

EDITH BESSIE NEW (1877 - 1951)

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Edith Bessie New. Image from Biography.com

Edith Bessie New was a suffragette born in Wiltshire who was the first to use vandalism in the protest for Women's Suffrage.

Edith Bessie New was born in 1877 in Swindon into a working class family. Her family's income was greatly diminished when her father died in 1878, so by the age of 14 she was working as a teacher at Queen's Town Infant School. She soon moved to London and gave up to teaching to join the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1908. She worked for them as a campaigner and organiser.

In 1908 Edith and a fellow suffragette Olivia Smith chained themselves to the railings of 10 Downing Street. This was so they could create a diversion for fellow suffragettes Flora Drummond and Mary Macarthur to sneak in without being arrested.

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Later that year Edith and another suffragette, Mary Leigh, broke two windows in 10 Downing Street. They were arrested and sentenced to two months in Holloway Prison; this was the first time in the movement that vandalism was used. Edith and Mary were first concerned that other suffragettes would not like this method but Emmeline Pankhurst, leader of the WSPU, visited them in prison and gave them her approval. That same year they were released and a delegation of suffragettes, including Christabel Pankhurst, met them from prison. They were given bouquets in the suffragette colours and were conducted into a carriage to a celebratory breakfast meeting. Edith then received a medal for a contribution to the cause.

In 1909 when she was campaigning in Scotland, she was arrested for causing a Breach of the Peace in a meeting in Dundee and sentenced to seven days imprisonment. While in prison she went on hunger strike with her fellow prisoners; they were the first suffragettes ever to do this in Scotland. Edith went back to teaching in 1911 but carried on campaigning for the vote and for equal pay in her profession.

At the start of the First World War the Suffragettes called off their campaign to help with war effort, and women over 30 who had property worth at least £5 (or whose husbands had) got the vote in 1918. Edith eventually retired to Talland-Polperro in Cornwall and died there in 1951 at age 73. There is now a blue plaque in North Street in Swindon which marks her birth place.

Researched and written by Elizabeth Strange, Curatorial Research Volunteer.

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