

Bradford's Women in World War I

In World War I woman played an enormous part, it was the first conflict to be described as total war and arguably the first where the home front was as important as the battle lines. Women in Bradford joined the army nursing corps, they drove trams, delivered the post; they worked in factories and on the land. For some women working was 'doing their bit', or a matter of necessity, for others it was a chance to seize new opportunities and experiences.

Many of these women were the mothers of those who were fighting in the trenches across Europe; others were sisters, wives and lovers of men and boys involved in the conflict— all women were touched by the war.

However opinions on the war varied greatly, even the Suffragette movement was divided between those who saw the war as being a patriotic struggle, necessary to support and justifiable and those who saw it as indefensible and who campaigned for peace. As the war dragged on there was a slow, but noticeable shift in attitude and by 1918 there were several strikes and peace marches as a growing number of people began to question what they were fighting for. These involved women and men.

As the war progressed and peace was finally declared perceptions changed. Three days before a planned Peace Day Celebration Parade in Bradford in 1919, the military personnel pulled out in protest at the way they had been treated. Many war veterans had returned home and were struggling to cope; they couldn't work, were angry about their pensions and a lack of support. The timing of the event was also not good; it was planned for July. The Battle of the Somme had taken place three years earlier, a lot of soldiers from Bradford were killed in that battle and it was still fresh in people's minds; so many people felt that there was very little to celebrate.

The Women's Peace Movement

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was established in 1915 and met initially in The Hague; because of the war the first Congress was only attended by women from twelve nations, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Belgium, Austria, Canada, United States of America, Denmark, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Public opinion from various countries was strongly opposed to the International Women's Congress and by no means did their efforts meet with universal approval. However, as a result of this, movements like the Women's Peace Crusade emerged; sometimes referred to as the Women's Peace Negotiation Crusade, this grew out of a 5,000 strong demonstration in Glasgow on 23rd July 1916, organised by Helen Crawford.

This was essentially a working class women's peace movement and was very active in Bradford. The Bradford Women's Humanity League was formed ten days after conscription was introduced and they held many anti-war meetings and demonstrations in and around Bradford. They met regularly in the Friends Meeting House and Laycocks Café in Bradford. In September 1917, their biggest march took place. Three thousand women took part in an anti-war demonstration, marching across the city from the Textile Hall on Westgate and ending at Carlton Street school yard, near Bradford College. They had a marching band and carried many banners bearing words such as: "The Boys in the Trenches want Peace" and "I want my Daddy".

When they arrived at the school yard political speeches were made and one of the speakers was Ethel Snowdon, wife of a Labour politician from Keighley.