THE SMEETON WESTERBY
SUFFRAGETTE

Jessica Jenkins

This article recounts the experiences of one Leicester woman and her family in the fight to win ‘votes for women’ before the First World War. Today little is remembered of this momentous struggle beyond the popular myths surrounding the central leaders. It is only by examining the experiences of ordinary women – and men – caught up in the battle, that we can really begin to understand the nature of the conflict.

Mary Ellen Bennett was born in Leicester on 24 March 1863 into a privileged household. Her father, John, was a prominent non-conformist and philanthropist within the town, destined to be elected unopposed as Mayor in both 1879 and 1880. When he filled in his census return in 1881 he proudly described his daughter’s occupation as ‘Alderman’s daughter’, and this for him was clearly sufficient. 1 Although each of his seven children were to be remarkable in their own way, perhaps the most surprising path of all was the one to be followed by his second youngest daughter, Mary Ellen.

John Bennett (1830–1906), the son of Robert Bennett, was born on 27 August 1830. He was educated at the Proprietary School in New Walk, the present home of Leicester Museum, before being apprenticed to Joseph Swain (1804–81), wholesale greengrocer. After apprenticeship and, incidentally, falling in love with and marrying the daughter of the boss – always an astute move – he went on to establish what was to be a most successful corn merchant’s business in Northampton Street.

John and Sarah Annie Swain (1833–71) were married in 1854 when she had turned 21. By this stage she had received some form of education at a private boarding school in Coventry. Family tradition records the existence of a letter written by the 15-year-old Sarah begging her parents’ forgiveness for conducting a secret correspondence with her father’s apprentice, so the courtship had apparently been a long one. 2 In what was by all accounts a very happy marriage, the couple were to have six children before her untimely death in December 1871 (Fig. 1).

The financial success of his business was to be the basis not only for the Alderman’s philanthropic benevolence, but also for the imaginative if rather haphazard education of his children. The eldest son, Henry Swain Bennett (1858–1927), was destined to join his father’s business after education at Franklin (Stoneygate) School, a year spent in Switzerland and a year studying history at

1 TNA: Census 1881 RG11 3173/98, p. 9.
Owen’s College in Manchester. In later life, when resident at ‘Holmwood’, Kirby Muxloe, he would be an active member of the Leicestershire and Archaeological Historical Society, as well as a strong supporter of Sanvey Gate Adult School and other charities.\(^3\)

The second son of the marriage, Frederick William Bennett (1860–1930), was to enjoy an illustrious career in medicine. After three years at Owen’s College, he qualified as an external student of London University before serving as a house physician at Manchester Royal Infirmary. It was in 1886 that he returned to Leicester to become one of the first assistant physicians at the Infirmary. After a period studying in Vienna, he succeeded in persuading the Hospital Board to establish a separate department for diseases of the ear, nose and throat, and in 1890 he was to become the Infirmary’s first auralsurgeon. He was also to be conspicuous in Leicester as a keen cellist, photographer and as a geologist, a prominent member of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society.⁴ On his 21 birthday, his proud father had written to him approvingly:

The profession you have chosen is a noble one. If successfully and thoroughly carried on you will be the means of mitigating much misery and saving human life.⁵

Such feelings were to stand in stark contrast to his attitude to his daughters... Of the eldest daughter, Annie (1855–1930), we know only that she married Henry Irving, a successful plant and tree photographer, and was by all accounts a ‘strong personality’. Elizabeth (1861–1956) or Lily, the fourth child of the marriage, appears to have been sent to Boarding School in Edgbaston, and it was either here or at another boarding school that she met Jessie Champ, the future wife of her brother Frederick. Interestingly, Jessie was the daughter of a wine merchant in Chelmsford and came from a family deeply committed to the fight for women’s suffrage.⁶ Elizabeth must have watched her brother’s distinguished medical career with some envy as she struggled to overcome parental opposition to become a nurse in a London Hospital. One can only guess at the determination and sheer courage, not to mention intelligence, which impelled her forward to qualify as a doctor in November 1894, at the age of 33. She would earn the letters MD in the following year and receive a bachelor of surgery from the University of London in 1896. This, in an age when women had only just earned, after a long drawn-out struggle, the right to become doctors, was a remarkable achievement in itself. Her father’s reaction, in strong contrast to his attitude to his son, entered family annals as a long-standing joke:

Oh well, no one need know!⁷

Elizabeth had been 10 when her mother died after a long illness. She recalled the loss as a devastating blow for all the family. John, who, in 1869, had moved the family out of Leicester to ‘Woodlands’, a house opposite Kirby Muxloe castle, in the hope of improving his wife’s ailing health, took the easiest course and married the children’s governess, Elizabeth Widdowson (1842–1916), with what some might deem unseemly haste. The couple were married in September 1872 and their only child Arthur Edward Bennett was born in the following June.

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⁵ H. Kirkland, 2001, as 2, p. 39.
⁶ H. Kirkland, 2001, as 2, p. 43.
⁷ H. Kirkland, 2001, as 2, p. 45.
In 1875, John Bennett submitted plans for a new house in Cross Walk (later known as West Walk) on the corner of Princess Road. The house, to be known as ‘The Limes’, backed on to Joseph Swain’s huge house in De Montfort Street. His subsequent return to Leicester opened the most successful phase of his career as a local politician, although a weak heart led to a premature retirement from public life in 1890. He was to die at ‘The Limes’ on 2 November 1906, aged 77 (Fig. 2).

The death of their mother must have had a profound effect on the two youngest members of the family – Mary Ellen (1863–1937), known as Nellie, and her younger sister Martha Louise (1866–1933), known as Pattie, who were then aged eight and five respectively. However, there appears to be no memory in the family of any resentment and subsequent photographs seem to attest to a happy thriving family. Certainly the three younger sisters remained close throughout their lives and were to be a strong support to one another in the coming struggles.

Fig. 2. ‘The Limes’, on the corner of Princess Road East and West Walk. Former home of the Bennett family, now offices.

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ROLLR Leicester building plans 1875, no. 10195.
We know frustratingly little about the education of Nellie and her sister. Later newspaper reports would describe the former as ‘very well educated’, but she herself in later years would lament to her son how much she could have achieved with a good education.\(^9\) Pattie evidently studied music and went on to teach privately. A photograph of her amongst pupils at the Belmont School suggests that she may have taught there for a while before marrying her husband Charles Edward Stansfield, a devout Quaker, in July 1896.\(^{10}\) The occasion appears to have been a double celebration with the marriage at the same time of her sister Elizabeth to Mark Wilks (1861–1945), a London school teacher. Theirs was to be a long and happy partnership, united in a constant struggle against injustice in many different guises (Fig. 3).

