



FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

VISIT FLORENCE'S PLAQUE



AT 38 BOND STREET

REMEMBERING

FLORENCE BEAUMONT

FLORENCE DESERVES A

BLUE PLAQUE BECAUSE...

of her role as the Hon. Secretary of the Council for the Representation of Women in The League of Nations, and her role in setting up the Suffrage Movement in Wakefield and leading the 1913 Pilgrimage through Wakefield itself, among many other outstanding achievements.

A BORN FEMINIST

Florence Margaret Beaumont was born 17th of June, 1876, in Stanley, Wakefield.

Asked at the age of fourteen what she thought most needed reform, she is said to have replied "That women should vote", and this is a cause she would embody throughout her life. Florence founded the Wakefield Women's Suffrage Society and steered the Yorkshire Federation as its Honourable Secretary. While Florence frequently found herself in positions of power, it appears this was not down to a desire for status, but rather a natural product of her forthrightness, marked intelligence, and her belief that suffrage for women was a justice that must be won. Indeed, it is documented in more than one account that Florence "detested" having to speak in public, but when a job had to be done her resolve did not falter.

To suggest this focus excluded all else would be to do her a disservice, as Florence was able to lend support to causes such as the Temperance Movement and the ideals of the League of Nations, to name just a few. She would later go on to represent the women's voice at the League of Nations.

Florence died unexpectedly on the 16th of August 1929 of a heart attack, cutting her remarkable life short.

One clear fact to emerge from the historical evidence is that, despite her outspoken nature, she was a woman who was deeply respected and highly praised in her chosen fields, and her legacy as one of the key people to have fought for all women to have the right to vote deserves to be acknowledged.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

WAKEFIELD "LAMP DAY."

To the Editor of The Yorkshire Post.

Sir,—May we through your columns appeal to your readers in the Wakefield district to support the "Lamp Day" in memory of Florence Nightingale, "the Lady of the Lamp," which it is proposed to hold in Wakefield on Saturday, October 28? The proceeds will be devoted to maintaining a "Wakefield" Bed in the Royallum Hospital (The French unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, N.U.W.S.S.). This hospital, owing to the great number of wounded from the gallant defence of Verdun and the advance on the Somme, has recently been enlarged from 200 to 400 beds. During the last few weeks, President and Madame Poincaré have visited the hospital and spoken in the highest terms of the work done by British women—the hospital is entirely staffed and organised by women—for the French wounded. The hospital is under the French Red Cross, and in view of its recent enlargement is urgently in need of support.

I shall be very glad to receive offers of sellers or other helpers for the "Day." Small coloured paper lamps will be sold, and we hope that no denizen of Wakefield will be without one on the 28th.—Yours, etc.,

FLORENCE M. BEAUMONT.

Hatfield Hall, Wakefield, Oct. 19, 1916.

Florence above using her public "call out" style to get things done. In this case, she is requesting help from Yorkshire Post readers to contribute to a day honouring Florence Nightingale. Florence Beaumont herself was active in the war effort between 1917 and 1919 in Ripon, North Yorkshire, where she worked with nurses.



Lady Elsie McGrath (nee Beaumont) (left) and Florence Beaumont (right).



Non-militant march, Wakefield. Photo taken from 'The Common Cause' Friday 4th, July 1913.

TIMELINE

- 17 June, 1876 Born at Mount Villa, Westfield, Stanley, Wakefield
- 1882 At the age of five she enters Wakefield Girl's High School
- 1894 Passes the entrance examinations to Newnham College Cambridge
- July 1895 Florence returns to live in Hatfield House with her father following her mother's death
- 27 & 28 January 1904 Mentioned in the Stage magazine for her work in theatre which she participated in to benefit charitable good causes
- 10 March, 1910 Formation of Wakefield Branch of National Union Women's Suffrage Society. Florence takes role as Secretary
- 1910-1911 Millicent Garrett Fawcett stays at Hatfield Hall to speak at the Wakefield Branch of the NUWSS
- July 2 1913 Florence leads the Pilgrimage of Suffrage March through Wakefield
- 1914 Florence's brother Gerald goes to war and Florence begins raising funds for victims of war
- 19 August 1916 Florence becomes acting Hon. Sec for the West Riding Federation of the Women's Suffrage Society
- 1918 Women over 30 with property get the vote
- 1921 Publishes in The Common Cause. Florence writes about the 'absurd age limit' of women's enfranchisement
- 1926 Resigns from The NUWSS over the issue of protective legislation for women
- 23 August 1928 Represents Women's groups pushing for women's suffrage to be recognised at The League of Nations.
- 16 August 1929 Dies unexpectedly of a heart attack

