

Girls' Education and Women's Suffrage in Bristol

Before I begin, I would like to thank the pupils and staff of Redmaids' High School, without whom this research, inspired by their unstinting curiosity and enthusiasm, would never have got off the ground.

Although the militant actions of the Suffragettes have long overshadowed those of their Suffragist sisters, this is particularly true in Bristol where, under the leadership of Annie Kenney, a number of high profile incidents continue to stir the popular imagination. In 2011, a local author, Lucience Boyce, published *The Bristol Suffragettes*, a lively account of the militant actions of the Bristol branch of the WSPU (including arson attacks on the University sports pavilion and boat house – [slide 2](#)), while the recent Vote100 celebrations in the city, included a reconstruction of Theresa Garnett's attack on Winston Churchill at Temple Meads station in 1909 ([slide 3](#)).

However, while the Bristol Suffragettes may have captured more headlines, it was the Suffragists who made the greatest impact in terms of transforming the lives of women and, more specifically, girls in Bristol during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through their involvement with the establishment and reform of girls' schools, the promotion of access to higher education, the provision of affordable housing for working women and girls, and their support for women's participation in trade union activity, Bristol suffragists such as Agnes Beddoe, Emily Sturge and Susannah Winkworth made a substantial and sustained contribution to the

improvement of women's living and working conditions and to the educational opportunities afforded to girls in Bristol.

The Bristol and West of England Society for Women's Suffrage was founded in 1868, the fourth such society to be formed in the UK. Among its founder members was Agnes Beddoe, wife of a medical doctor and anthropologist John Beddoe, and one of only seventeen Bristol women to sign the first petition for women's suffrage in 1866. The daughter of an Edinburgh clergyman, Agnes had a strong academic pedigree, her grandfather having served as Professor of Latin at Edinburgh University, an institution for which Agnes would later become a local examiner. Details of Agnes' own education are unknown, but when she moved to Bristol in 1858, she soon became involved with Mary Carpenter's Reform schools initiative, including the Kingswood Reformatory for boys and the Red Lodge for girls (Slide 4).

Having supported Carpenter's work in the reformatories, Agnes was approached to become a "lady governor" of Red Maids' School for Girls. (Slide 5) Founded in 1634 by John Whitson, former MP and Mayor of Bristol, the school had been established to "provide a secure home for destitute and orphaned girls". Although now a highly successful fee-paying school, at the time of the Endowed Schools Act of 1867 its provision was very limited, prompting one Commissioner of Endowed Schools to write in the Westminster Review (slide 6):

These criticisms were developed further in the local press, which criticised Red Maids' for its "scandalous" waste of funds and low educational standards.

It was in light of these criticisms that Agnes was recruited to serve on the School's governing body, helping to oversee the appointment of a new headmistress, Francis Roberts, a fellow suffragist. Under Roberts the curriculum at Red Maids' was transformed and the number of places increased and, by the mid-1880s, Red Maids' girls were earning the highest honours in the Cambridge Local Examinations.

At the same time as helping to oversee improved educational provision at Red Maids', Agnes' activities on behalf of the women's suffrage campaign intensified. As well as being involved in promoting the Married Women's Property Act, Agnes addressed suffragist meetings all over the UK and presided over the Grand Demonstration held at Bristol in 1880 and attended by around 3000 (Slide 7). Agnes also hosted a series of "drawing room meetings" at her home in Clifton, including lectures by Francis Power Cobbe. In 1890, after almost 30 years of campaigning for women's suffrage in Bristol, Agnes was elected to the Executive Committee of the NUWSS.

Among her fellow suffragists there were others who shared Agnes' enthusiasm for girls' education. These included Susannah Winkworth, another signatory to the 1866 petition (and later a fellow governor at Red Maids'), and Emily and Elizabeth Sturge who, in 1880 helped oversee the establishment of Redland High School for Girls, whose academic curriculum mirrored that of both Red Maids' and the Clifton High School for Girls, founded in 1877 by John Percival, Master of Clifton College and Catherine Winkworth, Susannah's sister (Slide 8).

