffer no punishment beyond failing to get the money, they would very logically ask me if I was an Anarchist."

### ***I Have Been Young*, London: By H.M. Swanwick reviewed by Victor Gollancz, 1935, p. 188.**

... was a very provoking colleague, owing to her habit of going her own separate way, even after she had joined others in hammering out an agreed way. There might have been give and take, and they would, perhaps, loyally carry out the agreed compromise, only to find that, like one of the hoops in "Alice's" game of croquet [in *Alice in Wonderland*], Sylvia had wandered off to another part of the field.

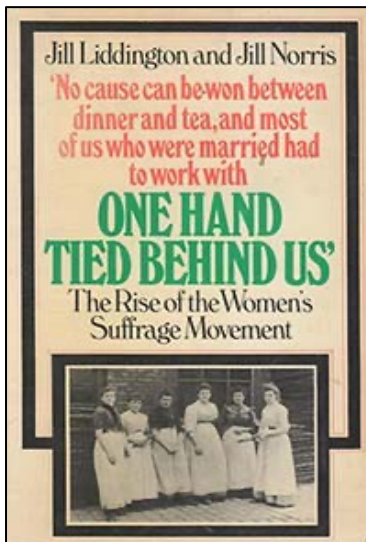
To understand why Sylvia Pankhurst's political ideas in 1918 were felt to be so different from those she held in 1914 requires an examination of the experiences she underwent during the War.

In 1930 she was made a Companion of Honour for 'services to peace and the enfranchisement of women'. By the time of the outbreak of WW2, she was in poor health, depressed at the growth of fascism in Germany and feeling isolated, her husband having died, and her friends been estranged because of her

views - she promoted non-intervention and isolationism, but advocated a Federal Europe and the 'cultivation of an international mind' among European citizens. She apparently committed suicide on 16 November 1939.

### **The women's suffrage movement and the outbreak of War.**

#### **3. Jill LIDDINGTON, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820*, London.**



Discussions of divisions in the British women's suffrage movement have typically focused on tactical differences between different organisations. The most obvious divide was between the two largest and most prominent women's suffrage campaign organisations, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), whose 'constitutionalist' suffragists used peaceful campaigning tactics, and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), whose militant suffragettes resorted to direct action and civil disobedience. However, the outbreak of the First World War revealed divisions that cut across these organisations. Millicent Fawcett, the president of the NUWSS, and WSPU leaders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, who also happened to be Sylvia's mother and older sister, argued that women owed loyalty to their nation state which in wartime took precedence over their demand to be recognised as citizens within that state and thus they suspended their votes for women's campaigns in favour of campaigns to support the war effort.

All three adopted belligerently nationalistic positions in the war; by 1915 NUWSS leader Millicent Fawcett was proclaiming that it was 'akin to treason to talk of peace', while the WSPU changed the title of its newspaper from *The Suffragette* to *Britannia*, and leading WSPU members toured the country denouncing workers taking strike action and attacking those who opposed the war as 'pro-German'.

#### **4. Jo VELLACOTT, *Pacifists, Patriots, and the Vote: The Erosion of Democratic Suffragism in Britain During the First World War*.**

This appreciation of Jo Vellacott, independent historian, and Quaker, draws upon details of her long and adventurous life. It focuses especially on the valuable contribution she made to researching and understanding the life of suffragist Catherine Marshall (1880–1961), the history of democratic suffragists, pacifism, the First World War and modern British history.

Jo Vellacott passed away on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2019 in her 97<sup>th</sup> year. Obituaries ran in the *Toronto Star* and *Globe & Mail* in Canada, and later in the *Guardian* (25<sup>th</sup> April 2019). They detail an adventurous life which began in Plymouth, England where she was born. She started her undergraduate degree at Somerville College, Oxford in 1940. During the war, she also worked in a variety of capacities, including filling anti-tank mines with high explosive in an arms factory, and serving as an Assistant Inspector for the Ministry of Health, before being called up for the Women's Royal Naval Service where she was trained as an air mechanic. Having completed her degree, after the war she accepted a contract to teach English in South Africa, where she married Peter Newberry and had two children, Douglas, and Mary. They returned to England where she had her third child, Soo, and then the whole family moved to Canada in 1955. She did a master's degree at the University of Toronto, and then a PhD in History at McMaster University in the 1970s.

She taught women's studies at Concordia University in Montreal for a period, even though she was an independent scholar for most of her academic career. She was a committed Quaker, a dimension of her life which began under the tutelage of Jean Rowntree when she was a young student at Downe House, and to



which she returned in the 1960s. Her conviction about pacifism was reinforced by her experience of the war and eventually informed the focus of her research. She remained actively involved with the Friends House in Toronto.

It was in 1977 that she began what has arguably become her life's work: the recovery of those she called the 'anti-war suffragists'. These were a group of leading lights in the largest non-militant women's suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), who resigned from the executive in 1915 in protest at its refusal both to launch a campaign to educate public opinion on questions of war and peace and to send delegates to the International Women's Peace Congress organised in The Hague.

For their trouble, they were written out of the official histories of the NUWSS, penned by its president Millicent Fawcett and her ally Ray Strachey. In retrieving their voices, Vellacott's careful archival work challenged existing storylines and opened up new areas of enquiry around women's suffrage, feminist responses to the Great War, and the war's long-term impact on British feminism. A reference point for scholars writing about this period, her views have not gone unchallenged over the past three decades. This book continues the conversation in earnest.

Drawing on her extensive knowledge of the NUWSS's minutes, methods, and members, Vellacott identifies two types of suffragists in its midst. Traditional suffragists, animated by a feeling of entitlement to rule over their social inferiors and pride in the empire, tended to support the Conservative Party, and were predominantly present in the south of the country, not least in their principal power base, the London Society for Women's Suffrage (LSWS). By contrast, democratic suffragists treated their social inferiors as equals (or at the very least believed they had a responsibility to them), were critical of the empire, supported the Liberal or Labour Parties, and were predominantly present in the north. Where traditionalists only wanted the vote on the same terms as men, democrats championed adult suffrage. On the eve of war, the latter had been in charge of the NUWSS for four years, after the adoption of a new constitution had loosened the LSWS's grip on the executive and brought in new women from the periphery.