By this stage, Nellie had already been married five years. She had married her husband Thomas Smithies Taylor on 16 September 1891 at Narborough

\(^{10}\) ROLLR: DE3736 Belmont School, New Walk.
Independent Meeting House, and their first child, Dorothea, was born a year later. A son, Garth Smithies Taylor, was to follow in June 1896. Thomas’s early origins as the son of Richard Taylor, a warehouseman in Holloway, contain no hint of his future success. (His distinctive middle name was his mother Mary Ann’s maiden name.) Born on 29 July 1863, he was a few months younger than his wife.

Clearly a talented engineer, he and his brother William, who was two years younger, had amused themselves as boys by constructing magic lanterns in the attic of their parents’ home. After an early apprenticeship to Howards of Bedford ended when Thomas contracted rheumatic fever, he was next apprenticed to R. and J. Beck, renowned makers of microscopes, thus incidentally becoming a freeman of the City of London. In 1886, Thomas left Beck’s to join his father in Leicester, where the latter now worked for a hosiery manufacturer. With capital of around £300, he was able to rent part of a factory in Slater Street, overlooking platform 4 of the Midland Station. There he was shortly to be joined by William, and together the two brothers worked to found what was to become eventually the world-famous firm of Taylor, Taylor and Hobson, scientific instrument makers. The brothers were lodging together in Kirby Muxloe at the time of Thomas’s marriage.

Around 1897, Thomas and Nellie moved out of Leicester to Smeeton Westerby, a hamlet just west of Kibworth Beauchamp, eventually settling at Westerby House, a fine Georgian residence in Main Street. It was here in June 1903 that their final child, Mark Herschel, was born. The family were to remain in Smeeton Westerby until 1912 when they sold the house. By then the family was already resident at ‘Rougemont’, 3 Berkeley Avenue, in Nottingham, where Garth attended the High School and Dorothea studied at the University (Fig. 4).

Thus far, Nellie would have appeared to be leading a very conventional life as a middle-class wife and mother. We can only hazard a guess at the factors which led her away from Smeeton and apparent domestic contentment, to a far more dangerous and controversial life. Had she watched her beloved sister’s struggle to become a doctor, with mounting rage at the inequality of opportunity offered to women? Or was she swept in to the women’s movement and the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in particular, after attending one of the many meetings held in Leicester? There are clues that the Smithies Taylor family were already of an independent nature, for, in 1903, they had sent Dorothea to Bedales, the progressive co-educational boarding school at Steep, near Petersfield in Hampshire. Garth was to follow in 1906, attending first as a day boy and then as a boarder. In a conscious rejection of conventional Victorian values, the founder John Badley had established the school in 1893 with a then revolutionary emphasis upon individual welfare and responsibility. The choice of Bedales is probably significant, for John Badley and his wife, Amy, were also deeply

H. Kirkland, 2001, as 2, p. 50.
committed to the cause of women’s suffrage. Amy Badley herself, born Amy Garrett, was a distant cousin of the Garrett family of Aldbrough, which had produced both Millicent Fawcett, leader of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, and the redoubtable Dr Elizabeth Garret Anderson. 12

Given that a large percentage of the female population in Leicester were earning their living in the boot and shoe industry, it is unsurprising that the leaders of the WSPU, the new militant group founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, soon looked to Leicester as fruitful ground for recruitment. The leading women of the movement were regular speakers in the town and a branch of the WSPU, founded in April 1907, quickly attracted large numbers. It seems likely that Nellie, like others in her family, attended many of these early meetings. An autograph album kept by Nellie’s sister-in-law, Jessie, over the period 1899 to 1925, still survives amongst the family and suggests that she too was involved from an early stage. Amongst many personalities eminent in different fields, the names of most of the leading figures in the women’s suffrage movement between

12 Information from Bedales School Librarian, Nov. 2009.
1908 and 1913 appear in the book. The lengthy entries suggest that Frederick and Jessie may well have offered regular hospitality to visiting speakers. The appearance of Nellie’s younger cousin, Corrie Swain, as an organiser in the WSPU shop in Bowling Green Street and as a window smasher, retained at His Majesty’s pleasure, also suggests a strong family involvement in the local struggle.

In later letters, Nellie refers to the arrest and trial of Isabel Logan, the daughter of the former Liberal MP of Market Harborough in June 1908, as if she was certainly following local events closely by this date, and if the records of the Metropolitan Police are to be believed, her involvement had deepened considerably by the end of 1909.

The nature of the struggle between women and a reluctant Liberal government had become increasingly bitter by this date, with the ‘Suffragettes’, as the militants were now loosely termed in the press, becoming increasingly disruptive in any political meeting where a cabinet minister was unwise enough to try and speak. Ugly scenes of violence regularly ensued. The first hunger strike, an impromptu protest at the refusal to grant political status to women imprisoned for ‘political’ protests, had occurred in June 1909, followed by the first use of forced feeding on women – a method hitherto employed only upon ‘lunatics’ – in Winson Green Prison, in Birmingham, in September. In September too the first serious protest had come to the streets of Leicester.

There had been excitement in Leicester for almost a week before the President of the Board of Trade, Winston Churchill, was due to speak at the Palace Theatre on 5 September. Extra police and stewards had been gathered, and the meeting was declared to be ‘for men only’. Nonetheless, several male supporters of the women did succeed in heckling Churchill and were unceremoniously ejected, joining the enraged crowd of women at the door demanding admission. The four women who were arrested on this occasion did subsequently undertake a brief hunger strike in Leicester Prison, but judicious handling by the authorities averted any major incident and the women were released before forced feeding was necessary. When, in December 1909, Churchill was due to speak at Crewe, the precautions were even more elaborate.

After the recent violence, the Lancashire and Cheshire Liberal Federation were clearly taking no chances as they prepared for the much heralded appearance of this ‘brilliant young statesman’ at the Town Hall and Cooperative Hall on the night of Thursday 9 December. Streets were closed off prior to the meetings and all day crowds enjoyed the spectacle of carpenters nailing thick planks across outside windows of the two halls as if ‘being made fit to resist a siege’. More than one amongst the crowd observed: ‘It was a free and fine advertisement for the suffragettes.’ Extra drafts of police searched the buildings for concealed militants.

