

Suffragette movement in Dornoch.

The suffragette movement began in the late 19th century. Women had far fewer rights than men in all walks of life from education and legal protection to politics. Women did not have the vote nor could stand for Parliament. The role of women was seen as only taking care of the home and child-rearing.

Many women and men were unhappy with this state of affairs and organized campaigns began as early as 1866 to provide a greater level of equality. A parliamentary debate on reform in 1867 decided against giving women the vote by 194 votes to 73 and this gave impetus to the campaign. By the end of the 19th century the focus for equality was to get women the vote.

There were two different methods used in the movement, those by the suffragists and those by the suffragettes.

The suffragists had their origins in the 19th century. They believed in a peaceful campaign using discussion, petition and behaving with ladylike decorum as was expected of women at that time. The main organization was the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

The first local Suffrage Societies were formed in Inverness in 1871 and Invergordon and Dingwall in 1872.

A new NUWSS was founded in Dornoch in 1912. In 1913 the Society was a member of the Scottish Federation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and their Secretary was Miss M. Davidson, who was the teacher of Modern Languages at Dornoch Academy, her address was Oversteps, Dornoch.

In September 1913 the Scottish Federation of the NUWSS toured the highlands, visiting Dingwall, Invergordon, Tain, Dornoch, Gospie and Helmsdale. 500 people attended the meeting in Dingwall.

The other method of campaign led to the creation of the suffragettes who came into being in 1903. Breaking away from the NUWSS they formed the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and adopted much more militant methods – breaking windows and vandalising property and attacking politicians. It attracted a lot of attention and many members of the public were shocked by their 'unwomanly' behaviour. The 'Daily Mail' newspaper nicknamed them the 'suffragettes' as a term of derision.

The police and courts administered harsh sentences for those women accused of breaking the law. After the women started on a policy of hunger strikes they were forcibly feed and many suffered ill health for months or even years afterwards.

There were mixed opinions in the press although many were unhappy about the forced feeding of women.

The two incidents on Dornoch Golf Course in 1912 and 1913 were perpetrated by members of the WSPU.

In 1912 Lillas Mitchell and Elsie Howie attacked the Prime Minister H. H. Asquith and the Home Secretary Reginald McKenna. This incident was kept quiet in Britain so the two newspaper articles detailing it are American.(See following documents.).

In 1913 Mr. Asquith was again attacked on the Golf Course this time by a local lady (pers comm. Kim Tulloch), one of the sisters, either Jessie or Agnes Gibson, who lived in Briarfield which overlooks the Golf Course. Miss Gibson knocked off the Prime Minister's hat and was escorted off the course by Mr. Ryle and Mr. Sutherland – there is a copy of the photograph showing this still hanging in the Club House today. (See copy of photograph.).