

“The Wild Women”: Female Violence against Male Sport

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Although few historians now believe that the average Victorian woman was a delicate creature in need of male protection, subservient to the needs of the family and “cramped by custom, corset and crinoline”, many would still agree that femininity, ladylike attributes and dutiful behaviour were expected from the female half of the population¹. As the issue of votes for women began to polarise opinion at the end of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of suffrage activists took care to present a womanly appearance, with traditional hats, gloves and elaborate hairstyles, as they attempted to persuade hostile politicians and a largely sceptical public that they deserved the franchise. But the Edwardian era saw elements within the movement increasingly resort to violent acts to publicise their case, calling forth all manner of derogatory terms. Winston Churchill referred to them as “a band of silly, neurotic, hysterical women”². The weekly magazine *The Gentlewoman* branded them “a collection of wildly irresponsible females”³. Even the term “suffragette”, first used by the populist newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, in 1906 is a diminutive of “suffragist”, and was used to distinguish the new breed of militant from the law-abiding supporter of political reform. “The wild women” was another phrase frequently used to describe the unladylike creatures who burst on to the political scene. A press report during the Newcastle by-election of 1908 described suffragettes as “hysterical wild women” while the weekly golfing magazine *Golf Illustrated* noted on 13 March 1914 that “Bath has lately been visited by the wild women”⁴. How and why sport became one of their targets is the subject of this paper.

The campaign for women’s suffrage in Britain gathered pace in the decade before 1914 after years of conventional speech-making, petitions and genteel pressure on successive governments had failed to deliver the vote. Until then the methods and demeanour of activists within the movement was labelled “all very polite and very tame” by Sylvia Pankhurst⁵, one of the members of a family who were soon to galvanise the political landscape. But with the formation by her mother Emmeline of a new organisation, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), in 1903, tactics began to change. A strategy of disorderly behaviour was launched in 1905 when Christabel, the eldest of the Pankhurst sisters, disrupted a party political meeting, assaulted a policeman who tried to evict her and thus became the first suffragette to be imprisoned. The next seven years saw marches, demonstrations and stunts to publicise the crusade, and politicians who were against female suffrage were regularly heckled and harassed. It was unfortunate for members of the government that many of them were keen golfers: the golf course was to become a battleground in the women’s fight for the vote.

Initially violence was committed against the men themselves. The first incident took place in 1909 when three young women cornered the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and his Home Secretary while they were playing a round of golf in Kent⁶. When he next appeared on a golf course he was accompanied by five local plain clothes policemen and a detective from Scotland Yard, a much larger bodyguard than that employed to protect the Chief Secretary for Ireland during the most recent Irish troubles⁷. It would seem from this that the suffragettes were considered to be more dangerous than Irish Nationalists! Most events, however, occurred on the links of north-east Scotland, where Asquith passed many hours of his summer holiday. He was verbally assaulted by a Mrs Cruikshank while playing near Balmoral in August 1912⁸. A few weeks later he and Home Secretary Reginald McKenna were set upon

by two women at the Royal Dornoch course, an episode that was apparently kept from the press to avoid publicity⁹. The following year, according to the historian of that club, a further incident involved a woman who appeared from nearby houses and attacked the Prime Minister, knocking off his hat. She was escorted from the course by the club captain and secretary¹⁰.

The most publicised assault took place in August 1913 when Asquith was playing with his daughter at the Moray Golf Club, Lossiemouth. Two “well-dressed young ladies” allegedly rushed on to the 17th green, seized his arms, tugged at his clothes, knocked his hat off and hit him over the head with a magazine¹¹. Press reports state that they also shouted abuse and pulled his hair before he was rescued by his detectives who had been discreetly following him round the course¹². The women were arrested and charged with assault and breach of the peace while Asquith apparently holed out and continued his round. The charges were later dropped to spare the Prime Minister from a court appearance.

It was not a golf course, however, but a racecourse that saw the most infamous act of violence. During the 1913 Epsom Derby a woman emerged from the crowd at Tattenham Corner as the horses rounded the bend and appeared to lunge at one of the backmarkers. The horse crashed to the ground, throwing his jockey and bringing down his assailant. The jockey Herbert Jones recovered but the woman, Emily Davison, a member of the WSPU, later died from her injuries. These are the bare facts of an event that shocked the Edwardian public, immortalised the victim and still remains a partially unresolved mystery. Did Emily Davison intend to kill herself? Probably not, for although she had already attempted suicide while in Holloway Prison, she had a return rail ticket to London in her purse and a pass for a WSPU event later that afternoon. Was it a tragic accident? She may have been trying to cross the racecourse thinking the horses had all passed but the bend would unfortunately have obscured her view of the stragglers: the runner she collided with was near the back of the field. Was it a publicity stunt that went wrong? The issue here is further complicated by the ownership of the horse: Anmer belonged to King George V. Although many commentators were convinced that she could not have singled out a particular animal racing at 50kph, her biographers believe that she was specifically trying to bring down the King’s horse or attempting to pin the suffragette colours of purple, white and green to its bridle in a gesture of protest to the royal family¹³. Queen Alexandra was not amused, referring to Davison in a letter of condolence to the injured jockey as a “brutal, lunatic woman”¹⁴.