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13 H. Kirkland, 2001, as 2, pp. 43–4.
‘with as much industry as the Houses of Parliament before a modern Guy Fawkes’. There had been a great demand for tickets of admission, but applications had been monitored closely. Bravely, the Crewe Women’s Liberal Association had been offered 100 tickets, and the organisation had been overwhelmed by requests from husbands pleading for tickets with such phrases as ‘My wife is under perfect control’ and ‘My wife is not a fighter’.

Meanwhile, the Suffragettes had been very much in evidence ‘moving about the borough mysteriously’. A large quantity of leaflets had been distributed through private letter boxes during the night and on Wednesday night a meeting attracting 3–4,000 had been held in the Market Square. As so often, it was the Suffragettes who were on the receiving end of the violence, suffering a barrage of eggs and tomatoes as well as the release of ‘a large quantity of the most offensive smelling chemical’.

In the event, the political meetings passed off without any interruption or incident, and Churchill would have been well pleased with the rapturous reception which he received. Only after the meetings were over, did one single protest occur. At about 10.40pm a lone woman approached the Liberal Club in Gatefield Street and threw a portion of brick through the window. The woman was quickly apprehended after she had succeeded in throwing two further bricks. On the Friday, when she appeared before magistrates charged with wilfully breaking two windows valued at two shillings, she identified herself as Nellie Taylor of 2 Clements Inn – the address of the WSPU headquarters in London. The Crewe Chronicle, like every good Liberal newspaper, rather inclined to treat the Suffragettes as an irritating joke, described her as ‘a little body, with very little of the militant spirit about her’. She pleaded guilty without offering any explanation. Despite her requests to be dealt with immediately, she was remanded for a week and was bailed for £5, with a gentleman in the court also giving a surety. A week later, Nellie Taylor appeared at Crewe Police Court, amidst a large crowd of sympathisers, and told the court that she broke the windows as a protest at not being admitted to the Churchill meetings. The Mayor was clearly out of sympathy: ‘You will never get the sympathies of the people if you go on acting like this. You will not further your cause by doing such ridiculous things; there is no sense in your methods....’ When the police pointed out that a Norah Taylor had appeared before Bow Street Magistrates charged with obstructing the police, the accused admitted that she was the same person and that there had been confusion over her Christian name. Declining to pay a fine with costs and damages, she was committed to Stafford Prison for seven days over the Christmas period.

Was this our Nellie Taylor? The Metropolitan Police, who drew up an amnesty for suffragettes in 1914 compiled from their own index cards, clearly thought it was. However, they were confused on more that one occasion by the

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19 TNA: HO45/24665.
smokescreen of false names and identities employed by militants, and there are many errors and omissions in their records. It seems strange that Nellie never referred to the incident in subsequent correspondence, but as much of this was censored by the prison authorities, this in itself cannot be conclusive. Perhaps more importantly, it does not sound like Nellie. In all subsequent court cases she defended herself with great courage and fluency. Was this a case of early nerves? It is impossible to be certain. Fortunately, there is no doubt about her later convictions, for we have her own account of the proceedings....

In January 1910, Emmeline Pankhurst called for a suspension of militant activities, whilst the newly formed cross-party ‘Conciliation Committee’ worked on producing legislation for the limited enfranchisement of women. This uneasy truce, with a notable breakdown for ‘Black Friday’ in November 1910, was to last until the autumn of 1911. In Leicester at least, this did not mean a curtailment of the WSPU’s busy programme. A new organiser, Dorothy Pethick, fresh from imprisonment and forced feeding in Newcastle, quickly made a strong impression in the town, opening, in February, a WSPU shop in Bowling Green Street. The shop was soon to become an important centre for fundraising and social activities, and many new and increasingly affluent members were attracted at this time.

In April 1911 the call from women suffrage societies to protest by not participating in the census was picked up and promoted by the WSPU. Across the country, thousands of women evaded the census with ingenious forms of all-night entertainment, which ranged from skating parties to watching Ibsen plays. In Leicester a well-advertised party was held at the shop in Bowling Street, with many of the party-goers delighting in confusing watching police by secretly leaving via a back entrance and re-entering in different disguises. Nellie and her daughter Dorothea were certainly part of the census protest, for her husband defiantly wrote on his census return ‘Women absent protesting “No Vote No Census”’. 20 Nellie’s sister-in-law, Jessie, was also protesting, for she was absent from her home in Regent Road, her husband writing rather more timidly ‘Mrs Bennett not on schedule’. 21

When, in November 1911, Asquith confounded Mrs Pankhurst and other Suffragist leaders alike by declaring that he would introduce a bill for the enfranchisement not of women, but of those men who were still without a vote, the scene was set for a new struggle of increasing violence and bitterness. As the year 1912 dawned, no one in the Taylor family could have guessed at just how much of an ‘annus horribilis’ the year was to be.

After the final defeat of the Conciliation Bill and with Mrs Pankhurst’s assertion that the ‘argument of the broken pane of glass is the most valuable argument in modern politics’ ringing in their ears, the militants of the WSPU now embarked upon an organised programme of window smashing which was to

20 TNA: 1911 census, Smeeton Westerby Sch. 70.
21 TNA: 1911 census, 104 Regent Road, Leicester, Sch. 178.
exceed anything that had gone before in the scale of destruction. Nellie, it seems, had no doubt about the necessity for this form of protest after all constitutional efforts had apparently failed. Documents surviving at the National Archives which were used in the conspiracy case against the leaders of the WSPU include the statement of the Police Detective who followed Nellie on the night of 4 March 1912, and enable us to follow her movements closely.22

A room on the second floor of the Gardenia Restaurant had been hired to members of the WSPU on several occasions and large numbers of police were waiting outside in anticipation of trouble. Groups of women were leaving at intervals and, at 6.40pm, Detective Sergeant Ernest Bowden of New Scotland Yard followed three women as they left the restaurant and walked along the Strand towards Charing Cross, accompanied by a crowd of about 20 people including uniformed police. In an evident attempt to throw off their pursuers, the women entered the tube station at Charing Cross and, following a circuitous route, eventually took the District line to Sloane Square. In what was obviously a well planned manoeuvre, the three then entered the Court Theatre and went up to the gallery. Just after the performance had started at 8.38pm, the women left the theatre and, crossing the square, walked along Kings Road. Opposite the Post Office, the women suddenly ran across and attacked the windows with hammers. Each of the three windows broken were 9ft by 6ft, and estimates of their financial value tend to vary wildly. Throughout the proceedings the women were shadowed closely by two men – one of whom was identified by police as Mark Wilks, a member of the Men’s Political Union, and, of course, Nellie’s brother-in-law.