REFLECTING ON FLORENCE'S LIFE

Florence was an exceptional woman. She led a 6000 strong march through Wakefield in 1913 as part of six national Pilgrimages to London. These came about from a direct challenge by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith to Millicent Fawcett asking her to demonstrate that women actually wanted the vote. Florence spoke as she wrote, with clever wit and sharp intellect. She also rode her bicycle, defying social convention and wearing pantaloons as opposed to the cumbersome skirt she was expected to wear as a 'lady'. Indeed she was well known for scorning convention if its observations resulted in unkindness or stupidity. Florence had a wonderfully creative side and ran a theatre company that performed plays and musicals in The Corn Exchange and The Wakefield Royal. Reviews of her success appear in London's The Stage and by all accounts she was as talented at changing the cultural landscape as she was at changing the political landscape of Wakefield. Her copious letter writing to newspapers, initially in Wakefield and, later, to the national press, exposed the stupidity of the anti-franchise argument and earned her a place at the table in the most powerful and influential women's unions in the UK. By the time she was 50, Florence Beaumont represented the Women's Voice at The League of Nations, and was part of the initial group of women who founded The Open Door Society, a powerful union which united all the different female franchise movements across the UK. She never married, but intriguingly there was a romance, which only came to light many years after her death, when letters from Leonard Fulton, an Oxford chum of her brother, Gerald's and her nephew's god father, were found, tied carefully with a ribbon, in a secret drawer in her writing desk. I find this aspect of her life both tragic and delightful. Florence was clearly a free spirit and found passion and purpose in her work and her vision for empowering and enabling all women, to which she devoted her life. She campaigned tirelessly to gain votes for women in 1918, and I get a real sense from her continued letters to papers and the way her commitment is reported, that the lack of opportunity for all women merely fuelled her passion for full franchise. I wonder what she could have achieved if her life was not cut so short by a heart attack in 1929, aged just 53. I am proud to be picking up her legacy here in Wakefield, proud to be bringing her achievements into the light and delighted that a Blue Plaque in her name will keep her in our memory forever.

—Sarah Leah Cobham, CEO Dream Time Creative

FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF WAKEFIELD

A FORCE FOR CHANGE

BY ALEXANDRA VAUGHN

"Half a loaf was better than no bread", Miss Florence M. Beaumont said with regards to the victory of some women getting the vote, but limiting women's suffrage to those over the age of 30 and with land reflected the absurd views of men who were afraid of a "monstrous regiment of women" that would swamp the electorate.

These were Beaumont's words at a late August meeting in 1922, when the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship held their summer school in Oxford.

This is typical of Florence who was quick to recognise the progress women around the country had made, but how changes thus far benefited only those with money. As a result, young women's economic status was restricted, and the country "deprived of a much-needed female outlook into political work". Was this to be tolerated? Denouncing the Government's volte-face in removing the inequalities between men and women, Florence voiced the feelings of those present at the event when she replied to her own question saying that "the answer of this National Union (...) is emphatically 'No'. This extraordinary and glaring inequality must be swept away."

It had been 4 years since the UK Parliament passed an act granting the vote to certain women over the age of 30, and the NUSEC had not diminished their efforts on expanding that right to all women over the age of 21, in equal paring to men. Florence was a leading voice in that struggle.

Born on the 17th of June of 1876 in Wakefield, Florence Margaret Beaumont was a woman of strong moral and principles. She had excelled academically and been admitted to Newnham College Cambridge in 1894, but following her mother's death one year later, she abandoned her studies to keep house for her father. This was most likely out of her own strong sense of duty as her father, "with his advanced views on the importance of education for both women and men would not have insisted on her return". In 1897 the family acquired the Hatfeild Estate Mansion House, where they moved to at the turn of the century, when renovation works were completed.

