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**'Hens that want to crow': Suffragists & Suffragettes of the North-east 1866–1918.
Women's struggle for votes and other campaigns in the 19th century.**

Liz O'Donnell

This inspiring talk coincided with International Women's Day and reminded us of the pioneering women of the North East who had struggled to ensure that today's women can vote.

The most famous of course was Emily Wilding Davison, who lost her life as she protested at a national race meeting in 1913. But Davison was only one of a long line of female activists with strong roots in the North East. Dr O'Donnell explained how the campaign for votes for women grew out of several related campaigns which arose in the early part of the 19th Century, as the rights of every human being to equal respect and treatment before the law were increasingly recognised. Women were involved in anti-slavery campaigns and in the Corn Law League. The issue of women's voting rights also arose in the various reform bills which slowly extended the franchise to different groups of men as the century proceeded. We were surprised to learn that Earl Grey's famous Reform Act of 1832, which introduced votes for all men owning property, was the first to explicitly exclude women. Until then, the franchise was defined in terms of eligible 'persons', while the new act referred specifically to 'male persons'. By the 1860s, with a new reform act underway (passed in 1867), a petition was presented in Parliament to include women in the extended franchise, the petition being presented by MPs whose wives and friends were involved in the growing campaign. We heard of the roles of Emily Davies, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Josephine Butler, the Priestman sisters, Millicent Fawcett, Norah Balls, Florence Nightingale Harrison-Bell and Dr Ethel Williams, all with North East connections. These activists mostly had middle class backgrounds, which gave them the time, the education and the contacts for such campaigning. Several came from non-conformist backgrounds, particularly among the Quakers and Unitarians. But they were often involved in several campaigns and projects at once. Some, such as Josephine Butler, stayed largely on the margins of the movement, as she was so deeply absorbed in her work on the difficult topic of the treatment of women alleged to be spreading sexual diseases. Emily Davies put her main efforts into creating what became Girton College in Cambridge, and did not return to campaigning for the women's movement until 1906.

By the 1880s, several roles in public life were being opened to women. They could vote on Poor Laws, and become members of School Boards. A well-supported proposal that the parliamentary vote be extended to women householders was justified on the grounds that such women were not only taxpayers, but had special knowledge of children and would bring more variety into national politics. Newcastle City Council voted for support for this measure, though Gateshead did not. There was also support in some of the national newspapers. However, in the end Prime Minister Gladstone dropped the issue of women's suffrage from what became the 3rd Reform Act of 1884, in order to pass a significant extension to male suffrage.

But still 40% of men and no women had the vote. By this time, many women were getting impatient with the slow progress of the right to vote. While some continued to work through persuasive argument and continual pressure through legal means, others concluded that the only way forward was to become much more militant. The most visible of such groups was the Women's Social and Political Union, led by Sylvia Pankhurst, which organised not just demonstrations, but set fire to buildings and tried

to disrupt the lives of key politicians. North East women such as Norah Balls spent time in prison as a result, though none demonstrated so dramatically as Emily Wilding Davison.

The flood of feeling which Davison's funeral attracted was so large, that perhaps the campaign for votes for women would have succeeded within a short time. However, the first world war both disrupted the campaign and advanced it. So many women were involved in so many spheres of life, that in 1918, votes were finally extended to women over 30 in 1918, along with all men over 21. Women over 21 had to wait until 1928. As our speaker emphasised, however, winning the vote was only one step in the wider struggle for greater equality for women in all spheres of life. She herself was involved in struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, and suggested that there was a new interest in promoting womens' rights these days, with very active celebration of International Women's Day. Her talk reminded us nevertheless just how much the struggles of earlier generations of women had brought benefits which we later generations have enjoyed and should be grateful for.