

Brent Women of Renown

By Angela Payne

In December 2022 Cricklewood Town Team was awarded funding by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to deliver an educational programme 'Brent Women of Renown' (BWR) for children in schools and supported by the elder community.

The BWR project highlighted the lives of three pioneer women who lived and worked in Brent at a significant time of their life: Violet Doudney, a suffragette who was imprisoned for protesting for equality in voting rights; Amy Johnson, an aviation and engineering pioneer who served in the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) during the Second World War; Dame Stephanie Shirley CH, who arrived in London on the Kindertransport at the age of five, a mathematician, pioneer computer engineer, businesswoman and philanthropist.

This is the first part, we will feature the continuation in the next issue.



Violet Mary Doudney (1889-1952): Suffragette and Political Pioneer

This photo of Violet was taken at her graduation in 1921.



Violet studied at St. Hilda's College, Oxford University. After successfully completing her BA in English in 1911, she was not awarded her degree certificate as was practice at the time for women; she graduated in 1921 with an MA and was awarded her BA (English) that she had not received. When St Hilda's celebrated the centenary of some women winning the right to vote, as well as St Hilda's College's 125th anniversary, they wrote that they 'are proud to remember the lives and achievements of our

inspirational alumnae who fought against injustice' (<https://www.st-hildas.ox.ac.uk/content/violet-mary-toy-received-medal-emmeline-pankhurst-joining-hunger-strike-holloway-prison>).

Violet moved to Kilburn in 1912 to start her teacher training in English Literature and Drama at the Maria Grey Academy; an Academy that was focussed on educating women teachers.

She stayed in the associated dormitories in Winkworth Hall, now known as HopScotch Nurseries. The Maria Grey Academy is now the Al-Sadiq & Al-Zahra Schools, Salusbury Road. While there she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a militant wing of the British Women's Suffrage movement founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst. The name 'Suffragette' was coined by the Daily Mail and adopted by the women themselves. The Suffragette campaigns began with public demonstrations, but became more militant. The WSPU began new tactics such as breaking windows, damaging letter boxes and confronting politicians. The WSPU members were criticised by other women suffrage campaigners, who preferred peaceful methods, as well as other anti-suffrage groups.

As a member of WSPU, Violet protested for equality in voting rights. A group of them left Winkworth Hall, going in different directions to cause trouble and get attention. Violet threw a metal weight (with Votes for Women stuck to it) through the window of the secretary's house (Reginald McKenna) on Friday June 28, 1912, in front of a policeman.

Sentenced to two months hard labour at Holloway Prison, London, she joined the hunger strike. The first woman to refuse food in 1909, Marion Dunlop Wallace, demanded to be treated as a political prisoner

rather than a criminal. When other suffragettes joined the hunger strike, most were released within a couple of days. By the time Violet was arrested, the view of suffragettes had changed. The government were unwilling to continue setting free suffragettes, who went on hunger strike, but didn't want any imprisoned protester to starve to death whilst in their prisons, so they started using force feeding methods on the hunger strikers. Protesters across the country were imprisoned for breaking the law, and over 1,000 were imprisoned in London's Holloway Prison.

The Women's Suffrage database (www.suffrageresources.org.uk, which is linked to National Archives, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4769024>) shows Violet was arrested and imprisoned in Holloway Prison, she went on hunger strike and was force-fed.

The women who were imprisoned and went on hunger strike were given a certificate, designed by Sylvia Pankhurst and signed by Emmeline and attributed to each campaigner by name. Violet's Certificate is in very good condition. She was also awarded the Hunger Strike Medal by the WSPU. Her name is shown on the case; both the certificate and medal are in the possession of her family. The silver medal awarded with enamel bar and ribbon in the suffragette colours of green, white and purple was given to suffragette prisoners between August 1909 and 1914. Many women were force-fed and their individual medals were created to reflect this. The list, which includes Violet Doudney, includes 92 women.

Many of the prisoners came from well to do families, and the government was keen to avoid bad publicity, but the methods were cruel, as prison officers poured liquid food straight down their throats and into their stomachs through a tube, which they inserted either



A suffragette in prison.
The Daily Herald, 24 May 1913
"For what you are about to receive"
Reginald McKenna

down the throat or the nose. Force feeding caused many injuries and traumas to the struggling suffragette, bleeding, broken teeth, vomiting and choking as food was sometimes poured into the lungs. Most of the public saw force feeding as inhumane and sympathy for the movement grew. In response to the outcry the

government introduced a new law called the Prisoners' Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act to prevent the hunger strikers dying in prison. The act stated that hunger strikers be released until they regained their strength after which they would be returned to prison to carry out their sentences. Many returned to their hunger strike when back in prison. Some went into hiding and didn't return to prison. This Act became known as the Cat and Mouse Act.