Both the Chair of Governors at Redland High, the Reverend Urijah Thomas and the Head Mistress Elizabeth Cocks, were also active members of the suffragist movement and, from the outset, girls were entered for external examinations, the first pupils achieving their Cambridge Local Examination certificates in 1883. Both the Sturge sisters took a particular interest in promoting scientific study, with Elizabeth Sturge securing funds for the construction of a teaching laboratory and Emily Sturge providing scholarships for Redland girls to progress to further study at the Merchant Venturers' Technical College.

The Sturges and the Winkworths were also eager participants in a series of "Lectures for Ladies" whereby visiting academics from across the country gave instruction on a range of subjects in the drawing rooms of their hostesses, and which Elizabeth Sturge described in her memoirs. (Slide 9). This arrangement formalised into the Clifton Association for the Higher Education of Women, winning support from Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol College, who later pledged to provide £500 per annum to support the creation of a College of Science and Literature for the West of England on condition that instruction be open to women – University College, Bristol duly opened in 1874, admitting 30 men and 69 women (Slide 10). Having achieved its initial aim, the Clifton Association refocused its efforts on raising money to fund scholarships for female students. In 1909 University College merged with the Merchant Venturers Technical College to become the University of Bristol. Due to its origins in University College, the University of Bristol continues to describe itself as the first higher education institute in England to admit women an equal basis to men.

Although their activities in support of women and girls' education provided the most tangible and long lasting evidence of their influence, Agnes Beddoe and her fellow suffragists did not confine themselves to this particular sphere. Susannah Winkworth, for example, was particularly concerned with standards in housing and, soon after arriving in Bristol in 1862, began renting properties, improving them and sub-letting them as affordable housing for the poor. In 1874, Susannah developed these activities further by forming the Bristol Industrial Dwellings Company, which purchased a building in the Hotwells area to be converted into 90 apartments (Slide 11).

Inspired by this example, Agnes Beddoe sought to use her influence as a member of the Mary Carpenter Memorial Committee to support the establishment of a new residential home specifically for working women and girls. Set up within weeks of Carpenter's death in 1877, the committee was charged with the establishment of a lasting memorial to Carpenter and, within a year had raised over £2000 in subscriptions. These funds enabled the creation of two homes; one for 40 working boys at Broad Plain, St Philips and another for 20 girls at 10 Bishop Street, Portland Square, with rents fixed at 1 shilling per week. Unlike, the boys home, the Mary Carpenter Memorial Home for Working Girls had two communal sitting rooms and the services of a matron. In its annual report, published in 1878, the committee stated the aim of the home was (slide 12)

Agnes' influence in the establishment of the girls' home can be seen by her appointment as its President. Indeed, such was her commitment to the enterprise, that Agnes later used her own money to purchase a neighbouring property on Bishop Street to provide additional housing for sixteen working women on low incomes of between 5 and 10 shillings per week. In a rare interview with the *Women's Penny Paper* in 1890, Agnes stated that, in establishing this new initiative, known as the Bristol Working Women's Dwelling, she had been aiming to aid women and girls "without creating a feeling of dependence". There is also evidence that Agnes' activities in providing housing "for the benefit of a poorer class of women" inspired similar schemes in other parts of the country, including the Ladies Dwelling Company in Manchester.

However, and as the previous statement might suggest, Agnes did not restrict herself to those initiatives that relied solely on the charitable instincts of wealthy Bristolians and, in her desire to support working women's independence, Agnes became increasingly attracted to the Trade Union movement. In 1879 Agnes presided over a soiree in support of the National Union of Working Women, founded in 1874 by fellow Bristol suffragist Mary Estlin and Emma Paterson, a veteran of the Dewsbury Weaver's Strike in 1875. Among the 100 supporters in attendance at the Star Coffee House in Old Market were a number of other Bristol suffragists, including Emily Sturge.

