

A Note from the Author

Until I was fourteen years old, I had never heard of the suffragettes.

The year was 1984, and my history teacher, Mrs. Pile, informed the class that for our end-of-year exam we had to write and illustrate a project on a topic we had studied during the year. Had I heard right? Illustrate! I was thrilled: anything that meant I could draw was a bonus.



A collection of faded old history books on a variety of subjects was scattered on the teacher's desk, and one by one each student went up to choose a book on which to base their project. Amid the books about famous British historical figures such as Humphry Davy, Edward Jenner, and Isambard Kingdom Brunel was a book that caught my eye. It had a black-and-white photograph on the cover showing two women in prison uniform: dark dresses covered in white arrows, aprons tied around their waists, mobcaps on their heads. They stood arm in arm, and above them was the title: *The Suffragettes*.

Who were these people? What was a "suffragette"? And what terrible crime had they committed to be sent to prison? I took the book eagerly and turned straight to the middle where the pictures were. Slowly the story revealed itself.

These were Edwardian ladies of the early 1900s who had protested and battled with the government of their day to win the vote. They had smashed stuff up, burned stuff down, and even died to be given equal political rights with men. I was captivated. Their struggle for equality really spoke to me.

Our class had never studied the suffragettes in history, or in any other lesson for that matter, so I have no idea why that book was on the teacher's desk. It's a mystery. But it started in me a lifelong interest and respect for this group of women who had stood up to the men in power and begun to change the way society viewed their gender and the way it restricted their lives, ambitions, and right to be seen as equal citizens with one another and with men.

More than thirty years after I wrote my school project, I have delved back into the history and learned so much more about the campaign for women's suffrage. I am not an expert, but more of an enthusiast — inspired by a diverse group of people, both suffragists and suffragettes, courageous, determined, peaceful, and militant, all focused on one thing: the right to vote.

One hundred years since women first won the right to vote, we continue to challenge ourselves on gender equality and the expectations and roles of women and men. Slowly we chip away at the limitations and barriers to equality that previous generations and many people still today suffered and suffer. Femininity does not equal weakness, and gender equality benefits everyone.

The campaigners for women's suffrage understood that. I'm so pleased to share some of their extraordinary stories.