Under their leadership the NUWSS grew stronger by establishing links with the Labour Party and working-class women and men. Despite their success, however, by July 1915 they had not only lost power to the traditionalists but had left the NUWSS altogether. Taking us to the heart of the NUWSS's internal politics, Vellacott meticulously retraces the unfolding of events between August 1914 and June 1915, as matters increasingly came to a head between the two feminisms. The democratic suffragists, arguing that there was a deep connection between militarism and women's oppression, pushed for the NUWSS to embark on a campaign to educate public opinion on the issue of peace.

Traditional suffragists countered both that militarism abroad was more dangerous than militarism at home and that any such campaign would be, in Strachey's words, 'the ruin of suffrage' (quoted p. 86) for it would be perceived as unpatriotic. Their disagreements were resolved through two councils, in February and June 1915, respectively. Vellacott's almost thrilling accounts of the motions and amendments that were mooted, carried, and defeated at these councils are to be commended.

## **5. Liz STANLEY with Ann MORLEY, *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison: A Biographical Detective Story*.**

Emily Wilding Davison (11 October 1872 – 8 June 1913) was an English suffragette who fought for votes for women in Britain in the early twentieth century. A member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and a militant fighter for her cause, she was arrested on nine occasions, went on hunger strike seven times and was force fed on forty-nine occasions. She died after being hit by King George V's horse Anmer at the 1913 Derby when she walked onto the track during the race.

Davison grew up in a middle-class family, and studied at Royal Holloway College, London, and St Hugh's College, Oxford, before taking jobs as a teacher and governess. She joined the WSPU in November 1906 and became an officer of the organisation and a chief steward during marches. She soon became known in the organisation for her daring militant action; her tactics included breaking windows, throwing stones, setting fire to post boxes, planting bombs and, on three occasions, hiding overnight in the Palace of Westminster—including on the night of the 1911 census.



Davison was a staunch feminist and passionate Christian and considered that socialism was a moral and political force for good. Much of her life has been interpreted through the manner of her death. She gave no prior explanation for what she planned to do at the Derby and the uncertainty of her motives and intentions has affected how she has been judged by history.

On 4 June 1913 Davison obtained two flags bearing the suffragette colours of purple, white and green from the WSPU offices; she then travelled by train to Epsom, Surrey, to attend the Derby. She positioned herself at Tattenham Corner, the final bend before the home

straight. At this point in the race, with some of the horses having passed her, she ducked under the guard rail and ran onto the course; she may have held in her hands one of the suffragette flags. She reached up to the reins of Anmer—King George V's horse, ridden by Herbert Jones—and was hit by the animal, which would have been travelling at around 35 miles (56 km) per hour, four seconds after stepping onto the course. Anmer fell in the collision and partly rolled over his jockey, who had his foot momentarily caught in the stirrup.



Davison was knocked to the ground unconscious; some reports say she was kicked in the head by Anmer, but the surgeon who operated on Davison stated that "I could find no trace of her having been kicked by a horse". The event was captured on three news cameras. The picture above shows the medal awarded for her hunger strikes whilst in captivity. Her funeral on 14 June 1913 was organised by the WSPU. A procession of 5,000 suffragettes and their supporters accompanied her coffin and 50,000 people lined the route through London; her coffin was then taken by train to the family plot in Morpeth, Northumberland.



A procession of Suffragettes, dressed in white and bearing wreaths and a banner reading "Fight on and God will give the victory" during the funeral procession of Emily Davison in Morpeth, Northumberland, 13 June 1913. Crowds line the street to watch.

### A retrospect

... However, there were members within both organisations who were unhappy with their leaderships' overt nationalism. A section of leading NUWSS members left their organisation after it condemned them for helping to organise the 1915 International Women's Congress in the

Hague which called for a negotiated peace.

Opposition to the War within the WSPU came not from the official, national leadership but instead from a group of rank-and-file activists, dubbed 'freelance' suffragettes by historians Stanley and Morley. The lack of opposition within the official WSPU leadership, especially in contrast to the NUWSS, can partly be attributed to the splits that had taken place in the WSPU before the outbreak of War which in each case had seen activists with more socialist leanings depart from the organisation and join other groups. The split in 1907 saw the formation of the Women's Freedom

League; after their expulsion from the WSPU in 1912 Frederick and Emmeline Pethick Lawrence joined the United Suffragists; and when Sylvia Pankhurst was ordered to leave the WSPU in January 1914 her East London branch of the WSPU became the East London Federation of the Suffragettes (ELFS). All three of these organisations adopted a critical stance towards the war effort.

At the heart of the split between the ELFS and the WSPU were conflicting ideas about the politics of the women's suffrage movement. Although the WSPU had been created in 1903 by women with strong ties to the labour and socialist movements, after Christabel Pankhurst took control of the leadership from late 1906 the organisation began to reflect her increasingly right-wing politics.

The WSPU started discouraging the central involvement of working-class women as they relied less upon collective action in favour of more individualistic acts of heroism that would attract more public and press attention if conducted by society's wealthy and prominent women.

In 1908 Christabel Pankhurst summarised the changing direction thus: 'it is especially the duty of women of distinction and influence to show their earnestness and devotion to this cause by taking part in the militant movement'.<sup>6</sup> An exclusive focus was demanded on women's suffrage with members exhorted to reject 'class feeling' and party politics, although in practice this was targeted at removing the socialist and labour movement politics that had characterised the organisation at its inception. Indeed, the WSPU leadership condemned the measures taken by campaigners in contemporary struggles against social inequalities such as the strikes of male workers, Christabel Pankhurst even argued that men would be wrong to send a deputation to Parliament as the suffragettes did 'because they [men] have representatives sitting in the House of Commons'. Instead, Christabel Pankhurst sought, although largely unsuccessfully, the support of the Conservative Party and the Ulster loyalists, neither of which had a long-standing commitment to women's suffrage, and both of which promoted a narrow and discriminatory view of political representation generally. Therefore, while Christabel Pankhurst sought the removal of the barrier to women's political representation, she did so largely because she identified with the interests of the existing state and, more widely, with the British Empire, and not because she identified with those struggling against other aspects of the discriminatory basis of that state.

