

# Doncaster Borough Police and the Suffragettes

By JOHN BROWN

**Following his appointment as the Chief Constable of Doncaster Borough Police, Mr William Adams did not have to wait long before his force made the national press as a result of militant suffragette activity.**

The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) had been founded in Manchester in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, and had become one of the more militant groups of the women's suffrage movement. In 1912 the group had stepped up their campaign with a series of arson attacks aimed at forcing the government to accede to their demands for suffrage.

A small group of suffragettes had gathered around Miss Violet Key Jones, who maintained a house on Osborne Road in Doncaster. Miss Jones had been a prominent organizer for the WSPU in York, and in May of 1913 she took part in an open air meeting of suffragettes in Waterdale, Doncaster. Unfortunately for the suffragettes, a hostile crowd had gathered and, not content with heckling main speaker Barbara Wylie, the crowd started to throw orange peel and other objects, causing the meeting to break up. The suffragettes and their supporters had to be rescued from the crowd by borough police officers.

In the weeks after the break-up of this meeting, and possibly

motivated by revenge, a corrosive substance was poured onto the greens at the Doncaster golf club in Rossington, and an incendiary device was discovered under the stairway in Wheatley Hall, but fortunately the device failed to ignite. Due to the campaign for suffrage being conducted at that time, the WSPU were suspected of both incidents. Wheatley Hall was vacant at the time and in the process of being sold, so it was quite easy for the culprits to break a window and enter in order to leave their device. The fact that the device was badly assembled and wrapped in WSPU literature undoubtedly helped confirm police suspicion against the WSPU.

However, the suffragettes had not finished, and between 1.00 and 2.00am on the morning of the 3rd June two persons, a male and a female, broke a window and entered

Westfield House in Balby. The house was also known locally as "Fisher Park" after the owner, Mrs Alice Fisher. At that time Mrs Fisher was away from the premises and it is believed that the two persons who entered thought that the house was unoccupied. It must have come as a complete surprise therefore when the housekeeper, 72-year-old Miss Mary Temple Beecroft, appeared at the top of the staircase holding a candle. Miss Beecroft had heard the sound of breaking glass and with considerable bravery on her part had decided to confront the "burglars".

It was the normal practice of the suffragettes not to attack properties which may have endangered the life of occupants, and as a result they targeted empty premises during their campaign of arson. The two "burglars" apologised to Miss Beecroft and promptly left the premises.



*Westfield House, Balby, target of the suffragettes*



*Lillian Lenton in the prison exercise yard at Armley gaol in 1913*

The housekeeper noticed that the intruders appeared to be carrying a bundle when they left the house.

The police were sent for, and Sergeant Needham arrived by tram at about 6.30am. The officer searched the house and grounds, and found a cardboard box containing paraffin, cotton wool and firelighters. He also found some newspapers and a label containing the name Violet Key Jones, the suffragette who maintained a house on Osborne Road in Doncaster.

As a result of discovering this evidence, the police arrested two suspects Harry Johnson and Augusta Winship, from amongst the small group of suffragettes at Osborne Road. Both suspects were then identified by Miss Beecroft. Harry Johnson was a junior reporter on a local newspaper who supported the suffragette movement. He was often to be found in the company of the Doncaster suffragettes.

When the two suspects appeared at Doncaster Borough Police Court, because of the considerable local interest the court was packed with residents. Also in attendance were a number of suffragettes and their supporters, and there was a minor sensation after proceedings had

commenced when one of these suffragettes stood up in the public gallery to claim that the police had arrested the wrong person. This particular lady, who gave the name May Denis, stated that it was she, and not Augusta Winship, who had been the companion of Harry Johnson at Westfield House at the time of the incident in question.

Eventually Johnson and Denis were charged with being found on enclosed premises with intent to commit arson and both were committed for trial at Leeds Assizes.

Unfortunately for the Doncaster force, the young woman who gave her name as May Denis was in fact a well-known suffragette called Lillian Lenton, a prominent activist in the WSPU. Together with another suffragette, she had set fire to the tea house in London's Kew Gardens in February 1913 and had been sentenced to 18 months in prison, where she went on hunger strike and became seriously ill with pleurisy before being released quietly and without publicity by the authorities.

The government, concerned that these activities of the suffragettes would probably end in a death - and martyrdom - before too much longer, rushed through a piece of legislation called the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act 1913, which became known as the "Cat and Mouse Act". The legislation provided for the release of any prisoner who became ill in prison as a result of a hunger strike. The intention was to return them to prison as soon as they were well enough to resume their sentence. This legislation was primarily aimed at the suffragette movement,

Lillian Lenton was therefore the woman at Doncaster Police Court who admitted forcing entry at Westfield House. It was common practice for the suffragettes to give false names

when arrested in an effort to obstruct police enquiries.

Attempts were also made to obstruct the court process and constantly deny the authority of a male-dominated justice system.

In addition, once sent to prison on remand or on sentence their strategy was to take advantage of the "Cat and Mouse Act" and either threaten or begin a hunger strike which then usually forced the authorities to free them from prison.

Lillian Lenton duly went on hunger strike at Armley gaol in Leeds, until she was released to a safe house pending her trial. Doncaster detectives were positioned at the house to ensure that she did not escape, but Lenton was experienced at foiling the police and, dressing up as a man, she left the house and escaped, much to the embarrassment of the Doncaster force.

Lenton committed further offences before being arrested in Liverpool in 1914 and was then returned for trial at Leeds Assizes for the Doncaster offence. She was found guilty and sentenced to 12 months imprisonment, but again went on hunger strike and was released after a short time in prison.

The unfortunate Harry Johnson was sentenced to 12 months hard labour in Wakefield prison.

In her later life Lenton was to become the financial secretary of the National Union of Women Teachers and died in 1972. She never married.



**Originating from Doncaster, JOHN BROWN is a retired Police Inspector, having worked for 33 years in the Lincolnshire and the West Midlands forces. On retirement from the police service he worked as a law instructor in Police recruit training at the regional police training centre, Ryton-on-Dunsmore, and also trained Immigration and Customs officers. John then became a Senior lecturer in Policing at the University of Northampton.**