Attacks against the person were relatively uncommon. Instead the weeks before Christmas 1912 saw pillar boxes targeted as suffragettes dropped burning objects into the waiting mail and sent inflammable chemicals through the post. However, in a speech that October Emmeline Pankhurst had already identified the main object of militant action: “the secret idol of property!”¹⁵ With the failure of the latest bill to enfranchise women in January 1913, the WSPU began an arson campaign targeted at buildings which was to last until the outbreak of World War I. During this period railway stations, churches, schools, private houses and industrial premises were bombed or set on fire. Orchids were destroyed at Kew Gardens, works of art in Manchester and London galleries were slashed and Lloyd George’s partly completed new house near Walton Heath was blown up.

Many other attacks took place but no-one seems to have noted that a significant number were on sports venues. Reports from *The Times* suggest that 64 major incidents occurred between March and December 1913 and, of these, sports premises accounted for roughly one-sixth. The figure of 64 probably underestimates attacks that were carried out away from London and the South East of England and obviously does not include unsuccessful efforts at fire-raising. A larger though not comprehensive list may be found in *The Suffragette*, the WSPU journal,

dated 26 December 1913¹⁶. Under the heading “A Year’s Record”, it covers “the more serious attacks on property which have been attributed to Suffragettes during the year 1913” and includes a number of plots and failed attempts. Taking the same period March to December, it details 125 damage-inflicting incidents and a further 6 high profile failures, including a bid to wreck the famous Eddystone Lighthouse at Plymouth Hoe and the discovery of a bomb in St Paul’s Cathedral in London. Of this inflated list, nearly one-sixth again related to sport.

It is possible that at least some of the minor fires were caused by vandals or persons who wished to implicate the suffragettes in crime: the use of the word “attributed” suggests that even the WSPU leadership was not convinced that all the attacks could be ascribed to its followers. *The Times* pointed out that some incidents blamed on the militants were simply everyday crimes and cited the destruction of haystacks by two men under the influence of drink, and the owner of industrial premises who had attempted to burn them down in order to defraud insurers¹⁷. For those bent on fireraising for their own purposes the suffrage plots must have been a godsend. All that was needed was some inflammable material, a few items of suffrage literature and perhaps a card bearing a suitable slogan. When the incidents reported in *The Times* are compared with the record of suffrage activity in *The Suffragette* there are some notable discrepancies. There is no mention by the suffrage press of either the burning of haystacks at Hampstead Golf Links, allegedly accompanied by the notice “No votes, no peace. This is the work of the suffragettes” or an attempt to set fire to a grandstand at Headingley where a postcard was found bearing the words “No vote, no sport, no peace – fire, destruction, devastation”¹⁸. While tell-tale pamphlets, colours and suffrage phrases probably denote authenticity, it seems likely that some examples of common vandalism were wrongly attributed to the militant wing of the movement.

Many fires, however, were deliberate attacks by members of the WSPU. Amongst the most costly were £2000 worth of damage to the private members’ stand at Ayr Racecourse in April 1913, and eight weeks later the burning of two stands, the press box and other buildings at Hurst Park racecourse in Surrey. The loss was estimated at between £6000 and £10000 (£0.5m – £0.75m in current terms), making it one of the larger attacks carried out by suffragettes. But horseracing, a sport from which women were still largely excluded, was not singled out for attention: almost every sport suffered attempted or actual arson. Although the grandstands at Kelso, Cardiff, and Aintree racecourses were also targeted, they were only part of a list which included a billiard room in Dundee, a bowling club in Newcastle, cricket pavilions from Perth in the north to Tunbridge Wells and Muswell Hill in the south, golf club premises at Manchester and Roehampton, and grandstands at Preston North End and Blackburn Football Clubs. The destruction of Rough’s boathouse at Oxford was estimated at £3000, another on the River Trent at £2000 and a third at Hampton Court at £3500. An attempt was made to burn down the All England Lawn Tennis club at Wimbledon and there was a plot to destroy the stands at Crystal Palace before a football cup-tie. In addition to fire-raising, acid and digging implements were used to damage grass playing surfaces at bowling greens, tennis courts and golf courses and the Oxford president received an anonymous letter threatening to disrupt the University Boat Race.