Arrested and taken to Gerald Row Police Station, the women identified themselves as Nellie Taylor of ‘Smeaton’, Leicestershire, and Nellie Crocker and Gladys Roberts, both of Nottingham. Only Nellie Taylor was said to have an occupation: ‘she is married’. An attempt by Mark Wilks to offer bail failed and the three women appeared next morning at Westminster Court where they were committed for trial, charged jointly with breaking windows valued at £20 and ‘threatening behaviour’. Husband Thomas, at home in Nottingham, heard the news by telegram and reacted by throwing himself in to efforts to visit his wife on remand in Holloway, telling his sister-in-law Elizabeth: ‘I feel very proud to be a husband of such a plucky wife.’23 Nellie was but one of some 200 women arrested at the beginning of March in an orchestrated campaign of window smashing across the capital city.

We are fortunate that so much family correspondence was sought out and preserved by Thomas after the momentous events, and were later deposited by Dorothea at the Women’s Library in London. The collection affords an often moving insight into the struggles of an obviously very brave woman and her equally remarkable family.

22 TNA: HO144/1119 294060.
23 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/50.
Nellie’s first letter, written from Rochester Row Police Court on 5 March, is typically full of concerns about her family – in particular her young son Mark, who is in the care of a German governess: ‘...without her I could not be here to fight...’ 24 She gives instructions for Mark’s clothing and goes on to warn the family that she may receive a month’s sentence. Things for her, she advises, should be sent to the Governor of Holloway, addressed to Nellie Taylor of Smeeton Westerby – a Suffragette. 25

Nellie, like most of the Suffragettes from a comfortable middle-class background, was appalled at what she found in Holloway. Despite the courage of her letters, it is clear from the concern of fellow prisoners like Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson (daughter of the famous Dr Elizabeth) that she suffered considerably at first. In a letter to ‘Dearest Tom and my precious children’ of 7 March, she confided: ‘I was rather bad the first day but I think it was caused by the effort to bring oneself up to the point of breaking a window at all....The clanging of the iron doors and the sound of keys that lock you up in cells which are dark and this one has no window that opens at all... ’ Referring to the recent window smashing protest by the younger suffragettes in the prison when Mrs Pankhurst was not allowed out to exercise, she noted that ‘Charlie Marsh has not a single pane left and this morning the pigeons were eating out of her hands through the holes...’, adding rather wistfully: ‘the pigeons give me the greatest pleasure they are so free and friendly... ’ 26

In time, Nellie began to find her feet. Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson, in an adjacent cell, was able to reassure her friend and colleague Elizabeth Wilks that Nellie was now sleeping better and ‘She looks so much better. At first prison is a great shock. Some people seem to recover more quickly than others. I think she took longer perhaps because she was so extraordinarily brave at first...’ 27 Nonetheless, by 8 March, Nellie had been admitted to the prison hospital, where she enjoyed the company of some of the older women like Mrs Saul Solomon (aged 68), ‘the most beautifully motherly old lady’. 28 At 48, Nellie was one of the older suffragette prisoners, although, surprisingly, there were several women in their 50s. The window protest had resulted in all prisoners losing privileges, and Nellie had been deprived of her writing paper, envelopes and ‘fancy work’. She assured her family that she was not ill, but was simply enjoying better food and an escape from solitary confinement.

It is clear that Nellie found confinement on her own the greatest of the trials. After privileges had been restored around a week later, Nellie was removed from the hospital, probably to avoid contact with Mrs Pankhurst who was now a patient there, but she was given a more comfortable cell and was pleased when the doctor suggested she should have a gate to her cell instead of a door. To her young

24 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/2.
25 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/2.
26 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/7.
27 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/6.
28 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/8.
nieces, daughters of her sister Pattie, Nellie wrote a cheerful letter thanking them for the cakes, potted meat and chocolate which their mother had brought, but confessing: ‘It is being in a cell all by myself, that I mind most.’ She warned them that once she had been sentenced she would be able to receive no extra food and ‘I shall have to sew all day for the government – perhaps make shirts for men who will not give us the vote!’29

Although Nellie clearly made a determined effort to improve her surroundings, spreading a counterpane over the floor of her cell for a carpet and delighting in gifts of daffodils, she gave rare glimpses of her frustration: ‘It really is a most extraordinary system. You feel more like a child out with its nurse. You can’t move without a wardress. You get to feel yourself dangerous in time. The place looks more like one would imagine a lunatic asylum ought [to] look like…’.30 In one unguarded moment she declared: ‘This place is a revelation to me, the whole system will be swept off the face of the earth when we get the vote…’.31

Whilst anxious to allay the fears of her family, Nellie was obviously in constant turmoil. Nellie gave instructions for the cancellation of dress fittings and requested a pattern to be sent in to her so that she could commence work on a summer suit for Garth. Above all, she troubled herself over her youngest child, afraid that he would not understand his mother’s absence, and on several occasions she insisted that he should not leave his presents school ‘with Miss Keating’ to attend the High School in Nottingham. The 10 minutes or so allowed for seeing visitors was not long enough to convey all she wanted. With a curious lack of logic, indicative perhaps of her troubled state of mind, she urged her family to keep writing regularly but always say ‘everything is well’. She confided to her sister Elizabeth, with whom she was often the most frank: ‘I don’t like to tell them not to write to me but when you are in a cell with no one to talk to every little worry grows until it seems ten time the size. Tell them to send all letters to you first and make it quite clear why I should hear nothing. I can go straight if I have no outside worries…’.32

Meanwhile, she worried about the present coal strike and its effect on business and clearly missed her family desperately: ‘I am thinking of you at home with the children this afternoon. I hope dear Garth has gone to golf. I expect you will sing in the Hall in the evening about old Mother sitting in her chair. It is in a chair in a cell…’.33 She was immensely proud of her children, commenting on more than one occasion: ‘I was so proud to have such nice letters from the children. I do hope they will all grow up fighters…’.34 Proudly, she showed Mrs Solomon verses penned by her son Garth.

