

**Feminist Fightback** *would like to present...*

## **East London Federation of Suffragettes Radical History Tour**

1. **198 Bow Road** [no longer standing so gather outside tube instead]

*Ask the audience - What did we learn about the suffragettes in school?*

Nicely dressed ladies marching in processions wearing their sashes and asking politely for the vote?

Random acts of militancy by mentally disturbed young women – Emily Davies throwing herself in front of the Kings Horse at the Royal Derby Races.

And then, the First World War came along, all the women knuckled down working hard for the War effort, and afterwards they were graciously granted the vote by the government and that was the end of that.

So where does Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of Suffragettes fit into that story?

What is often erased in the public memory of the suffragettes is the fact that they were part of a mass movement – a movement that had been building up for fifty years until it reached a fever pitch in the first decade of the twentieth century. A movement made up of men and women, closely connected with the labour movement and a history of radical working class struggle. The other things that's often left out of the BBC drama, sanitised version of the suffragettes is that this movement was about revolution – it was not just a single issue campaign for the vote but part of a general move to radically transform not just the roles of men and women but the whole of society.

At the forefront of this rich and multifaceted movement was the Women's Social and Political Union, led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel. A second daughter, Sylvia was also a leading member of the WSPU.

The WSPU had initially been allied to the newly forming Labour Party, and involved significant numbers of working class women and men. Yet by 1913 Emmeline and Christabel were increasingly keen to recruit upper class women to their organisation which they wanted to re-organise along the lines of disciplined army.

Sylvia, however, disagreed. She felt that it was more important to continue to try to build a broad and grassroots movement, rooted in working-class struggles against all forms of exploitation. In 1912 she moved to the East End to pursue these aims, setting up a shop at 198 Bow Road (no longer standing).

The East End was one of the poorest but also one of the most infamous neighbourhoods in the whole of England. Most of the people who lived here were casual workers employed in seasonal industries – the women worked in jam making factories in the summer and match factory in the winter, while the men worked on the docks – a job so precarious because it depended on the winds and the tides.

Middle class reformers also flocked to the East End, working at ‘Settlements’ at Oxford House or Toynbee Hall. They were motivated partly by a desire to help people out of poverty and partly to ‘civilise’ the East End which was often racialised and compared to the colonies in India and Africa.

Sylvia Pankhurst wanted the East London Suffragettes to be something different – a socialist and self-organised movement demanding not charity, but political rights. The East End was already highly politicised – up the road in this direction Whitechapel and Spitafields was home to Jewish immigrants where anarchism and socialism were strong. Further East, on the docks huge strikes took place in the first decade of the century. While just to the east of Bow Road, on Fairfield Road, the Bryant and May Matchgirls Strike of 1888, when the most low paid and vulnerable of women workers had won – marked the beginning of a new kind of militant trade unionism, as well as an alliance between feminists and workers.

*Turn right out of tube station and walk down Bow Road until you find, on your right hand side...*

## **2. Bromley Public Hall (#3 on map)**

Initially, Pankhurst and her comrades focused on political organisation – holding stalls on Bow Road and Roman Road, raising awareness about the need for the vote to transform women’s lives more generally. They frequently held public meetings in this building, Bromley Public Hall, until they were barred from council buildings because of their ‘militant’ tactics.

The East London suffragettes were part of the militant strand of the suffrage movement which, in 1907, began to shake up the campaign for votes for women by introducing ‘direct action’ intended to violently disrupt civil society. Militant tactics varied greatly, from shouting ‘Votes for women’ in the middle of church services and political meetings, to breaking windows, to burning down castles and stately homes, to planting bombs in the houses of parliament.

The question of violence is an interesting one for us today in the context of a state which heavily condemns even small scale skirmishes on demonstration but yet claims to valorise the women suffrage campaigners as the people who brought us ‘British democracy’.

To avoid the contradictions this throws up, we’re quite frequently taught that the violent suffragettes were the bad ones and the constitutional (non-violent

suffragettes) were the reasonable people who really won the vote by convincing the government of the justice of their cause.

What such an analysis misses, is the revolutionary nature of the years immediately proceeding the First World War when a variety of mass movements – feminism, new unionism, and Irish nationalism – found themselves in direct confrontation with the state. Violence was, in some ways, necessary for both self-defence and to ensure that the movement could continue.

Sylvia made her first East End speech from the back of a horse and cart, just around the corner from where we're standing now. She ended her performance by throwing a stone and breaking the glass of an undertakers. While Sylvia was tussling with the police, one of her supporters, Willie Lansbury ran round the corner and smashed windows of this building.

Both Willie and Sylvia were arrested and taken to the police station over here...

*Walk back into the direction of the tube station and cross over the Road to the...*

### **3. Police Station (#5 on map)**

The police were a constant presence in the lives of the East London Suffragettes. Once arrested and tried for their militant acts, suffragettes would often receive excessively harsh prison sentences. By 1913 they had developed a strategy of hunger striking in protest against the government's failure to treat them as political prisoners.