Violet's parents wrote to the Home Secretary, requesting her early release from prison due to her ill health stating that, if the request was granted, they would ensure she would take no further part in suffragette campaigns. Violet, on discovering how she had been released early, wrote the attached letter. The family have copies of the telegrams between Holloway and Mrs Felkin of Winkworth Hall about releasing her. She was furious when her health improved and realised that she had been released early and wrote to the home secretary offering to go back to complete her sentence. Personal testimony of Maggie Toy, her granddaughter.

Violet's letter to the Home Secretary about her early release:

"I understand that you ordered my release from H.M. Prison Holloway on account of an undertaking given by my parents that I would do no more militant work. I wish you to understand that no pledge of any kind whatsoever has been even offered to me and that I have given no undertaking whatsoever. Moreover, I am of age and I do not consider myself in any way bound by any pledge given without my knowledge or consent and I certainly intend to take, "militant" or



otherwise which may appear necessary to me to be necessary and justifiable in advancing a cause which I have at heart... If upon receipt of this letter you think you have released me on false pretences and wish me to return to Holloway I am willing to do so." - Personal testimony of Violet's son, John Toy.

She did not receive a reply and undertook secretarial work for the suffragette cause for the next two years, before becoming a teacher of English Literature and drama in 1914, a career she followed for 25 years. Violet married architect Sidney Toy in 1929, had three sons.

Violet's son, John Toy, born 1930, wrote a book about her life, where he recalled: "My father was a typical Victorian man and wasn't in favour of women having the vote. He asked her not to talk about this episode, and she didn't tell us until the day the Second World War broke out. I'm very proud of what she did. She always taught us to be angry at any injustices."

In 1939 she retired from teaching at which time she and her husband were living in the City of London, near the Temple Church where they were both ARP Wardens, with Violet Toy also undertaking first-aid duties.

Images courtesy Cricklewood Town Team

Sources:

- <https://www.thescarboroughnews.co.uk/news/scarborough-man-tells-mothers-suffragette-story-710666> Article interview of John Toy in 2018
- Suffragette, poet, teacher: Violet Mary Toy (né e Doudney) 1889-1952 : a memoir of an interesting life. Author John Toy, British Library

Further reading:

- Museum of London: Background to suffragettes and their imprisonment and treatment: <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/suffragettes-holloway-prison>
 - An interesting article about Force feeding of the suffragettes, including artist impressions and flyer produced by the Suffragette and WSPU movement: <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/six-things-you-didnt-know-about-suffragette-hunger-strikes>
 - The British Library: <https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/the-campaign-for-womens-suffrage-an-introduction>
 - Celebration of 100 years of getting vote by the BBC in 2018: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-42818833> Unused ticket: The suffragette story in seven objects: from Hunger strike medal, Bolt Cutters, Return ticket to Epsom, Jack in the Box, Postcards – used by both pro and anti, Anti Suffrage badge (for both sexes), Spoiled 1911 Census Form.
- The British Newspapers Archive provide significant

information about the activities of the Suffragettes.

- Yaeger.15 <https://www.vogue.com/article/suffrage-jewelry-history>
- The March of the Women <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCtGkCg7trY>
- Meet the Suffragettes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rvty0tsEts>

The Teachers' Training & Registration Society was created by the Women's Education Union to promote women's right to education and the professional recognition of female teachers. The Society was promoted by Maria Georgina Grey, who had also been fundamental in the founding of the Union. In 1885, it moved to Fitzroy Square, and in March 1886 it was renamed Maria Grey College after its founder.

The college was attached to Brondesbury and Kilburn High School, so that the trainee teachers could test their skills in a classroom situation. New buildings for the college and high school were erected in 1892, designed by architect J. Osborne Smith, at a cost of £11,500 (£1.33 million as of 2023). In 1892, it attracted Alice Woods as its new head. She was not a great administrator but she focussed on raising the quality of the student's work. Under her leadership, she was able to have lecturers who were all graduates for every area except for the kindergarten. The teachers learnt about teaching methods developed by Maria Montessori and Froebel.



Alice Woods, portrait by Annie Swynnerton, 1930
Wikipedia