Like the NUWSS, the NUWW was a pioneering organisation that aimed to encourage trade union activity among women and to challenge male dominance of the trade

union movement by demanding representation at the TUC. This led, in turn to the foundation of the Bristol Association of Working Women, to which Agnes also subscribed. In 1881 Agnes addressed a meeting of the Association at the Temperance Hall in Broad Street at which she paid tribute to those who “live so economically that no margin is left for the reduction of wages, or for the loss of work” and for whom “the only strength to be found is in union”. Agnes also took the opportunity of the presence of the local press to petition for improved technical training and education for women workers and to demand that “the gentlemen” recently charged with establishing a network of new trade schools in Bristol “will not forget the interests of the many women who have now to support themselves and others by trade.”

That Agnes was becoming more interested in the particular challenges faced by self-supporting women and girls is also demonstrated in a speech she made at the Annual General Meeting of the Bristol and West of England Branch of the Society for Women’s Suffrage in February 1891, in which she ridiculed Chamberlain’s suggestion that women did not need the vote as they could achieve their aims by using their “social influence” (slide 13):

Agnes’ continuing interest in the “Labour question” manifested itself in a number of ways as the years progressed. In 1890 she hosted a meeting of women workers addressed by Mrs Briant of the Female Cigar Makers Protective Union in Nottingham – a pertinent choice considering one of the principal employers of women’s labour in Bristol at this time was Wills’ Tobacco. Agnes also helped organise the 4 day Central

Conference of Women Workers held at Bristol's Victoria Rooms in November 1892 and attended by around 250 delegates, including the NUWSS leader, Millicent Fawcett.

Fawcett's attendance at this conference underlines the way in which the activities of the suffragists on behalf of women and girls extended well beyond the campaign for the vote. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that, alongside her work in support of improvements to girls' education, housing and working conditions, Agnes' work for the suffrage campaign continued unabated, not only for the Bristol branch of the NUWSS, but for its national executive committee. Despite her advancing years (Agnes was now in her seventh decade), she continued to travel to London to attend NUWSS meetings and to lobby MPs in parliament. In November 1893 Agnes also took the opportunity of an invitation to address a meeting of the Leeds branch of the NUWSS to attend the Working Women's Conference being held at the city's Albert Hall.

Agnes' significance in the campaign for women's suffrage was celebrated in one of the many banners created by Artists' Suffrage League, founded in 1907 (slide 14) and she continued to campaign for women's right to vote until the end of her life in 1914. In her final years, both Agnes and her husband would also lend their support to the activities of the WSPU, attending meetings with Annie Kenney in Bath.

Of all the women considered in this paper, only Elizabeth Sturge survived to see the Representation of the People Act passed in 1918 and, until recently, was the only

one for which there had been any public recognition of her contribution to girls' education and women's suffrage in the City (slide 15)

However, at the start of this paper I paid tribute to the pupils and staff at Redmaids' High School, formed just over a year ago as the result of the merger between the Redmaids' School and Redland High School for Girls. Indeed it was their enthusiasm for exploring their shared history that gave rise to this research. It is also thanks to Redmaids' High that the City of Bristol has now given some belated recognition to the contribution of Agnes Beddoe and Emily Sturge, with two new blue plaques adorning the walls of Burfield House and the new Redland Hall.

As an additional tribute to their pioneering work on behalf of women and girls in Bristol, the unveiling of these plaques on this year's International Women's Day was accompanied by a march by pupils with banners highlighting many of the issues of concern to women and girls today (slide 16) – that the campaigning spirit is alive and well in the schools they helped establish and develop, is a testament to their lasting legacy.

Additional Info

The “official” histories of these schools are somewhat coy about their founders and mistresses role in the campaign for female suffrage. *Xxx’s Apparelled in Red* makes no mention of it all, while Jennifer Allen-Williams *Redland* refers to it only in terms of the “difficult times” that faced the nation in the first decades of the 20th Century.

Fortunately the school magazine is slightly more illuminating with the October 1892 edition describing the dilemma faced by the schools’ “many ardent supporters of women’s suffrage” in deliberating a Debating Society motion that “the admission of women to parliament would prove the solution to all political difficulties”. According to the Magazine’s correspondent the “peculiar wording” of the motion left the pro-suffrage faction “obliged to vote against it, much to their own disgust.” Sadly, the magazine ceased publication in 1896 and did not resume until 1919, thus depriving us of any insight into the girls and mistresses views as the campaign intensified.