

Women's Suffragettes Community Project

Character study: **Christabel Pankhurst**



Christabel Pankhurst, along with her mother Emmeline Pankhurst, was one of the driving forces of the Suffragette movement. Christabel had a sister, Sylvia. However, Sylvia left the movement when Emmeline expressed the view that a patriotic Suffragette should help the war effort. Sylvia was a committed pacifist and did not agree. Christabel, however, fully supported her mother's point of view and remained one of the most vociferous members of the Suffragette movement.

Christabel was born on September 22nd, 1880. Her father was a radical socialist and he was very influential in her upbringing and helped to shape her early views. Her mother also played a prominent role. Christabel attended Manchester High School for Girls.

In 1901 Christabel met Eva Gore-Booth who was a member of the NUWSS – National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. Gore-Booth was in Manchester trying to persuade working class women there to join the NUWSS and Christabel was taken by her arguments. Sylvia and Emmeline Pankhurst were also taken in by the arguments for women's suffrage. However, the NUWSS did not believe in direct action as they placed their faith in the powers of verbal reasoning. All three Pankhurst's soon believed that the NUWSS was not going to achieve anything, as it was too passive.

In 1903 Christabel along with her mother co-founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which became better known as the Suffragettes. In 1905 she was arrested for disrupting a meeting of the Liberal Party. Along with Annie Kenney, she shouted out 'Votes for Women' when speakers were on stage addressing the audience. Christabel was fined for disturbing the peace, but she refused to pay and was put in prison. The media paid a great deal of attention to this whole episode and served to highlight the Suffragette cause. As a result, many more women decided to join.

In 1906, Christabel was awarded a Law degree from Manchester University. After this she moved to London where she became the organising secretary of the WSPU. Despite support from the fledgling Independent Labour Party and some MP's, the real power base in Parliament refused to accept the notion of female suffrage. As a result, the Suffragettes became more extreme in their approach. They argued that they were pushed into becoming more militant as a result of Parliament's obstruction. Christabel was jailed in 1907 and 1909 and was dubbed the 'Queen of the Mob' by the media.

In 1910, the WSPU decided that the only way they were going to achieve their aims was to become more disruptive. Demonstrations with placards was replaced with stone throwing, breaking of shop windows, attacking politicians who were known to be against women's suffrage. The 'Queen of the Mob' became a target for the police and to an extent Christabel invited their attention.

From 1912 to 1913, Christabel lived in France to escape imprisonment. In 1913, as a result of the declining diplomatic position in Europe, Christabel returned to England. She was arrested on her return. She had been sentenced to three years in jail but only served 30 days. Unlike her sister Sylvia,

Christabel announced her support of the government in its declaration of war against Germany. On September 8th, 1914, she spoke at the London Opera House and gave a speech entitled 'The German Peril'. Christabel was a supporter of conscription and the 'industrial conscription' of women. She also believed that internment should have been used against those who were foreign nationals but who could not be trusted. The WSPU newspaper was renamed 'Britannia' in 1915. Its slogan was "For King, For Country, For Freedom". Christabel's followers gave out white feathers to any young man they saw in public who was in civilian dress. Christabel made frequent attacks in 'Britannia' against politicians she saw as being soft on war – Sir Edward Grey and Lord Robert Cecil being amongst them who were both openly referred to as "traitors". In fact, 'Britannia' became so vitriolic that it attracted the attention of the police who more than once raided its premises. By an ironic twist, Christabel gave her support to the one man who in earlier days she had blamed for the stalling on women's suffrage – David Lloyd George.

In 1917, Christabel went to Russia in an attempt to stop the country from withdrawing from World War One.

In 1918, the Representation of the People's Act introduced women's suffrage for those over 30 years of age. To an extent this satiated many in the WSPU. In the 1918 election Christabel stood as a Women's Party candidate in Smethwick. She narrowly lost to the Labour Party candidate.

In 1921, Christabel left the UK and moved to America. She became an evangelist and joined the Second Adventist movement. Christabel returned to England in the early 1930's and in 1936 she was appointed a Dame Commander of the British Empire. In 1939 she returned to America.

Christabel Pankhurst died on February 13th, 1958, in California aged 77.