After Christabel fled to Paris in 1912 to avoid a conspiracy charge, her strategy faced being undermined as her socialist sister Sylvia began to take on a leading role in the militant suffragette movement and created a branch which organised among working-class women in the East End of London.

Sylvia would later recall that Christabel demanded the East London branch separate from the WSPU on the basis of her objection to working women's involvement in the campaign. In the first edition of the ELFS's newspaper, *The Woman's Dreadnought*, Sylvia's editorial defended their insistence on building a working-class suffragette campaign:

#### **Other newspaper references:**

##### **The Woman's Dreadnought, 8 March 1914, p. 3.**

... Those Suffragists who say that it is the duty of the richer and more fortunate women to win the Vote, and that their poorer sisters need not feel themselves called upon to aid in the struggle appear, in using such arguments, to forget that it is the Vote for which we are fighting. The essential principle of the vote is that each one of us shall have a share of power to help himself or herself and us all. It is in direct opposition to the idea that some few, who are more favoured, shall help and teach and patronize the others.

##### **E.S. PANKHURST, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England During the First World War*, London:**

... Therefore, Sylvia explicitly rejected the idea, promoted by Christabel, that society's wealthy women could represent the interests of working women. Furthermore, the ELFS identified their struggle with others facing repression by employers and the British state. The ELFS supported and recruited members from working women, particularly in the wave of strike action that became known as the Great Unrest, they worked closely with trade unions and when the First World War broke out Sylvia Pankhurst was in the middle of a visit to Ireland where she was gathering first-hand reports of a massacre of Irish civilians by British troops. Sylvia's trip to Ireland underlined her internationalism, which stressed that workers across national boundaries had more in common with each other than they did with their ruling class. Only three

days before the outbreak of the First World War Sylvia implied that working people had nothing to gain from war when she argued that modern wars were waged solely for the material gain of society's elite:

**The Woman's Dreadnought, 1 August 1914.**

... All sorts of reasons that sound glorious and patriotic are invariably put forward in support of a declaration of war; but it is practically certain that every war of modern times has been fought with the purely materialistic object of forwarding the schemes and protecting the interests of powerful and wealthy financiers.

**The East London Federation of the Suffragettes and the outbreak of War**

... Sylvia's socialist materialist opposition to the War was shared by leading ELFS member Melvina Walker, a docker's wife, who wrote an article in *The Woman's Dreadnought*, titled 'Working Women and the War', just over a week after the outbreak of war, in which she argued against the growing nationalist tensions that were dividing communities in East London by evoking the solidarity German workers had shown to London dockers in their strike:

**The Woman's Dreadnought, 15 August 1914, p. 85.**

... How strange! British transport workers – trade union men – are called upon to shoot down German transport workers, and it is not so very long ago, in the time of our industrial war – I mean the great Dock Strike – when we were fighting the large ship owners, we received with joy the news that these same men had sent us £5,000 to help us in our fight for better conditions. We said we would never forget their kindness, let us keep our word by treating all those German workers who are left behind in our midst with civility.

**B. Harrison interviews with Miss Elsie Lagsding, 8SUF/B/094, 15 June 1976; Miss Jessie Stephen, 8SU.**

Other anti-war ELFS members included Elsie Lagsding, (one brother became a Conscientious Objector), and Jessie Stephen, who joined the ELFS after resigning from the WSPU over its support for the war effort. before the commencement of hostilities in the Second World War Albert Goddard Lagsding was an In-Patient of Claybury Mental Hospital in Ilford Essex. (The term of the time was "Incapacitated". Their elder brother William John Lagsding served with the Merchant Navy during the First World War and was awarded service medals. However, not all ELFS members took this anti-war stance when Britain entered the War on 4 August 1914.

Melvina Walker would later remember the effect of the pro-war propaganda campaign in the East End of London, which won support by promising a short, heroic and victorious war:

When War was declared, everybody who was "anybody" in Poplar [a borough in East London] threw himself or herself into the job of recruiting.

Down came three or four 'buses filled with soldiers, and bands playing "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," "Rule Britannia" and other such songs to stir up the people. Each 'bus displayed a white banner inscribed: "Roll Up Boys, A Free Ride to Berlin."

**The Workers' Dreadnought, 17 April 1920, p. 1.**

... Hundreds of men and women gathered round. Every man who walked up the steps to "sign on" was treated as a hero; cheers were continually rising.

**PANKHURST, The Home Front, p. 16.**

... Sylvia Pankhurst immediately noticed the effects of this atmosphere on members of the ELFS when she returned from Ireland to find Norah Smyth and Jessie Payne, two of the organisation's leading members who lived in the same house with Sylvia, accepted the government's claim that Britain had entered the War to defend Belgium. She felt 'their minds all dazed and glamoured by the torrents of Press rhetoric, and the atmosphere of excitement and rumour growing apace in every street. 'The glamorisation of war rendered Sylvia's anti-war arguments distinctly less attractive, Sylvia later recalling:

**PANKHURST, The Home Front, p. 16-17.**

... They flinched from the huge conception that a perpetual reaching out for new fields of exploitation was inherent to the Capitalist system. To show them that the rivalry of the Governments to secure preferential opportunities for their Nationals was the Past master-cause of the War, was to thrust on them a vision of human Society, ruthless and without scruple as the grip of the boa-constrictor upon the lamb. It was to tear from them the tinsel and the glory, to send their souls shivering and naked into a grey, cold world of disillusion, peopled by harsh and revolting truths.