Nellie was also deeply concerned about her sister Elizabeth, constantly urging her to have peace of mind: ‘I saw your anxious face in Court – please don’t worry

29 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/20.
30 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/10.
31 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/32.
32 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/15.
33 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/19.
34 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/8.
about me. The Doctors seem very kind. I can't bear to think of you with all your work troubling about me. Remember, I feel it a privilege to fight for this cause. Remember how much this movement has brought into my life...

Much of the anxiety was brought to a close when Nellie finally appeared at Sessions on 28 March and all the speculation as to her fate was ended. Thomas sent an enthusiastic telegram to the family waiting for news in Nottingham: 'At last glorious dignified defence speech. Three months probably Holloway.' It was unusual for three women to be charged jointly and this had caused some problems with the Nottingham women not wanting a defence lawyer, whilst Nellie's family – if not Nellie herself – wished to make every defence possible. In the event, Nellie refused all offers and made her own defence. The severe sentence came as no surprise, for the Government was deliberately imposing harsh sentences upon all window breakers regardless of the amount of damage caused. Nellie noted ruefully that she wished she had been responsible for more damage since all the sentences were the same. Thomas, as part of the continual campaign which he waged through letters to the local and national newspapers, stressed the contrast between such excessive sentences and those imposed by local magistrates on men who had committed far more serious crimes. He also highlighted the fact that as each window was worth only £3 16s. 8d., each woman could have been tried by a magistrate (who would normally preside over cases involving damage of less than £5), rather than at Sessions, if they had not been charged jointly. For a time there was confusion about the sentence, but on 6 April the Governor of Holloway wrote to Thomas explaining that Nellie, now sentenced to three months in the third division, would be eligible for release on 4th June provided that her conduct was good. A visit and the opportunity to write and receive one letter would be allowed after two months. She had already endured nearly four weeks in prison – including her birthday, with cards from her children smuggled in. Now the family debated whether to appeal to the Home Office on the grounds of undue severity.

Nellie's letters are full of concern not only for her family, but also for her fellow prisoners, and she often asks for help on their behalf. She demonstrated a considerable aptitude for smuggling, instructing her sister to sew messages in the hems of clean washing and regularly passing uncensored notes to her visitors. She would not send notes out sewn into garments, she explained, for fear that she might lose the privilege of sending her laundry to her sister. Nellie clearly enjoyed the fellowship of other suffragettes, rejoicing when all 80 were allowed to exercise together, and reports conversations with Mrs Pankhurst and Lady Constance [Lytton]. The latter assured her that 'the disapprobation is not quite so awful as it was' and that 'Christobel appeals so to the sporting instincts of men...'. In the
cell next to hers was a Miss Brackenbury and opposite was the sister of Garth’s master at Nottingham High School, Sarah Corner, who was aged 58. In the distance a singer sang through her tiny window for her fellow prisoners’ entertainment, prompting Nellie to predict ‘one day they will have a comic opera composed about prison life...’. 40

At the beginning of April, Mr Hankinson, the Unitarian minister, rang Lily to report that Nellie had been admitted to the prison hospital with toothache. Now Dr Garrett Anderson had been released, the minister was the only way of communicating with her sister. The only hint that anything was wrong was Nellie’s reference to ‘rheumatic headaches’ and her frequent request to her sister for a bottle of ‘Bishop’s Varolettes’. 41 In fact, although this is never clear from the letters or smuggled messages, Nellie had become involved in a hunger strike which was taking place in both Holloway and Aylesbury Gaol, where many of the Suffragettes had been moved. The women were protesting that they had been deprived of the unofficial privileges which had been granted by Churchill when he was Home Secretary and had amounted in everything but title to a form of political status. Once more the convicted women were faced with harsh restrictions which prevented them receiving visitors or letters for the first two months of their sentence. Interestingly, Thomas knew nothing of his wife’s participation in the hunger strike until he visited her on 24 April and by then the protest was over, with most of the privileges restored. Fortunately, his wife, presumably because of her age, had not been one of those forcibly fed, and her husband reported her ‘bright and well’. 42

As to how much the new relaxation of restrictions owed to the hunger strike, and how much to outside pressure from men like Thomas, is very much open to debate. Whilst his wife was on hunger strike, he had busied himself bombarding everyone from the Home Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Prisons with letters of protest and requests for interviews. He himself confessed to have found his status as a Territorial Army Officer, with the right to use ‘On His Majesty’s Service’ envelopes, ‘had worked miracles’. 43 In addition to his business interests and his involvement with a new company, he had found time to write regularly to WSPU leaders and relatives of Suffragettes in prison with his wife. He advised all to make use of the Reverend Frederick Hankinson, a Unitarian minister and keen supporter of women’s suffrage, who visited the convicted prisoners twice a week and was allowed to read one letter of any length to each. Nellie herself had advised him to make use of the minister, although rather sheepishly confessing that they might have initial trouble making contact because she had entered her religion as ‘Votes for Women’. 44 However, in April 1912, the minister was officially reprimanded for whispering with

40 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/19.
41 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/34.
42 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/104.
43 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/84.
44 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/18.
prisoners, and after the protests and violence outside Aylesbury Gaol he was finally debarred from visiting the prisons altogether – much to the disappointment of Thomas.45

Towards the end of April, Thomas, Dorothea and Elizabeth demanded an interview with Nellie, and were amazed to be permitted to spend a full half hour with her instead of the usual 15 minutes. Thomas delightfully reported to the Labour MP and suffrage supporter George Lansbury that food parcels of up to 11lb could now be sent weekly, and prisoners could send letters once a fortnight. They were permitted six books and could receive visits once a month. Concerning this new face of officialdom, Thomas was unimpressed: ‘They seem off their heads and evidently are afraid of the pluck, determination and resource of these brave voteless women. I suggest asking, demanding and worrying to any extent. There is no other way...’ 46

Perhaps as keen to be rid of Thomas as of Nellie, the prison authorities released her on 27 April. Official records attributed her release to ‘general medical grounds’, adding for good measure: ‘Hysterical insomnia, mental condition deteriorating and likely to result in melancholia.’47 Nellie remained with her sister in London for a few days before returning to Nottingham on 2 May, where she received ‘a Royal welcome’ from her children at Nottingham Station. Thomas sensitively fended off suggestions from the WSPU branch in Nottingham that Nellie might like to speak to the branch: ‘Mrs Taylor is still rather dazed and would hardly be strong enough to stand the excitement of previously preparing even a few remarks for Tuesday next....’48 He also intimated that she would refuse any form of public welcome until her other Nottingham accomplices were released. He was in trouble with his wife it seems for suggesting in a letter to the Home Secretary that Miss Crocker and Miss Roberts had no friends fighting on their behalf as she did. Somewhat forlornly he asked the secretary to correct the statement. Nellie it seems still had plenty of fight left in her.