Why were so many sports venues chosen by militant campaigners? Although they were only one of numerous targets, grandstands were amongst the largest public buildings at the time – their size, the spectacular nature of a successful attack and the cost of replacement were sure to attract considerable publicity. They were frequently empty, mostly unguarded and, along with other sports premises, they represented male leisure pursuits. It may have been coincidence but very few attacks took place at tennis, croquet, hockey or badminton clubs where women might have formed a percentage of members. What better way to get at the enfranchised male citizen than through his sport? When Janie Allan, a prominent Scottish

member of the WSPU, writing in the Socialist paper *Forward* after the attacks on Ayr and Kelso racecourses, referred to the “destruction of the temples dedicated to gambling”, she was not only voicing a moral concern but demonstrating an attitude towards male recreation¹⁹. And trivial though sport may seem to many, both then and now, the editor of *The Times* knew its importance to the British man in June 1913 when he commented that “attempts to spoil sport whether they succeed or fail are not likely to win favour for any cause from a sporting nation”²⁰.

The Times editorial was prompted by an incident at Ascot, two weeks after Emily Davison’s death, when a man carrying suffragist colours and a loaded revolver ran on to the course with the intention of stopping the big race, the Ascot Gold Cup. He brought down the front runner and was seriously injured in what was labelled a “copycat outrage”. There was much public and press sympathy for the horse and jockey who were fortunately unscathed but none for the man himself. Although he had no known connection with the suffrage movement, the publicity and spectacle of Emily Davison’s funeral cortege were blamed for encouraging this latest disruption to the British sporting calendar. Her procession, a moving occasion, had on the whole been “respectfully received by Londoners” apart from some racing men who had voiced their protest²¹. One suffrage leader was shocked to hear them shouting “the King’s ‘orse”, apparently more interested in the animal than the dead woman while *The Times* reported cries of “three cheers for the King’s jockey”²². Other groups that took exception to suffragette attacks on sport were male university students. The burning of an Oxford boathouse resulted in retaliation: the local headquarters of the NUWSS, the non-militant suffrage organisation and therefore not responsible for the destruction, was wrecked by a mob, said to be undergraduates. When a sports pavilion belonging to Bristol University was burned down, a crowd of students marched on the local suffragette office, smashed windows and set fire to furnishings, apparently egged on by a crowd of onlookers²³.

The sportsmen who continued to be most inconvenienced by WSPU activists, however, were golfers. While politicians ran the risk of assault, ordinary club members often turned up to play a morning round only to discover that intruders had spent the night hacking up turf, throwing acid around the greens and sometimes carving the letters VW or Votes for Women into the ground. During February 1913, the first month of the campaign, 20 separate attacks took place across England and Wales with as many as 9 holes vandalised at any one course. One clubhouse was set on fire, another broken into and items destroyed. Within weeks underwriters at Lloyds began to offer policies aimed at protecting clubs from suffragette damage²⁴. Fear of attack that spring caused the Committee of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St Andrews to insure its courses for £1000 each and to enrol 200 guards to watch the greens and patrol the links ahead of the Amateur Championship²⁵.

Physical protection of less prestigious golf clubs, however, was too costly and the size and semi-rural locations of most courses meant that any determined women could gain access under cover of darkness. This had been proved the previous year when two suffragettes had replaced the flags on the private royal golf course at Balmoral in Scotland with others in the purple, white and green suffrage colours and had painted the message “Votes for Women” on a nearby fountain. In an unpublished memoir Liliias Mitchell, one of the perpetrators of this incident, described the night time walk through the grounds of the royal estate: “Several times we lay flat on the ground thinking we heard footsteps”. She and her accomplice carried out their task and escaped unchallenged but she admitted that it was “the sort of adventure that is tremendous fun once it is over”²⁶.

It was no fun for club members and their plight received much sympathy, both in the national and golfing press and from the general public, who viewed the golf course atrocities in a similar light to the hated pillar box campaign²⁷. An article published in *The Sunday Times* and

quoted in *Golf Illustrated* under the banner “The Tearing of the Greens” suggested that it was unwise to rouse “a passion of resentment against the suffrage cause” because “golfers are a large and influential class”²⁸. But that, according to Mrs Pankhurst, was why they had been selected for particular attention.

