

VOTES FOR WOMEN IN OXFORDSHIRE

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote Faringdon Peace Group invited women's historian Dr. Katherine Bradley to talk about the women's suffrage campaign in and around Oxford.

It was a very long campaign which began in the 1850s and did not end until 1928 when all women over 21 gained the vote, on the same terms as men. Although there was a debate in parliament every year from 1860 it always failed due to lack of time and divisions in the main Liberal and Conservative parties.

In the second half of the 19th century middle-class women's lives were changing; they were more highly educated, had more leisure time and began to enter professions. Although the first suffrage meeting in Oxford took place in 1873, there was little progress as women were more focused on their right to higher education.

Women's suffrage groups from all over the country were brought together in 1897 under the umbrella of 'The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies', founded and led for 20 years by Millicent Fawcett. They, the Suffragists, were non party political and law-abiding, too much so for the Suffragettes who broke away in 1903 to follow a more militant path. Though few in number they gained more publicity through outrageous acts – storming Parliament, arson, smashing windows, graffiti – but the violence was always against property, not people. They attracted opposition and there were equal numbers of anti-suffrage societies.

At the same time the first Women's Suffrage Society was founded in Oxford with over 500 members, organising meetings, demonstrations and petitions from their office in Holywell Street. A branch was founded in Faringdon in 1914 but was suspended along with all other suffrage activity when war was declared later that year and all their energy went into the war effort.

Lobbying still continued quietly and in 1918 the Representation of the People Act gave women over 30 the vote. Although Countess Constance Markievicz, an Irish Republican, was the first woman elected to Parliament she refused to take her seat, so Nancy Asquith was the first woman MP to sit in Parliament.