With admirable concern for posterity, Thomas wrote once more to the Reverend Hankinson, asking for all his wife’s letters to be returned so that they could be preserved, adding: ‘Mrs Taylor, although still somewhat dazed, is fast regaining her strength and I see no reason to fear that her experiences will have any permanent ill effect; mentally and morally she has gained much. If it were possible she would be more determined than ever! There will certainly be no more active in working for the reform of our present barbarous prison system....’49 Hankinson responded with apologies that he had destroyed all the letters and could return only a few fragments from the waste-paper basket. Several carefully repaired letters in the collection testify to Thomas’s diligence in document repair.

46 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/104.
47 TNA: HO 144/1195/220196.
48 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/112.
49 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/113.
It is clear that neither Nellie nor Thomas were likely to abandon the cause. On 29 June it was Thomas's turn to face what he referred to as 'His first fight'. In the company of Mark Wilks, who was clearly not a steadying influence upon the family, Thomas joined other members of the Men’s Political Union in attending a meeting held by the Liberal Association in Woodford, Essex. The carefully vetted audience was assembled to hear an address by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George.

Restrictions on admission were, if anything, a little stricter than at Crewe and women faced a barrage of questions as their tickets were examined not once, but three or four times. Thomas, in his later account of the meeting which he wrote for Nellie, recalled that the whole audience spoke only about Suffragettes, and he was particularly amused to hear the ladies in front of him confidently identify several ‘strange looking women’ in the front row as obvious militants, only to discover that it was the Mayoress of Bethnal Green and her entourage.

Thomas chose his seat carefully, six rows from the front in the centre, ‘right in front of Oily George’. He waited only for the cheers to die down and Lloyd George to make his opening remarks, before rising and moving towards the gangway ‘with my newly blocked silk hat held high and a rose in my buttonhole’. He recalled shouting ‘Mr Chairman I protest against listening to Mr Lloyd George until he gives votes to all taxpayers’, just before he was seized roughly by a crowd of stewards. Despite shouting that he wished to go quietly, Thomas found himself in the centre of a scuffle as he was dragged out of the marquee, losing his spectacles and hat in the process: ‘My specs were knocked off my face and trampled to bits. My silk hat and umbrella knocked down and trodden to pulp.’ Outside the tent, Thomas narrowly escaped a ducking in a horse trough when police rather belatedly intervened. At the main gates, on the green, Thomas’s assailants paused before a crowd of men and he feared very much that he was about to be thrown to a hostile crowd. To his relief, he found the crowd sympathetic and several helped him to retrieve his now ruined hat. He left it on a park bench, wishing he could label it ‘How Lloyd George treats real Liberals’. One man, ‘admiring his pluck’, offered to let Thomas back in to the field through his garden but he felt ‘too dazed without my specs to try’, and instead he borrowed a cricket cap so that he could return to London respectably.

Meanwhile, the other men in the protest had also been ejected with similar violence. Mark was disgusted that they had followed each other too quickly, but nonetheless it was reported that ‘they struggled hard and cleared big spaces of broken chairs while the reporters stood on their table for safety...’. Heavy rain finally brought the meeting to a premature end.

Nellie meanwhile was busy campaigning to ‘keep the Liberal out’, probably at the Ilkeston by-election, and was happily ignorant that her family was about to be

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50 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/182.
51 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/182.
thrown into yet new conflict. Thomas had already resolved to sue the Woodford Liberal Association for £3 16s. od. for his damaged hat and was debating about adding ‘unprovoked assault’. For a time he even considered forgoing damages in the County Court so that he could raise the question of assault in the High Court, but was eventually dissuaded from this course.

Thomas’s concerns about the possible costs involved in initiating a lawsuit were somewhat allayed when his sister-in-law Elizabeth started a guarantees scheme for expenses incurred in the ‘Smithies Taylor Action’. Distinguished contributors would include Millicent Fawcett and Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson. Thomas’s avowed aim was to have the case as widely reported as possible and ‘to make it clear to all that the law as laid down in the Hawkins case, provides that no one may be ejected without being first asked to leave’.52 The Hawkins case had involved another Leicester man – Alfred Hawkins, the wife of the prominent local suffragette Alice – who in November 1910 had suffered a broken leg when thrown down a staircase by overzealous stewards guarding a Churchill meeting in Bradford. In a high-profile case, important enough at the time to be recalled in the memoirs of Millicent Fawcett, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst, but now largely forgotten, Hawkins had won £100 in damages.

In the event, a well-publicised action was brought against the Liberal Agent and Ward Secretary for Walthamstow and others at Bow County Court at the beginning of November, when Thomas claimed £3 16s. 6d. for the articles destroyed and a further £50 as special damages. Thomas told the judge that he had left the meeting in protest at the description of Lloyd George as ‘the great democratic champion of the time’.53 He also explained that he was particularly disgusted at the manner in which the women were treated: ‘They were penned up behind a barrier and kept a long time while their tickets were examined.’ Confessing that he was a strong supporter of women’s suffrage and that his wife had ‘incurred the disapprobation of the law’, he somewhat disingenuously claimed to have gone to the meeting on his own. In fact, the defendants had gone to some lengths to establish that Thomas was a well-known disruptor of political meetings, even sending a photographer to capture his image as he walked from his Leicester office at 2 Newark Street to the Great Central Station.54 They were presumably disappointed to find him a relative novice.

When the judge eventually gave his decision, both parties seemed to have been dissatisfied and contemplated appeals. Thomas received damages but not proper costs. On 4 December, A. E. W. Marshall, Thomas’s lawyer, although personally disgusted with the strong prejudice shown by the judge, counselled against appeal: ‘The only comfort is that you have re-established the principle, and the action had a wide publicity...’55 Thomas eventually received damages in May 1913. By then, the family had moved on to new conflicts.