“After all, a golfer is a man and a citizen, and because he is a man and a citizen, he is responsible for the way in which the Government are treating the women and the Women’s Cause...Use the power and influence which you as a citizen possess to get justice for women and protection for your greens!”²⁹

The response to this exhortation was immediate and scathing. The editor of *Golf Illustrated* assured suffragettes that golfers did not regard the “scratching and scraping of a few putting greens” as sufficient proof that women were suitable candidates for the franchise. “On the same principle we ought to give votes to worms, moles, rabbits and other greenkeeping pests”³⁰. The editorial in the weekly magazine *The Gentlewoman* was more hostile: “I question whether 1% of the female population is actively identified with the reprehensible conduct of those who are disgusting the general public”³¹. Women golfers, who represented nearly 20% of the entire golfing population in the decade before 1914, often found themselves in a difficult position³².

The militant campaign of arson and vandalism continued until the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914. It was then immediately suspended and the Pankhursts threw themselves instead into the war effort. It had failed to persuade politicians to grant women the vote and the levels of violence employed had alienated substantial sectors of the general public³³. *The Times* calculated that the loss to insurers in 1913 alone was roughly £270,000 (over £18million in current values) but there were no important industrial targets and the impact was thought to be marginal in economic terms³⁴. The most significant loss attributed to “the wild women” was probably the goodwill of the British population, including sportsmen.

¹ Vickery, Amanda: “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History”, in: 36 *The Historical Journal* 2 (1993), 383-414, p.387; Hannam, June: “Women and Politics”, in: Purvis, June (ed.): *Women’s History: Britain 1850-1914*. London 1995, 217-245, p.218; Billington, Rosamund: “Biology and Feminism: Why the Suffragettes were ‘Wild Women’”, in: 5 *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6 (1982), 664-672, p.664; Abrams, Lynn: *The Making of Modern Woman*. London 2002, pp.50-51

² quoted in Leneman, Leah: *A Guid Cause: The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Scotland*. Edinburgh 1995, p.87.

³ *The Gentlewoman*, 5 July 1913.

⁴ John, Angela: “Men, manners and militancy: literary men and women’s suffrage”, in: John, Angela & Eustance, Claire (eds): *The Men’s Share*. London 1997, p.88.

⁵ quoted in Rosen, Andrew: *Rise Up, Women! The Militant Campaign of the WSPU, 1903-1914*. London 1974, p37.

⁶ Crawford, Elizabeth: *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928*. London 2000, p.296.

⁷ *Golf Illustrated*, 17 September 1909.

⁸ Hamilton, David: *Golf: Scotland’s Game*. Ayrshire 1995, p.228.

⁹ Leneman: *Cause*, p.116.

¹⁰ MacLeod, John: *A History of the Royal Dornoch Golf Club*. Elgin 2000, p.32.

¹¹ McConachie, John: *The Moray Golf Club at Lossiemouth 1889-1989*. Lossiemouth 1988, pp.27-28.

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- ¹² Leneman: *Cause*, p.155.
- ¹³ For discussion of Davison's motives, see Morley, Ann with Stanley, Liz: *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*. London 1988, pp.164-165.
- ¹⁴ quoted in Nawrat, Chris, Hutchings, Steve & Struthers, Greg (eds): *The Sunday Times Illustrated History of Twentieth Century Sport*. London 1992, p.40.
- ¹⁵ Pugh, Martin: *The Pankhursts*. London 2001, p.253.
- ¹⁶ Reprinted in Bartley, Paula: *Votes for Women 1860-1928*. London 1998, p.58.
- ¹⁷ *The Times*, 21 April 1914.
- ¹⁸ *The Times*, 6 September 1913 and 26 November 1913.
- ¹⁹ *Forward*, 31 May 1913.
- ²⁰ *The Times*, 20 June 1913.
- ²¹ Fulford, Roger: *Votes for Women*. London 1958, p.252.
- ²² Vicinus, Martha: *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920*. London 1985, p.278; *The Times*, June 16, 1913.
- ²³ Harrison, Brian: *Separate Spheres*. London 1978, p.189.
- ²⁴ *Golf Illustrated*, 28 February 1913.
- ²⁵ *Golf Illustrated*, 16 May 1913.
- ²⁶ Mitchell, Liliast: *Suffrage Days*. I am grateful to the late Leah Leneman for allowing me access to these private papers.
- ²⁷ Rover, Constance: *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain 1866-1914*. London 1967, p.82.
- ²⁸ *Golf Illustrated*, 21 February 1913.
- ²⁹ *The Suffragette*, quoted in *Golf Illustrated*, 28 February 1913.
- ³⁰ *Golf Illustrated*, 28 February 1913
- ³¹ *The Gentlewoman*, 1 March 1913.
- ³² Tranter, Neil: *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain 1750-1914*. Cambridge 1998, p.84.
- ³³ Rosen: *Women*, p.242.
- ³⁴ *The Times*, 21 April 1914; Pugh, Martin: *The March of the Women*, Oxford 2000, pp.220-221.

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