



What was the suffragette movement?

KS2

KS3

Ages 7-14 ⌚ 2 min read

It might seem obvious that everyone in a democracy should be allowed to vote. But until 1918, women in Britain were not allowed to vote in general elections at all — regardless of how educated, wealthy, or politically engaged they were. The movement that changed this is known as the **suffragette movement**.

Suffragists vs suffragettes

It's worth knowing there were two distinct groups. **Suffragists** campaigned peacefully — writing letters, organising meetings, lobbying politicians. They had been doing so since the 1860s with very limited success.

The **suffragettes** — led by **Emmeline Pankhurst** and her daughters through the **Women's Social and Political Union**, founded in 1903 — decided that polite persuasion wasn't working. Their motto was "Deeds, Not Words." They chained themselves to railings, smashed windows in Oxford Street, set postboxes on fire, interrupted Parliament, and went on hunger strike in prison.

Imagine playing a game where the rules say only half the players are allowed to vote on how the game is run — and every time the other half asks nicely to change this, they're ignored for decades. Some players decide they need to start breaking pieces of the game to force people to listen. That's roughly what drove suffragettes from polite campaigning to direct action.

Emily Wilding Davison

In 1913, **Emily Wilding Davison** ran onto the racetrack at the Epsom Derby and grabbed the reins of the King's horse. She was struck down and died four days later. Whether she intended to die or not remains debated by historians. Her funeral procession drew enormous crowds and huge press attention. She became the movement's most famous martyr.

The First World War

When war broke out in 1914, many suffragette leaders suspended their campaign and encouraged women to support the war effort. Women took on factory jobs, nursing roles, and administrative work that had previously been considered "men's work." By 1918, it was genuinely difficult for politicians to argue that women were unfit to participate in democracy.

Votes for women

In 1918, the Representation of the People Act gave the vote to women over 30 who met certain property requirements. It wasn't complete equality — younger women and those without property still couldn't vote — but it was a start. Ten years later, in 1928, all women over 21 gained the vote on equal terms with men.