**The Woman's Dreadnought, 12 December 1914, p. 155.**

... Furthermore, beyond the acceptance of government rhetoric and an initially enthusiastic response to the pro-war propaganda, there were other reasons why people in East London became caught up in the war effort. The outbreak of war had destabilised the economy, workers were thrown out of work as industries restructured to cater for war production and the cost of food spiralled due partly to concerns over shortage of supply and partly due to opportunistic profiteering. These changes disproportionately hit the poorest in society and the effects were particularly felt in the impoverished East End. In December 1914, an East London man who had enlisted told the Dreadnought that when people asked the soldiers why they had joined up, they replied 'because we were starving'. Sylvia identified that similar pressures forced local women to work in the wartime industries:

**PANKHURST, The Home Front, p. 205.**

... I was surrounded by masses of poor women who had taken war work, soldiers' clothes and equipment, munitions, whatever came, as the sole means of keeping them and theirs from starvation. Inevitably they passed to war work as peace employment failed.

**Minutes of ELFS General Meeting, 9 August 1915, E. Sylvia Pankhurst Papers.**

... At an ELFS special meeting to discuss the way forward, held two days after Britain entered the War, Sylvia acknowledged the constraints that this situation placed on the ELFS's activism: 'we could not say much against the war at present as so many people have relations in it that they will not listen yet.' Acknowledging the extent of local involvement in the war effort, combined with the initial wave of popular patriotic enthusiasm and the lack of a united perspective on the War within the ELFS, the ELFS decided on a list of five demands that the organisation could unite around.

The first called on the government to take control of the food supply 'in order that all may feed or starve together, without regard to wealth or social position', and that working-class women be consulted on the price and distribution of food.

The second called for government committees to provide work for men and women at the rates set by the trade unions, with 'women to be paid at equal rates with men for equal work'. The third called for the moratorium that applied to debts over £5 to be extended to those below, as these were the debts incurred by the poor and least able to pay. The fourth called for committees dealing with food prices, employment, and relief to include working-class women. The fifth demand was votes for women. Though this did not require members to adopt an explicitly anti-war stance, the first four demands did insist that the War should not translate into increased suffering or exploitation for the working-class. However, the ELFS's stance did implicitly undermine the War in two ways. Firstly, the insistence that working people had different interests from their rulers countered the establishment's rhetoric any sacrifice was justified because nothing, but the 'national interest' mattered in wartime. Secondly, the demand that workers' wages should be generally raised, and the price of food subject to democratic control to protect against profiteering, entailed shifting the cost of the war away from the poor and onto the wealthier members of society. Sylvia Pankhurst demonstrated an awareness of the radical implications of this argument when she told an ELFS general meeting in 1915: 'If we can make employers lose instead of making profits, we would bring the war to an end'.

**Campaigning in the community**

... East London Federation of the Suffragettes. First Annual Report, London: 400 Old Ford Road, Bow, East.

... The five demands constituted campaigning aims, but in the meantime the ELFS found itself confronted with the immediate problem of the intense distress the East End had been plunged into by the outbreak of War. The ELFS's local reputation for effective campaigning meant that it was to this organisation that many people turned for help, as Sylvia Pankhurst remembered: 'It was intensely gratifying to realize that so many women felt that the Suffragettes were their friends'.

The ELFS established a Distress Bureau at its headquarters which helped women struggling with the wartime bureaucracy. Many women did not know how to apply for the separation allowance that was supposed to compensate for the absence of a son or husband who had joined the army. When women did apply, they frequently found that the authorities lost their application forms and legal documents. When money was granted to wives and families, or in compensation to wounded soldiers, the amount was often wrong. Mistakes and delays had a far more devastating impact on poorer families who did not have the financial resources to subsist in the meantime. Sylvia took up numerous cases on behalf of soldiers and their families, writing to the relevant government departments to challenge decisions she regularly won improvements and the ELFS began to act 'as a Trade Union or a family solicitor might have done'.

#### **ELFS. First Annual Report, p. 18.**

Distress bureaus were soon set up at the four other ELFS offices across East London. The scale of destitution prompted the ELFS to go beyond providing legal advice and they began to organise schemes providing immediate practical assistance to local women and children. The five bureaus were soon offering free milk, baby-weighing, and daily professional medical assistance. These were accompanied by five 'Cost Price Restaurants', the first set up less than a month after the outbreak of War, where local people who bought an inexpensive meal ticket were provided with a two-course meal, although the very poor were given these tickets for free, and the ELFS ensured that customers were not aware who had paid and who was eating there for free. The ELFS also employed some local women, who had suddenly found themselves out of work, making maternity clothes and toys and created a nursery, run according to the Montessori method, to provide for the workers' children. This became a significant area of work for the ELFS; in January 1915 they were employing, in addition to their own organising and secretarial staff 'regular indoor workers on relief work of one kind or another, all but five of whom are on full time, and also a varying number of outworkers'.

Sylvia Pankhurst had misgivings about the establishment of these welfare services, as she did not want to see her organisation, which had strived so hard to empower working women to fight for their rights, turn into one which now treated those women as passive victims: 'organised relief, even the kindest and most understanding, might introduce some savour of patronage or condescension, and mar our affectionate comradeship, in which we were all equals'. The ELFS took several measures to guard against this.

Firstly, they insisted on paying all the adult workers at least 5d. an hour, thus ensuring that women were not paid less than the minimum wage a man in the area was paid (women were generally paid at a lower rate than men). Secondly, as the number of people approaching the ELFS for legal assistance increased, Sylvia created a new organisation at the beginning of 1915, the League of Rights for Soldiers' and Sailors' Wives and Relatives, in which she involved the women who wished to challenge decisions and encouraged them to take up their own grievances in a collective environment, supported by others in a similar position alongside help and expertise from ELFS members. Sylvia later recalled that 'it was my great joy that we were stimulating working women to speak up for themselves and their sort, and to master, despite their busy lives, the intricacies of Royal warrants and Army regulations, so as to secure the promised allowances, such as they were, for themselves and their neighbours.' The choice of names for their projects also reflected their aim of self-emancipation, by for example titling their organisation for legal redress the 'League of Rights', while Sylvia recalled that the restaurants were titled 'Cost Price' because 'the name should be a slogan against profiteering and would carry no stigma of charity'.