52 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/184.
53 Leicester Daily Post, 2 Nov. 1912.
54 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/190.
55 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/197.
Meanwhile, controversy had also propelled the Wilks family into the limelight. Whilst Nellie was busy being thrown out of political meetings in Bethnal Green, her sister Elizabeth was continuing her own form of protest (Fig. 5). When the Tax Resistance League had been founded in October 1909 as a body independent of other suffrage groups, the women were raising the age-old cry of ‘no taxation without representation’. Elizabeth, in company with Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson, was present at the inaugural meeting and was elected Treasurer.\(^{56}\) Accordingly, from that date she refused to pay tax, and the tax due on her income for 1907–08 and 1908–09 was duly recovered by distraint, firstly on furniture and subsequently on jewellery.\(^{57}\) As was normal in these cases an auction of the goods seized was made the occasion of a well-advertised public meeting, at

\(^{56}\) E. Crawford, 1999, as 45, pp. 671–3.
\(^{57}\) TNA: T1/11319.

Fig. 5. Elizabeth (Lily) Wilks, 1861–1956 (courtesy of H. Kirkland).
which the injustice of the case was highlighted and friends purchased the goods so that they could be returned to their owners.

When, however, the local collector of taxes attempted to recover the duty for 1909–10 which amounted to about £40, Elizabeth raised the objection that the furniture belonged to her. Under the Married Women’s Property Act her goods, she pointed out, could not be distrained upon, but under the Income Tax laws it was her husband who was responsible for his wife’s payment even though he had no power over her to enforce it. As a ‘Celebrated lady doctor, medical officer to the Board of Education, clinical assistant at the Royal Free Hospital and the Evelina Hospital’, Elizabeth enjoyed an income far in excess of her husband’s salary as a school teacher. On 5 August 1910 the first application for payment was made to Mark, and he protested that he was unable to meet the demand and did not even have sufficient knowledge of his wife’s affairs to fill in a tax form. Whilst he laid his case before the Treasury, the dispute ground on. His letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, asking him to stay execution until the law was altered, went unheeded, and finally on 18 September 1912, Mark was arrested and ‘flung roughly’, as the *Evening Standard* reported it, in to Brixton Gaol. The situation was manifestly absurd and evoked a great public outcry, which included not only the voice of Thomas Smithies Taylor but even that of George Bernard Shaw. Amidst great public protest, a torchlight procession to Brixton Gaol was organised, and after two weeks of imprisonment and a hunger strike, Mark was finally released on 2 October due to ill health. Thomas sent his brother-in-law a telegram which said only: ‘Heartiest Congratulations. Thanks of all true Britons.’ As a means of securing publicity, the case was probably the most effective of all the tax resistance protests, but today the sacrifice of women like Elizabeth and, indeed, men like Mark are largely forgotten (Fig. 6).

After such a year of protest, it is understandable that Nellie reported herself ‘debarred’ from militant actions due to ‘domestic circumstances’. These circumstances certainly seem to have changed too, with Garth now working for a lens manufacturer in Berlin, Dorothea studying to be a doctor in London and the rest of the family in the process of joining a co-operative housekeeping scheme at Melvin Hall in Golder’s Green. Nationally the suffrage battle – although it might now justifiably be termed a war – had entered a new level of conflict. Arson of empty mansions, and any building which would not occasion a risk to life, was now seen as a legitimate weapon in the WSPU armory. The new Home Secretary had responded to the problems posed by the continual use of the hunger strike and the controversy surrounding forced feeding by introducing the notorious ‘Prisoners Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Bill’, soon to be better known as ‘The Cat and Mouse Act’.

On 14 July, Nellie resolved to attend the usual Monday afternoon meeting held by the WSPU at the London Pavilion, and told Tom and the children that she

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60 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/229.
61 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/118.
would be home for tea. She, with the rest of the audience, was thrilled to find both Mrs Pankhurst and Annie Kenny at the meeting, both weakened by hunger strike and out of prison on licence: ‘The enthusiasm with which the appearance of Mrs P was greeted can be more easily imagined than described!’ Having stayed to talk to friends, Nellie left the meeting to find police surrounding the entrance: ‘Thinking that they were about to arrest our beloved leader I was so struck with horror at the thought of such a magnificent woman being taken back to prison under the Cat and Mouse Act that I tried by my presence to support her to the car...’ Nellie’s obvious adoration of her leader was typical of many: ‘I knew that this government is not beneath using her unbounded courage as a tool with which to murder her. This is my battle as well as that of every other woman that she is fighting...’

62 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/118.
In the end it was Annie who was captured and ‘the magnificent woman’ was left unmolested, but in the melee around the car, Nellie herself was arrested. At Marlborough Police Court on the subsequent day, she was charged on the oath of PC George Lee with obstructing the police and assaulting him personally by slapping him in the face, whilst shouting: ‘I am one of the leaders. I won’t go away.’ Nellie always categorically denied this charge, pointing out that she was never even asked to move on: ‘On the contrary without any warning a constable in uniform seized me by the right arm, so violently twisted it....’ She also asserted quite convincingly that it would be beneath her dignity to slap anyone in the face. This is a charge which seems to have been used quite regularly against the suffragettes, sometimes most inappropriately, and it is certainly easy to imagine the poor hapless police constables utterly confused by so many women, presumably in an array of equally bewildering hats. Nellie was unsurprised to receive a sentence of 21 days: ‘...as no justice is to be expected or ever found in the conduct of suffrage cases in the law courts it seemed quite a natural conclusion that the magistrate accepted the constable’s unsupported statement & ignored mine....’ This time Nellie adopted the name of Mary Wyan, anxious, as Tom explained, to protect both her 10-year-old son and the other residents of the housing co-operative. She challenged the fact that, as apparently a first-time offender, she received the same sentence as the other Suffragette arrested with her, Annie Bell, who had previous convictions. Later she found her sentence reduced to 14 days without explanation. More conflict ensued when the Black Maria arrived to take them from the court to prison and both women refused to move, demanding a taxi rather than a vehicle used for criminals. They were eventually carried forcibly to the Black Maria and Nellie found herself ‘locked in the wooden box which gives you a feeling that you are in a coffin...’. Her companion had fought particularly hard and Nellie noted with amusement: ‘...There is such a holy fear of Suffragettes’ complaints in the minds of officials that all the way to Holloway the officer was trying to make his peace with Miss Bell....’

Whilst Thomas launched once more into a vigorous campaign of letter writing, protesting at the arrest of Mrs Mary Wyan on the unsupported evidence of one constable, Nellie commenced her own protest with a hunger and thirst strike. Thomas’s pretence that Mrs Wyan was a friend of his family seemed to have been dropped fairly quickly as his wife’s health rapidly deteriorated (Fig. 7). On the 18 July all were relieved when Nellie was released on licence, with instructions to return to prison on 24 July once her health had been restored. Although many Suffragettes released in these circumstances chose to adopt a dangerous game of evasion, Nellie characteristically adopted a different course. At home with Elizabeth, she drafted letters to the Home Secretary demanding that her case should be re-examined, and on 25 July she returned to Holloway of her own

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63 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/117.
64 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/118.
65 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/118.
volition to ask for a complete discharge. When this was refused and she was re-arrested, she resumed her hunger and thirst strike immediately.