Settling into her new role as lady of the house at her father's home, Florence occupied herself with an active social life and involvement in civic society affairs, helping with fundraising and being a keynote speaker at local events. Florence was an accomplished actor, producer and director and, with her cast, put on regular shows at both The Corn Exchange and The Theatre Royal to raise money for good causes. Owning a practical mind, she only followed convention insofar as it did not result in unkindness or stupidity, an example of which was her early adoption of the use of bloomers when cycling, despite the jibes and insults this provoked.

On March 10, 1910 the Wakefield Women's Suffrage Society was formed at a drawing-room meeting in Florence's home, where she was appointed as Secretary of the Society. The following year she would also become Treasurer of the Yorkshire Suffrage Federation. In 1913, suffragists campaigning non-violently for the vote held The Great Pilgrimage, a march organised by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, where women marched to London from all around England and Wales; some 50,000 attended a rally in Hyde Park.

Florence led the Pilgrimage of Suffrage March through Wakefield, which was described at length in the Wakefield Express: "All along the route there were large crowds of people, and the women displayed all kinds of banners and devices. On one were the words 'Law abiding', on another 'Justice for Women', while the Wakefield N.W.S. banner was held aloft by Miss F. Beaumont, of Hatfield Hall, who takes a deep interest in the movement in the city." As noted by her nephew Nigel Beaumont in his autobiography, "she would march for the cause but there was no unseemly behaviour such as chaining oneself to railings, throwing oneself under racehorses (...)" Aunt Flo was a suffragist, not a suffragette."

Florence was a prolific writer of newspaper letters, exposing, challenging and arguing on the matters that were close to her heart, and putting pressure on organisations by publicly calling for their support. With the break of WWI in 1914 Florence turned her efforts to charitable works to support the victims of war and used her considerable influence in the creative community to raise funds and goods. She never stopped writing to the papers, raising parcels for war-prisoners, requesting donations for a Wakefield Club for women of men in active service, or funds to support hospitals' work, whilst at the same time penning letters in the pursuit of equal franchising for women. She even found the time to take on new roles in the suffrage movement, becoming the Acting Hon. Sec West Riding Federation of the Women's Suffrage Society in late 1916.

At the start of 1917 Herbert Beaumont, Florence's father, died at the age of 66. Florence then joined the war efforts in a more active way, going to Edinburgh for a two-week training course in nursing, whereby she was sent to Ripon, North Yorkshire where she became Superintendent of the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps Nurses. Shortly after she completed training to become an administrator for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, she took the role of the WAAC leader and organiser whilst at Ripon. With the end of WWI and her brother's return home, Florence moved to London where she could focus further on her lifelong work with the suffragist movement.

Whilst in London Florence joined the Women's Relief Subcommittee as joint secretary with a Miss Thompson. Founded in 1917, the Subcommittee was founded with the objective of collecting exhibits and the formation of a record of war activities by women. Over the following years she continued her work towards Equal Franchise and Equality of Liberty, Status and Opportunities, but by 1926 disagreement with some of the ideas that the NUSEC stood for, firstly the facilitation of "information as to Artificial Contraceptive Methods at State-aided Infant Welfare Centres" and later that same year changes to some of their fundamental principles, led to Florence and another nine members of the Executive Committee to resign their roles. Their goal was to no longer be bound to carry out policies they did not agree with, whilst remaining members and working internally to realign the NUSEC with what they believed to be their fundamental work.

For the rest of her life Florence Beaumont maintained a variety of national and international roles in the pursuit of equality between men and women, working with the Open Door Council and with the Equal Political Rights Campaign Committee. Her life was sadly cut short however.

In 1929, whilst visiting her brother and his family who lived in Woolly, she was taken to a nursing home in Leeds, presumably waiting to go into hospital for surgery for what is believed to be throat cancer, where, on the 16th of August, Florence died unexpectedly of a heart attack. The National Council of Women's News recalled how, when "at the age of 14 Florence was asked what reform was the most necessary, she answered 'That women should vote'.