#### **The Woman's Dreadnought, 10 July 1915, p. 277.**

... Moreover, the ELFS continued to employ some of their pre-war tactics to put pressure on the government, such as organising demonstrations and sending deputations to government Ministers and governmental bodies where they demanded political and economic rights for working women. For example, when the government introduced the National Register in the summer of 1915, which required the details



of everyone between the ages of 15 and 65 and was widely seen as a precursor to compulsory military conscription (which was introduced the year after), the ELFS organised a demonstration which demanded: 'No register without safeguards! No compulsion! Equal pay for men and women! Down with sweating! Wages must rise with prices! Down with high prices and profits! Votes for women to protect our homes and wages!'

### **Barbara WINSLOW, 'Sylvia Pankhurst and the Great War':**

Barbara Winslow, one of Sylvia Pankhurst's biographers, has argued that instead of organising welfare schemes and deputations to Parliament, 'it might have been better for the ELFS to organize working women and unemployed women to fight for their rights as workers, for better pay and working conditions and for more jobs'.

Winslow argues that had they focussed on trying to get the women experiencing low pay involved in the struggle they might have generated industrial action and therefore they should have concentrated 'on convincing women munition workers rather than Runciman and Lloyd George that they deserved equal pay. 'Had there been an organisation of women workers calling for equal pay, backed up with strikes, rallies, and demonstrations, perhaps more could have been accomplished.' This view, however, overlooks the specific difficulties that women workers faced in the munitions industries that become clear when their position is compared with that of the male workers who did undertake significant industrial action in the early years of the First World War. Workers in the munitions factories on the Clyde in Scotland went on strike in February 1915 and again in the spring of that year, while coalminers in South Wales struck in July 1915.

Both these groups of workers had been influenced by socialist organisations since before the War and had built a tradition of self-education in socialist ideas; in Scotland John Maclean ran popular classes on Marxism while many of the Welsh workers were involved in the Central Labour College. Consequently, many of the strike leaders were active socialists. The ELFS, as a relatively small organisation formed only months before the War, had nothing like the same degree of influence. Moreover, the war effort saw 1.25 million women enter the workforce.

Therefore, large numbers of women were entering the workforce on the terms that employers dictated in wartime. This meant that if women wanted to fight for better conditions, they had to engage in an overtly offensive struggle for something they had not had before.

By contrast, it is significant that both the first strike on the Clyde and in the South Wales mines were initiated when pre-war pay deals expired, and the new offer failed to match the wartime rise in the cost of living.

Women workers, new to the industry, did not face the same opportunity of expiring pre-war pay agreements around which to contest their pay. Furthermore, employers took advantage of women workers paying them less than the male workers and forcing them to work excessive hours. This gave rise to resentment among many male workers who responded by harassing women workers and arguing against their employment because they felt women were undercutting and even replacing their jobs leaving them vulnerable to military recruitment. These tensions were exacerbated by the decision of major unions in the munitions industry, such as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, to refuse to admit women members, thereby hampering the creation of a struggle of male and women workers to fight collectively for better pay and conditions.

### **ELFS Minute Book, 6 Aug. 1914 [un-published], E. Sylvia Pankhurst Papers.**

The ELFS's decision to raise industrial demands from outside the workplace perhaps reflected the fact that the workplace could be an uncomfortable environment for women to campaign in. Indeed, Sylvia remembered that the ELFS's July 1915 demonstration against sweated labour was made up of 'the sweated workers come to plead their own cause'. On the outbreak of war, the ELFS had planned more radical, direct action based on their community organising to challenge the economic problems that women faced. At their special committee meeting called two days after the outbreak of war the ELFS voted to endorse the proposal of members Mrs Bird and Miss Paterson to resist the spiralling food prices: 'that someone should

go into a shop and ask for food at normal price and if it were refused go and get a member to back her up and go & take it.'

#### **M. CRAIG, When the Clyde Ran Red, Edinburgh:**

Although this took place on a few occasions, Sylvia Pankhurst later recalled that the general atmosphere of demoralisation induced by the War thwarted attempts to transform this into a mass campaign: 'the effect of the War and its sorrows smothered rebellion even against the grossest extortion.' Another proposal that emerged from the special committee meeting was for the rent strike, that the ELFS had been planning prior to the War as a tactic for demanding votes for women, to be implemented with the aim being to halt the rising cost of rent. While this scheme was not realised by the ELFS, by March 1915 when there was increased anger against the War a militant rent strike campaign and mass resistance to evictions was successfully implemented by women in Glasgow.

#### **Demanding working-class representation**

However, the ELFS's turn towards less direct action on economic questions cannot solely be attributed to a more conservative assessment of what could be achieved. The deputations to governmental bodies, for example, raised the radical prospect of working-class control over questions previously deemed beyond the concern of democratic decisions. At the start of the War, the government persuaded Mary Macarthur of the National Federation of Women Workers, Marion Phillips, and Margaret Bondfield of the Women's Labour League to join the Central Committee for the Employment of Women (CCEW), which provided temporary employment for women. The ELFS was deeply critical of the CCEW's much vaunted scheme, the Queen Mary Workrooms, complaining that the 3d. paid per hour to the workers (considerably less than what the ELFS paid its own employees) meant that leading women in the labour movement were presiding over a scheme that forced working-class women into sweated labour.

The ELFS sent a deputation of working women to see Mary Macarthur and argue the case for the payment of a higher wage in the Workrooms. ELFS member Charlotte Drake, herself a member of the delegation, reported the exchange in the *Dreadnought* commenting critically on the 'splendid, furnished apartment' in which the deputation was received, with its 'gild chairs' and 'very rich carpets on the floor', observing that Macarthur:

#### **The Woman's Dreadnought, 3 October 1914, p. 115.**

... was very affable indeed, shaking hands with us all, and that made me feel very uncomfortable, as I was feeling intensely the contrast between her surroundings and those of the thousands of poor souls that we all know of, who have lost their fathers, brothers and sons and have no comfort of any kind.