Under what became known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act' hunger strikers would be released when it appeared their health was in severe danger. They would then be given a pass for a few weeks to have time to recuperate out of prison, before returning to finish their sentences. The suffragettes, however, aimed to resist arrest for as long as possible after their temporary release. They used their freedom to speak at political meetings and tell tales of the brutality they faced in Holloway prison. The East London police would follow Sylvia everywhere she went, attempting to re-arrest her. To find out how she managed to evade the police, we need to travel deeper into the communities of the East End and to find out more about her relationships with other activists...

*Walk north down Addington Road. Go under Tom Thumbs Arch. This is the signal for Mary to get singing the suffragette song.*

*Go straight down Mostyn Road, cross over Malmsbury Road, go straight down Cardigan Road until you hit...*

**Entertained by suffragette songs along this walk – starting at Tom Thumbs arch.**

### **4. Roman Road (no particular site marked on map)**

Here we are on Roman Road, where, every Saturday during the market, the East London Suffragettes would hold political stalls, listening to the stories of working

class women and recruiting others to their cause. By 1913 the East London Suffragettes had been expelled by the WSPU on the grounds that they were too democratic for the streamlined army that Emmeline (Sylvia's mother) and Christabel (Sylvia's sister) now envisaged as the next step in winning the vote. Christabel also told Sylvia that there was no point wasting time on working class women, who were too 'weak, instead they needed to recruit the most powerful professional and wealthy women.

The East London Federation of Suffragettes was therefore founded as an independent organisation. In 1914 they started their own newspaper, the *Woman's Dreadnaught*, which they sold here on Roman Road.

Sylvia wrote in her memoirs of how:

'It was my earnest desire that [the *Woman's Dreadnaught*] should be a medium through which working women, however unlettered, might express themselves, and find their interests defended...I wanted the paper to be as far as possible written from life; no dry arguments but a vivid presentation of things as they are, arguing always from the particular with all its human features, to the general principle.'

Much of this tour has ended up focusing on Sylvia because we are able to trace her history more easily. But it is important to remember that although Sylvia played a leading and sometimes autocratic role, but none of the ELFS work would have been possible without the core of East End women who remained constantly active in the Federation.

One such woman was Melvina Walker, who had worked as a ladies maid and could therefore tell many tales about the cruelty and moral corruption of the British ruling classes from first hand experience. Sylvia describes her as being 'steeped in the bohemianism of the London poor' which probably means she was a supporter of 'free love', though she was married to a London docker. Melvina was a powerful voice in the delegations of working women who came regularly from the East End demanding an audience with the politicians at Westminster. During such meetings, Melvina Walker would use her extensive knowledge of domestic labour and household budgeting to lecture Tory politicians on, for example, the rising price of a leg of lamb and the impossibility of maintaining families on the meagre wages paid to working women.

*Turn left down Roman Road and keep walking*

### **Start selling *Woman's Dreadnaught***

**5. Bow Baths** (#13 on map, no longer standing so stop opposite in front of Victorian Building which used to be public library in Sylvia's time.)

It was through building this kind of grassroots and mass based movement that the suffragettes were able to continually resist arrest. The sheer numbers of their supporters and the close knit nature of the community meant often made it very difficult for the police to physically take control of a situation.

Opposite you stands the site of Bow Baths – used as a swimming pool and bath house in the summer and for public meetings in the winter. In October 1913 Sylvia and her partner in crime, Norah Smyth, spoke on the platform at a radical meeting. They were both wanted by the police, and as a result the doors of the Baths were being carefully guarded by supporters such as a ‘Kosher Bill’, a 6ft Jewish boxer who often acted as Sylvia’s bodyguard whenever the police were around. This time, however, the police had snuck in the back and began to creep up on Sylvia as she was speaking (in a ‘behind you’ pantomime style manoeuvre). ‘Jump Sylvia jump!’. She jumped into the mass of her supporters who quickly disguised her in an old hat and coat and smuggled her out.

Women were at the forefront of physical encounters with the police – who were often under instructions to twist the suffragette’s breasts or sexually assault them in other ways on suffrage demonstrations. But such women prepared themselves to fight back. One popular weapon around this time was the ‘Saturday night’ – which we have on display for you here – it’s made of a tarred rope, knotted at the end.

*Keeping walking in the same direction down Roman Road. Turn left down St Stephen’s Road, right again into Saxon Rd, and right again into Norman Grove.*

## **6. The Payne’s Residence at 28 Ford Road (#17 on map)**

After being expelled from the WSPU, Sylvia came to live with Jessie Payne and her husband who were both East End bootmakers. The histories of this movement often place great attention on heroic acts – hunger strikes, storms on parliament, clashes with the police etc. But it is important not to forget that none of this would have been possible without the behind the scenes labour of people such as Jessie Payne who cooked, cleaned and cared for Sylvia. The effects of the hunger strikes were intense – Sylvia would forego all water as well as food and her memoirs describe how her tongue would slowly grow a green scum before she lost all consciousness. On being released from prison she would be taken on a stretcher to 28 Ford Road, where Jessie gave over her own bedroom and nursed her back to health on a diet of egg white, tea and beef broth.

