

## Alice Abadam and the Suffrage Movement in and Around Beckenham

**Introduction** Women across the country had been seeking the right to vote in national elections since 1867, but a national organisation was not formed until 1897. In that year, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was founded with two branches in London & 18 provincial ones. These were amalgamated under the Presidency of Millicent Fawcett and they endorsed any M.P. who supported them.

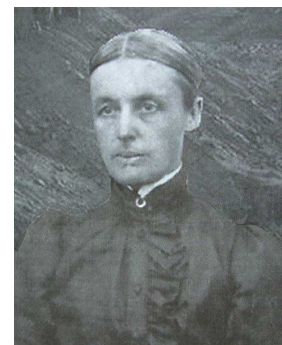


In 1907, the same year that Millicent Fawcett spoke to a large crowd in Bromley Drill Hall, Miss **Alice Abadam (picture left)** became President of the Beckenham NUWSS group. From her house in Crystal Palace she travelled the country, her inspiring and eloquent talks, often attracting audiences of 5000 or more. She had a ready witty tongue for hecklers and impressed people with her intellect and knowledge of women's history. Miss Abadam was a prolific writer on the subject of women's oppression on issues ranging from women's employment to banning the white slave trade.

Little headway was made with the all-male governments so in 1903 six women led by Emmeline Pankhurst formed the Women's Social Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester on 10 October 1903. This women-only organisation adopted the slogan 'Deeds, not Words' and interrupted public meetings in order to have their say. When this failed, Emmeline started a militant campaign against property.

In 1909 a group of WSPU members formed the Women's Freedom League (WFL) led by Charlotte Despard. This more democratic group targeted the Government, held protests at trials of women, and started a tax resistance policy.

Some 25 years earlier the first major meeting promoting women's suffrage in Beckenham was held at the Christ Church, Lecture Hall, Beckenham, at the invite of the vicar, Mr Welsh on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1882. Further meetings were chaired by the Reverend Charles Green, Vicar of St. Paul's Church in Beckenham helped by his wife, Mary. Other supporters were more local clergymen, Mr Lloyd Phillips, founder of Abbey School, Beckenham and Miss Heppel the first head mistress of Bromley High School 1883 to 1908. **(pictured right)**.



Mrs Kate Harvey, held meetings at her huge house *Brackenhill* on the heights of Highland Way, Shortlands overlooking the vale of Beckenham as far as the Crystal Palace ridge. She was a close friend of Charlotte Despard and, following the establishment of the WFL, Kate refused to pay taxes for herself and her staff of a children's school based in her home. She was also profoundly deaf which confounded visits by the local tax inspector. Later when bailiffs were sent in to take goods and household effects, they were seen off the premises by a huge crowd of Kate's supporters.

Leading up to the Parliamentary Election April 1908, the Suffragettes used the Cup-Final at Crystal Palace to distribute leaflets at railway stations and to fly a kite over the ground. After the game leaflets were again distributed, this time with envelopes bearing the teams' colours inviting the men's wives to a meeting.

In 1910 The Pageant of Great Women by Edith Craig, daughter of Ellen Terry was staged at the Public Hall in Beckenham. A house fire in Park Langley estate in Beckenham was blamed on the suffragettes in 1913, the year when a suffragette captured the headlines of both the national and local media. She was Emily Davison who stepped in front of the King's horse in the Epsom Derby and was killed.

In 2013 the concert in St George's Church, Beckenham entitled "March of the Women" began with Dame Ethel Smythe's Suffragette battle hymn of the same name.