Drake's report thus questioned Macarthur's legitimacy to represent the interests of working women when Macarthur was so far removed from everyday working-class experiences, thereby helping to bolster the ELFS's fourth demand that working-class women be themselves representatives on committees on questions related to them.

'It is up to us workers to end the War': campaigning against the War.

#### **ELFS Minutes of General Meetings, 17 January 1916, E. Sylvia Pankhurst Papers.**

The ELFS's insistence on self-representation, which it maintained throughout the War, led to it adopting a more all-encompassing demand than votes for women. In January 1916 they voted to support 'human suffrage', which explicitly demanded votes for all men and women. Their increasing focus on general working-class representation was reflected in their decision in March 1916 to change their name to the Workers Suffrage Federation (WSF). However, as in the pre-war suffragette campaign, the WSF not only sought to achieve change through winning representation, it also sought change through the self-activity of workers. While the WSF's demand for working-class representation on bodies determining wages and prices held out hope that representation might be able to affect economic conditions, the same could not be said of the question of the War itself which Sylvia had diagnosed as a systemic problem of capitalism. Recalling her feelings in late 1915 Sylvia expressed, in the form of an internal dialogue, the tension between the campaign to win improvements within the existing system, and her desire to challenge that system:

**PANKHURST, The Home Front, p. 230.**

Ruthlessly I examined myself, deciding that though I had spoken against the War, the greater part of my struggle had been waged for economic conditions. "Oh yes, I know this is a capitalist war; if capitalism were ended, wars would be no more; yet the politics of this War, in their callous wickedness; these you have not sufficiently exposed. You have attacked the effects of war and of capitalism more often than those two great causes from which they spring."

**47 The Woman's Dreadnought, 3 March 1917, p. 688.**

**48 See East End News, 20 March 1917, press cutting in Tower Hamlets Local History Archive.**

When the WSF began to engage in overtly anti-war campaigning from late 1916 they looked to working-class action from below to stop the war. In late February 1917 Melvina Walker was arrested and fined after she addressed a crowd in Hyde Park, telling the audience 'Our class in Germany was just as good as we are. What we want is peace . . . It is up to us workers to end the War.' Towards the end of 1916 they held peace meetings in the heart of their working-class community, outside the dock gates and in East London's large Victoria Park, while in March 1917 they attempted to sabotage the attempt to recruit workers into the war effort by disrupting the National Service Week rallies held in the East End.

### **Revolutionary democracy and social change**

Before 1918 Russia used the Julian calendar and not the Gregorian calendar used in Western Europe.

... When the Russian Revolution broke out in February 1917, it received not only the support of the British left but also support from the British government and The Times newspaper, the organ of establishment opinion in Britain. Their support was based on their understanding of Russia's newly installed Provisional Government. On the one hand the establishment of a Provisional Government appealed to liberal sentiments, not least because it replaced the Tsar, widely seen as the most autocratic leader in Europe, whose alliance with Britain in the War undermined British claims to be fighting for freedom.

However, while the British government supported the Provisional Government for the political change it represented, its support was also based on the lack of social change that the new Russian government promised.

The Provisional Government's commitment to keeping Russia fighting in the First World War meant that the interests of the British government were unharmed, because it had not lost an ally, but it meant that the heavy cost of war continued to be paid by Russian civilians. However, the Provisional Government did not have hegemonic power in Russia. Indeed, the February Revolution had produced a situation of 'dual power', which Sylvia analysed in the Dreadnought:

**The Woman's Dreadnought, 24 March 1917, p. 704.**

At present there are virtually two Governments in Russia – the Provisional Government appointed by the Duma and the Council of Labour Deputies which is responsible to the elected representatives of the workers and the soldiers.

The councils, or soviets, to which representatives were elected from workplaces and army battalions allowed more direct participation by workers and peasants than the Provisional Government and they increasingly reflected the growing discontent with the War. After the revolutionary anti-war Bolshevik Party won a majority in Russia's two largest cities they called for a second revolution under the slogan 'All power to the soviets'.

After the second Russian Revolution in October 1917 the Bolshevik government ended Russian involvement in the First World War and rapidly instituted radical social reforms, including votes for women, the abolition of legislation that discriminated against children born outside of marriage, civil marriage with equal rights for the husband and wife, the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality.

**The Workers' Dreadnought, 26 January 1918, p. 932; on Sylvia Pankhurst's approach to the soviets.**

Sylvia Pankhurst supported the project of extensive social change, and she linked the socialist character of these changes and their rapid implementation to the structural change that the soviets represented. She

saw the soviets as a more direct form of democracy which could more accurately and swiftly represent the interests of the Russian working class: 'The Soviets, as delegate bodies, are able to respond swiftly to the changing feeling of those they represent.'

**She argued that this soviet form of democracy was far superior to Parliamentary democracy:**

... As a representative body, an organisation such as the All-Russian Workers', Soldiers', Sailors', and Peasants' Council is more closely in touch with and more directly represents its constituents than the Constituent Assembly, or any existing Parliament. The delegates to the All-Russian and local Soviets are constantly reporting back to and getting instructions from their constituents; whilst the Members of a Parliament are elected for a term of years and only receive anything approaching to instructions at election times.'

