

THE 1866 SUFFRAGE PETITION IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Although in small numbers, women from all areas of the country signed the 1866 suffrage petition. Out of approximately 1,500 women who signed, 38 were from the West Midlands including 10 from Coventry, four from Birmingham and four from Shrewsbury.

THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Campaigning for women's suffrage took place across the West Midlands from manufacturing towns like Wolverhampton to the historic town of Stratford-on-Avon.

In the 20th century Birmingham had local branches of suffrage groups such as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the more militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Although no formal record of their action remains, the Birmingham Fire Service documented many of the results of the WSPU's militant activities. The Fire Service's press cuttings collection features many newspaper articles on the various actions of the group. These include setting fire to empty buildings and railway carriages and attacking works of art in Birmingham's Art Gallery.



38
women
signed
from the
west
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ACTIVITY 1

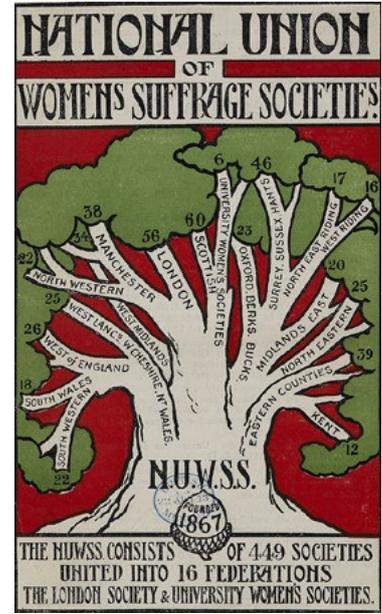
Use the sources and your own knowledge to answer the questions.

Source 1

A poster from 1913 promoting the suffragist campaign groups: The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

Q: Analyse the suffragist poster and describe three things it suggests about the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Source 2

"Mr. KEIR HARDIE: I beg to ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department a question of which I have given private notice, whether he has any official information concerning the state of health of Mrs. Leigh and Miss Charlotte Marsh, prisoners in Winson Green, Birmingham, and whether it has been found necessary to administer food to those ladies by force, and, if so, under what authority that has been done?"

Keir Hardie MP speaking in the House of Commons, asking about the state of two suffragette campaigners and the use of force-feeding, 1909.

Q: Source 2 is a question the Labour MP, Keir Hardie, asked in Parliament regarding the health of Birmingham suffragettes in prison. What impact do you think the treatment of prisoners would have had on public opinion about the suffragettes' cause?

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Source 3

Photograph of a suffrage campaigner addressing a crowd in Stratford-Upon-Avon, 1913



Q: What does source 3 suggest about the impact of public speaking in towns? What do you notice about the people in the crowd?

Source 4

"SUFFRAGETTES DAMAGE RAILWAY CARRIAGE

A minor instance of the destructive methods of the suffragettes was provided last night, when, on the arrival at Birmingham of a Midland Railway train from Redditch, it was found that a third-class compartment had been damaged. A number of cuts had been made in the upholstery of the seats, and the luggage racks had been slashed by some sharp instruments. The words 'Votes for women' had been inscribed on the panels."

An extract from an article in the Birmingham Daily Post, describing vandalism by suffragettes to a train carriage, 1914.

Q: What can you learn from source 4 about the suffragettes' campaign methods in the early 20th century? What impact do you think this type of news story would have had on local attitudes about the cause?

ACTIVITY 2

News of the 1866 petition was spread through word of mouth. Social connections, whether through location or familial ties, had a significant impact on the number of signatures the petition received as women encouraged other women they knew to sign.

Anne Gully was one of the women from the West Midlands who signed the petition. Using the information about her and the prompts provided, write a response from Anne's perspective to a friend's letter arguing against the petition.

Biography of Anne Gully (1815-1880), Malvern – 1866 Petition signee

Anne Gully was born in 1815 in Jamaica and was the daughter of Daniel Gully, a wealthy coffee planter. After the abolition of slavery the family lost its fortune and moved from the Caribbean to Liverpool. Anne then went on to live in Malvern and before eventually moving again to London.

What is known about Anne's life is mostly shaped by the career and reputation of her brother, James. James Gully was a doctor and published writer, well known for practising hydrotherapy or the "water cure". Anne lived with her brother at his clinic, The Priory, in Malvern and helped to raise two of Dr Gully's children. Many famous people, such as Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens and Florence Nightingale were treated by Dr Gully and living in The Priory must have made life very interesting for Anne. Dr Gully, too, was a supporter of women's suffrage and it was in Malvern where Anne signed the 1866 petition.

Dear Anne,

Thank you for your letter. The petition is intriguing but I will not be signing.

I believe the interests of women are already represented by our elected Members of Parliament. Years of laws prove that our MPs look out for the interests of both men and women without women having to be involved.

When our brothers, husbands and fathers vote, I believe that they take in consideration the view of their wives, daughters and sisters.

I believe that there are things that men do better than women and some things women do better than men. We all have our own strengths and weaknesses and politics is the business of men.

Yours,

Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,

I am disappointed to hear that you will not be signing the petition. I believe it will be of historic importance and has already received significant support from women all across the country.

For me, this is a question of fairness. I do not agree that...



I cannot agree that men are better suited to politics than women. If women were given the chance, we could...



I hope you will reconsider adding your name to the petition.

Anne

List of sources

Source 1 – National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies Poster showing the reach of its organisation across the country – Image courtesy of the London School of Economics.

Source 2 – A question asked to the Home Secretary on the mistreatment of prisoners – House of Commons Debate 27 September 1909 vol 11 cc923 (Keir Hardie MP)

Source 3 – Photo of a suffrage rally in Stratford-upon-Avon, 1913 – Image courtesy of Sylvia Morris, www.theshakespeareblog.com

Source 4 – Newspaper extract – (1914) ‘Suffragettes Damage Railway Carriage’, Birmingham Daily Post, May 7