The police were always trying to lie in wait for Sylvia, ready to arrest her when her ‘Cat and Mouse’ permit was up, but it was hard for them to get close to 28 Ford Road because every single person in the neighbourhood refused to rent a room to anyone they suspected of being an undercover copper – despite the high rents they promised to pay in this impoverished area.

## **7. The Toy Factory and the Nursery (#10 and 11 on map)**

Here is the site of two of the most important projects set up by the East London Federation of Suffragettes – the Toy Factory and the Nursery.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, many working class men joined up quickly, leaving their wives and families without an income. The government were

supposed to pay soldiers' wives an allowance, but for at least the first six months of the war the bureaucracy was so incompetent that women were frequently left for months without any financial assistance. Initially the ELFS put pressure on the government to pay up, arguing that this money was not charity but a wage, which women had a right to. On these grounds they also opposed the practice of withdrawing the allowance if mothers were caught drinking in a pub, or if babies were born less than 9 months after the marriage of their parents.

However, the hardship faced by women in the East End was so extreme that the ELFS decided something more practical and immediate had to be done. They deliberated as to how to ensure that any welfare schemes would not be seen as charity but as self-organised community projects. The Toy Factory was one solution to this – it employed women at a living wage of £1 a week in contrast to the £10 shillings a week paid by the government-sponsored workrooms.

The factory also provided a crèche for the children of women workers. This creche was the first of its kind in the UK – where any form of nursery or collective childcare was virtually unheard of. The creche was in the same road as the factory, and mothers could leave their children there for the price of 3 pence per day including food.

The need for women to work for wages outside the home during the First World War, highlighted the unwaged work they had always done in the home. It was apparent that it was impossible to combine these two full time jobs unless some collective responsibility – either by the state or the community – was taken for childcare. Eventually, the government began to provide small grants for the ELFS nurseries – the ideas for which were taken up elsewhere. The factory nursery was soon over subscribed, and the ELFS decided to start setting up others in Bethnal Green, Poplar and Shoreditch.

*Walk back to the bottom of Norman Grove and turn right at the end, turn right again up Lyal Road, cross over Roman Road and turn right up Driffield Road, turn right down Roman Road until you come to the site of..*

## **8. 400 Old Ford Road: ELFS Headquarters**

This became the headquarters of the ELFS in 1914 and Sylvia and Mr and Mrs Payne also moved in here.

It was also the site for the first 'Cost Price Restaurant' set up in 1914 – another of the ELFS projects intended to battle the poverty caused by the First World War. The name 'Cost Price Restaurant' was chosen to highlight its contrast to the capitalists' war profiteering which caused a drastic rise in food prices in the early months of the war. As with the Toy Factory, the emphasis was on fair prices and wages rather than charity. All customers were required to buy tickets in advance which they then exchanged for food. Families in severe financial distress were

provided with free tickets – and by this method no distinction could be made between those who paid for their meal and those who received it for free.

Sylvia employed Mrs Ennis Richmond, a middle class woman and ‘expert’ in cooking and nutrition, to run the restaurant. The East London women who worked as her assistants soon began to complain about her refusal to peel potatoes before putting them in the soup, for Mrs Richmond insisted that they were the healthiest part of the vegetable. Writing about this, some years later, Sylvia recalled how

‘It was a shame, [the working women] declared, to give such “muck” to poor people! Even the customers, hungry as they were, were seen surreptitiously to examine with pained and disappointed resignation the dark-hued tubers.’

Sylvia tried, but failed, to persuade Mrs Ennis Richmond to peel the potatoes. She then went to ask the advice of Mr. Keir Hardie, MP and leader of the Independent Labour Party. They had an argument about it, with Hardie finally despairing ‘Have we been reduced to this, discussing potato skins?’. Sylvia recalls feeling ashamed of fussing over such matters, when thousands of young men were being slaughtered daily in the trenches. Yet it seems to me that this kind of attention to the everyday lives of women is what marks out the East London Federation of Suffragettes as particularly interesting. They seemed to understand that movements for liberation and social justice were founded on attention to matters such as what goes into people’s stomachs and whether those people feel they are being treated with respect or being patronised. They understood the value of the hard work women performed in the home, and in seeking to liberate women from the burdens of cooking and childcare and instead to collectivise reproductive labour – they were virtually unique among feminists at this time.

The ELFS set up another creche and baby clinic on this street. Staffed by trained nurses and developed upon Montessori lines. This was housed in a converted pub called the Gunmaker’s Arms, whose name was changed to the Mother’s Arms. Previously it has been thought that this was down the other end of Old Ford Road, and now demolished. But a recent documentary has suggested that the Lord Morpeth here was also used as a creche – in a minute we’ll go in and see more.

Will end by casting forward to after WWI. Some of the projects kept going into the inter-war period. Activists from ELFs contributed to new radical campaigns, such as the workers birth control movement and the Marie Stopes clinics of the 1920s. Sylvia’s comrades, the Lansbury family, went on to lead the Poplar rates rebellion, and the Woman’s Dreadnaught became a champion of the cause for racial equality in inter-war Britain...