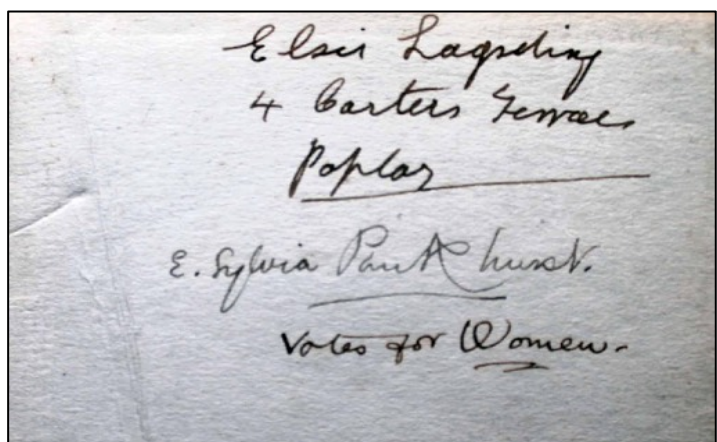
These conclusions had implications for Sylvia's campaigning priorities. Whereas previously she had campaigned for universal suffrage within Parliamentary democracy as a means towards fundamental social change which represented working-class interests, when she felt that this was achieved in the aftermath of the October Revolution, she argued that a different kind of organisation of society was needed for these changes to be realised. Therefore, although the October Revolution would cause Sylvia Pankhurst to argue for a different kind of democratic structure based on the example the soviets provided her with, her appreciation of the soviets was based on her insistence during the suffragette movement and the First World War that the interests of working-class people could not be accurately represented by others.

In the suffragette movement she formed a campaign of working-class suffragettes as she rejected the idea, espoused by the WSPU leadership, that middle-class suffragettes could fight on their behalf. In the First World War she campaigned to expose those who claimed to represent working women were in fact presiding over their exploitation. Therefore, it was not the case that it was only after 1917 that Sylvia Pankhurst was demanding more direct working-class representation, she was demanding this during the First World War and in the suffragette movement before it. The difference from 1917 was that the October Revolution provided her with a model through which she hoped her demand could be realised.

The Women's Hall at Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives is the first major exhibition about the East London. The Federation of the Suffragettes (ELFS) explores the work of the ELFS during the period 1913-1918 and the involvement of their leader, Sylvia Pankhurst. Exhibition visitors will learn about little-known working-class suffragettes like Melvina Walker and Elsie Lagsding, and the venues in Bow and Poplar which were taken over by the ELFS for use in their outreach work - such as the pub which they turned into a crèche and called The Mother's Arms.

Alongside their campaign for the vote, the ELFS carried out relief work in the local community, such as distributing free milk for babies and serving free or cheap food to the deprived residents of the East End who faced stark increases in poverty following the outbreak of the First World War.

In 1916, a Scotland Yard detective informed his superiors that three members of the East London Federation of Suffragettes had moved into a flat together: May O'Callaghan, an Irish intellectual, Nellie Cohen, Sylvia Pankhurst's secretary and the daughter of Jewish refugees from Poland, and her sister Rose. The detective had unwittingly documented the beginning of a friendship that reflected the vibrant world of the East End, where an Irish and Jewish migrant community came together to fight for the causes of the day; votes for all, revolutionary socialism and an end to the war then raging across Europe. These three women maintained a remarkable friendship across decades and places, from the tumult of East London during the suffrage struggle, through the experimental society of revolutionary Moscow and beyond.



Led by Sylvia Pankhurst who chose East London as the starting point for her campaign for women's suffrage, East End women were key to the success of the Suffragette movement. Seeing the plight of the working women and mothers, she also established a nursery, a series of restaurants and a toy factory in Bow.

#### **The Brentwood Belles Women's Institute visit records:**

... Ten of us had a great time at the East End Women's Museum Suffragettes Exhibition yesterday. It was all about the East London Federation of the Suffragettes which ran from 1914-1924 and the brave ladies who were involved with it including Sylvia Pankhurst, Minnie Lansbury, Rosaline McCheyne, Jane Savoy, Melvina Walker, 'Tough' Annie Barnes, Nellie and Rose Cohen, Rose Pengelli, Jessie Payne, Daisy Parsons, Julia Scurr, Nellie Cressall and Elsie Lagsding (who never married but died locally, her death registered in Brentwood!)



As well as campaigning for women's votes, better housing, pay and equal rights for women, they set up and ran nurseries to look after children while the women went out to work after the men had gone off to war. They also set up a toy factory and made toys under the brand name of 'Elontoys' which paid a good wage for the people who worked there. The toy factory ran up until 1952 when it was closed. Our tour was followed by lunch at the Women's Hall Cost Price Restaurant, following the initiatives of the women from the ELFS who set up Cost Price Restaurants, where diners would be allowed to pay what they could (or nothing if they couldn't) for a hot two course meal or a pint of soup and a chunk of bread in the evening. The restaurant uses surplus food distributed by FoodShare, a food distribution project which donates surplus food to communities and stops food going to waste. All in all, a lovely day out.



**Elsie Caroline Lagsding**

#### **The Brian Harrison Interviews.**

The interviews were conducted by the historian Brian Harrison for the London School of Economics between 1974 and 1981, as part of a project funded by the Social Science Research Council (he later extensively used these interviews in his book 'Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists between the Wars' Oxford University Press 1987). The recordings were deposited with the Women's Library in 1981, and the collection consists of 205 interviews with 183 individuals.

The original aim of the project was to provide material to supplement documentary sources on the Edwardian women's suffrage movement in Britain and to make these interviews available to scholars



subsequently working in the field. Interviews were conducted with surviving suffrage campaigners, their relatives, and employees. Many of the interviewees talk about their relationships with more famous suffrage leaders such as the Pankhurst's, Flora Drummond, and Millicent Fawcett.

As the project progressed the scope widened: it extended chronologically to include discussion of the women's movement after full enfranchisement in 1928 and it extended thematically to encompass those who were active in various women's organisations, including international and religious organisations, and to cover wider discussion of women's lives. The interviews are particularly rich in subjects such as politics, trade unionism, international peace activism, women's employment and family life, and the birth-control movement. Taken as a whole, the collection is a key source for British women's history of the 20th century.

Harrison travelled the UK interviewing the women (whom he referred to as his 'informants') in their own homes. He also visited Ireland and conducted one interview in Australia. The interviews are very much conversations – as you can hear, Harrison interrupts, attempts to clarify, and prompts. You will hear household noises in the background – ticking clocks, birds in the garden, even chinking of glasses!

