

Suffragette riot, 1908

On October 10th 1908, the (Liberal) Prime Minister Asquith visited Leeds. The Suffragette and Suffragist (the former being distinguished by a “direct action” approach) movement had been active for many years in pursuit of the franchise for women, and took every opportunity to challenge and embarrass the government of the day. Accordingly, a Suffragette presence was planned.

The authorities were well aware of this and there was strict control of the distribution of tickets for the main meeting, held in the Coliseum on Cookridge Street (now the Town and Country Club). A great number of the tickets were over stamped “Men only”, and door stewards were commanded to forbid entry to any woman holding one; there was a recognition that suffragettes could dress in a manner that made them appear fully respectable members of a Liberal audience.

A significant crowd gathered, and there was a large police presence, including many mounted. The doors opened early in an effort to defuse any trouble - in the words of the *Yorkshire Evening News*, to prevent “possible disturbance by the suffragette rowdies”. A reporter within noted “women being less noticeable than has been usual at such gatherings. The carefulness of the organisers in regard to the admission of women had [the] advantage in the audience wearing a more practical air”. Outside, Ms Jennie Baines, a well known suffragette organiser from Stockport, was addressing the crowd, reported as good-natured, from a brougham.

Meanwhile, in Victoria Square, a large meeting of unemployed has been called by the Leeds Permanent Committee on Unemployment, chaired by a man called Kitson. As Asquith approached the Coliseum, some 600 or so men moved up the hill to where Ms Baines was declaring that unemployment was “more a woman’s question than a man’s, for it was the wife that had to meet the landlord’s demand for rent”.

Precisely what happened next, and what was intended, remains unclear. The press, in the form of the *Evening News* and the *Leeds Mercury*, agreed that Ms Baines was heard to say “Break down the barricades and compel a hearing”, but it is not clear if this was intended as an explicit incitement to the men to interpret her literally. Whatsoever, there was a rush of people which was subsequently interpreted as a riot, although the only recorded damage was a broken pane of glass (later attributed to Leeds woman Leonora Cohen, who later became a distinguished local magistrate). It seems one stone was thrown which a policeman claimed had hit him, but no injury was recorded, to him or anyone else.

The *Mercury*, running the headline “Wild Street Scenes in Leeds”, and the *Evening News* enthusiastically set about painting a picture of reckless and misguided rabble-rousers, although perhaps not dangerous. Several articles, letters in the correspondence column, and pictures took a clear anti-suffragette line; perhaps not entirely by coincidence, this was the week of a suffragette “assault” on the House of Commons in which two Pankhursts were arrested and there was a lot for the press to write about.

In Leeds, Kitson and five suffragettes were arrested. Trial proceedings dragged on into the next year and the excitement subsided, but Jennie Baines is recorded the honour of being the first suffragette to be imprisoned after conviction. Leeds historians may note that a companion arrestee was Bertha Quinn who later became a

very long serving Labour city councillor, both before and after a period of expulsion from the party.