Four days later, Mary Wyan was discharged once more under a ‘Cat and Mouse’ licence with instructions to return on 6 August, but now the case took a more sinister twist. Nellie was by now dangerously ill and the prison authorities, evidently in some concern, sent her to a nursing home at Campden Hill Terrace, just off Kensington High Street. Nellie had refused to leave Holloway unless it was with a complete discharge. Later, Nellie’s words were reported in *The Suffragette*: ‘Three or four wardresses dressed me. They took me in a taxi cab to the nursing home. One of the wardresses rang the bell and another pushed me out of the cab...I am very weak and have had nothing for four days and I sank to the pavement. Someone placed a chair for me by the gateway and left me.’

There Nellie remained from 4.30 pm to around midnight, refusing to enter until her full release was granted. *The Suffragette* reported with evident glee that a sympathetic and indignant crowd quickly collected around her: ‘Just the kind of

66 *The Suffragette*, 1 Aug. 1913, p. 724.
crowd usually most difficult to get to take any interest in the workings of this infamous act...But the crowd... was entirely sympathetic, even awestruck, in the face of so much courage and so much suffering...’

Just after midnight the police brought up a stretcher and removed Nellie to the Infirmary of the local workhouse. She evidently still refused food and water, for on 31 July, Thomas received notification that Mary Wyan was seriously ill and should be visited without delay. With a typical lack of tact, the workhouse superintendent also wrote asking him to defray the cost of maintenance of his wife in the Infirmary at the rate of 20s. per week. Thomas, who adamantly refused to pay, visited his wife and finally persuaded her to abandon her protest – presumably for the sake of her children.

Nellie, now attired in workhouse clothes, remained in the Infirmary until 20 August. Her letters to her family – most of whom were enjoying the summer holidays – reveal her as surprisingly lonely. Even Thomas, now at Camp with his Territorials at Chatsworth Park, professed himself not fit enough yet to get back to help her. An order for her re-arrest on 6 August was stopped at the gates of the Infirmary, but her appeals to the Home Office also went unanswered. Visitors from the WSPU reported that she intended to remain until she received a full discharge or was re-arrested. Christabel Pankhurst, safe in exile in Paris, was reported to have sent a special message thanking Nellie for her ‘wonderful courage’. Interestingly, he chose to highlight not the injustice of her sentence, but the fact that as a ‘common woman’ she received none of the mercy applied in the remission of sentences like that of Lady Sybil Smith.

Finally, on 20 August, after several alarms, Thomas, now on holiday in Norfolk, received the news from Dr Gayton at the Infirmary: ‘Patient removed to Holloway suddenly.’ Nellie once more was refusing food and water.

It is apparent that the authorities had no intention of enduring further scandal and controversy, for just two days later, Thomas received notification from the Governor of Holloway that Mary Wyan would be discharged absolutely on the following day. It was to be Nellie’s final protest. Although Emily Davies’s well publicised death on the Derby racecourse is now the only sacrifice remembered, it is important to remember that there were many other ordinary women like Nellie who were quite ready to die for their cause – and indeed several did.

Just a year later the Taylor family, along with the rest of Europe, was to be engulfed by a far greater tragedy in the shape of the First World War. By this time Nellie was living at ‘Stonerdale’, in Church Lane, Steep, and Mark was attending Bedales as a day boy (Fig. 8). Thomas, called up as a territorial, was in charge of

67 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/144.
68 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/162.
69 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/145.
70 The Women’s Library, as 14, 9/26/170.
the Army Service Corps in Northampton where Garth joined him briefly, before transferring to the 2nd Sherwood Foresters (Notts. & Derby).

Garth’s letters home to his family were preserved and published within the family by Dorothea, and give us our last insight into the family. Nellie was apparently occupying herself with poultry keeping and a little writing. The bond between mother and son was clearly a strong one, as Garth’s efforts at poetry in eulogy of her convey:

She is filled with a spirit that never dies
Kind and brave, lofty and free...
She will not believe in her own soul’s worth
But no one can shake her trust in us...71

Nellie and Thomas would have to draw on new resources of courage when, on 15 October 1915, Garth, by then acting Captain, was shot dead by a sniper whilst superintending an advance trench near Transloy on the Somme. Dorothea, now Assistant House Physician at Great Ormond St. Hospital, recorded her mother’s

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71 Liddel Hart Centre for Military Archives, as 9, p. 22.
reaction in a letter to Pattie:

Mother has been so wonderfully brave that she has helped me to bear it. When we told her she said: ‘Don’t cry, we are not so near dear Garth if we cry – I shall like to feel I have never shed a tear over it’...72

Like so many other parents faced with such an incomprehensible loss, Nellie and Thomas went to great pains to meet and interview those who had served with Garth, and piece together the last moments of their son. It was probably a tragedy from which they were never to recover (Fig. 9).

We have no way of knowing Nellie’s feelings about women finally gaining the vote in 1918, although it is likely that she shared the frustration of many that it was still not awarded on equal terms with men. The involvement with the school at Bedales certainly deepened, for Thomas, apparently turning his back on the world of business, taught woodwork and metalwork there from 1920 to 1930, and from 1923 took on the role of estate manager, moving into ‘Dunhill’ – a property owned by the School. There Dorothea joined them, acting as the school’s

72 Liddel Hart Centre for Military Archives, as 9, p. 97.
doctor from 1923 to 1932, whilst in practice in Petersfield. Garth’s name is to be found on the Steep war memorial and on the memorial in Steep Church, above the name of the poet Edward Thomas.

Nellie was to die in 1937 and Thomas a year later. Their contribution to the fight for women’s suffrage would probably have been entirely forgotten were it not for the diligence of Dorothea in preserving so many letters. Amidst the confusion of popular myth and distortion which surrounds the history of this momentous battle, it is all the more important to examine and understand the motives of apparently ordinary individuals, hitherto overlooked by historians, who yet contributed so much of themselves to the struggle. As it turned out, Nellie certainly was somewhat more than just an alderman’s daughter...

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