The informal settings of the interviews (and Harrison's equipment) mean the sound quality is sometimes not great – the voices of the interviewees can be indistinct or obscured by background noise. The interviews often begin and end quite abruptly – sometimes when his subjects are in the middle of saying something – so don't be thrown if or when you listen to the recordings if they appear to start or end mid-sentence – this is the way they were recorded not a fault of later editing. Over two hundred interviews and recordings were made including Elsie Lagsdings and the evidence she gave when interviewed on 15 June 1976 at her home at "Bayhurst" Clarence Road Pound Lane Bowers Gifford. This interview was number 94 on his list.

# ELSIE, THE RELUCTANT

**WHEN** suffragette leader Sylvia Pankhurst split with her mother Emmeline and her domineering sister Christabel just before the First World War she moved her activities lock, stock and barrel into London's East End.

There she was to form the East London Federation of Suffragettes. And from the windows of her two rooms in East India Dock Road she would speak passionately to passers-by, beseeching them to join her fight for women's suffrage.

One evening young Elsie Lagsding, who lived in Poplar then – was walking by with a friend and they stopped to listen to the great lady speak.

When they were invited inside they agreed to join the movement. And that was the start of several years of adventure, hilarity and hard work for Elsie – who is now well in her eighties, but bright and articulate as can be.

**Reluctant**

You could almost call Elsie the Reluctant Suffragette – because although she believed strongly in the votes for women cause and later in Sylvia's fight for pacifism and the end of the terrible war – she hated trouble! And she cheerfully admitted that when the least whiff of trouble brew up with the brutal police of those days she would run like mad and have a darned good laugh about it later.

Elsie explained – as we drank tea in her little bungalow – "It was all very good fun with a crowd of girls my own age. But there was always the danger of getting pinched – like the night we went out when the war had just started with sticky notice's to put on people's doors saying 'stop the war' – and a couple of girls were arrested."

**Arrested**

"I was pinched myself in Hyde Park for having copies of Sylvia's newspaper. The Women's Dreadnought, over my arm. I didn't mean to sell them – only give them away – but when a man in a straw boater with a flower in his buttonhole paid for one I didn't worry."

"Then a policeman came up and took me off to the nearest police station. All the girls were following behind me cheering and shouting in their lovely summer dresses with white shoes and stockings. But I had to appear in court and was fined five shillings."

Later Sylvia Pankhurst – smart in her younger days in well-cut dresses and Dollie Varden hats – moved into an empty pub in Railway Street, Poplar, an old-fashioned beer house where her federation really got off the ground.

She kept the place going when she later moved into a large house in Old Ford Road – using this as her new headquarters.

**Social work**

And few people have any real idea of the good work she did, according to Elsie.

**SOME WEEKS ago the Recorder's** Sylvia Knight asked on our This and That page if any suffragettes were still alive and well and living in Basildon.

A few days later she received a fascinating phone call that sent her along unmade Clarence Road in Bowers Gifford to meet a very remarkable old lady.

Her name is Elsie Lagsding and this is her story.

"She was one of the first people to think of the idea of day nurseries and started one for mothers working in the small arms factories around Old Ford," Elsie said.

"There were doctors there and a couple of nurses and Sylvia always kept an eye on things."

"She also had a restaurant in Railway Street, Poplar, which I managed for her. We did dinners for 6d, each but it was a thankless job really because we just couldn't get the food and had to make pies and stews from offal."

"The poverty in the East End was pretty bad then but although I was one of nine sisters my dad was a bridge builder and always in work – so we didn't go without."

"I worked in the Cost Price Restaurant until a year after the war when the place was closed up. And Sylvia would eat there herself."

Another of Elsie's jobs for the movement was working for the Women's Dreadnought in Fleet Street, folding the papers.

**Poverty**

Money was always very tight, but one woman, Miss Norah Smyth, who came from a very rich family, poured all her inherited wealth into the work.

But eventually the Dread-



A procession of Suffragettes feel the arm of the law as they are led through St. James' Park after an attack on Buckingham Palace in May, 1914.

Her early meetings with Sylvia Pankhurst have already been documented. She goes on to describe her work after leaving school in the service industry, initially working as a Cook at a Poplar school until the First World War. She attended weekly meetings in Old Ford Road and was asked by Sylvia Pankhurst to work at the restaurant of the East London Federation of Suffragettes and Welfare Centre on Railway Street Poplar in 1914 where she did so throughout the war. They served food, arranged for medical examinations of children, collected money for milk supplies to the needy. All this at the time of Anti-German sentiment where shops were being smashed up. Elsie mentions that her brothers were in the Navy. (We know William John served in the merchant Navy and Albert Goddard Lagsding would have been eligible having been born in 1896 so it begets the question would it have been Charles (born in 1900 who became a Conscientious Objector?).

The work at the restaurant served





some thirty to forty people, the centre was also used for political meetings. Elsie was injured in a road accident by a horse and carriage and attempted to get compensation helped by Sylvia Pankhurst. She also had worked folding papers in a press; in a laundry and of course the latter being in a school near Bow.

At this time of the interview, Elsie's sister Clara joined in saying that Elsie was arrested for selling the "Dreadnought" newspaper in Hyde Park and Norah Smith bailed her out. Her court appearance resulted in a fine of five shillings.

During the Second World War she was evacuated along with school children to Oxford and then to Stevenage for eighteen months working as a cook and then to Amersham until wars end. In later careers she worked in Brentwood, then at Marlesford Lodge in Hammersmith, a remand home for girls, where children often rioted. Then to Stanford House Remand Home for Boys in Goldhawk Road Shepherd's Bush until her retirement.

Elsie Lagsding died in 1977. She had not married. For the record and at death, William John Lagsding and his family lived at "La Retreate"

Pound Lane Bowers Gifford Essex.



Miss Lagsding as she is, and as she was then.

Basildon Borough Heritage Society - May 2021.