

## **Sandbach History Society**

### **Report on March meeting 2020**

#### **Linda Hulse: "Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy: A Thoroughly Modern Woman"**

Linda Hulse spoke at a recent meeting of Sandbach History Society about "Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy: a Thoroughly Modern Woman".

Mrs Hulse said that she lived in Congleton for 50 years and campaigned fearlessly for women's rights – not only the right to vote but also the right to education for girls, the right to refuse sex in marriage and the right to keep her own property and earnings when she married.

Elizabeth led an unconventional personal life, said Mrs Hulse. She struggled with the Christian faith, becoming an atheist, and had an intense dislike of marriage, being horrified by the vow of the wife to obey her husband.

She was born in 1833 in Manchester, the daughter of a Methodist minister. Whilst her elder brother received an education including a place at Cambridge University, she was only allowed two years of formal education, her guardian at the time (her parents having died earlier) decreeing that she had "learned everything it was necessary for a woman to learn".

Elizabeth educated herself whilst acting as a tutor and governess. At the age of 21, using a small legacy, she founded a girls' boarding school in Worsley. She was amazed at the woeful standard of education for girls and introduced subjects into the curriculum normally reserved for boys.

In 1867 she moved the school to Moody Hall in Congleton. Along with Josephine Butler and Ann Clough she campaigned for girls to be given the same access to higher education as boys.

She had joined the College of Preceptors (a body set up to create and maintain standards in education) in 1862 and founded the Manchester Schoolmistresses Association in 1865. In 1866 she gave evidence to a Royal Commission into Education, the first woman to do so, said Mrs Hulse.

Elizabeth was an avid suffragist, said Mrs Hulse, and before coming to Congleton had become involved with many organisations concerned with female emancipation. These included the Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage and the Society for the Employment of Women. She was also a member, and later secretary, of the Married Women's Property Committee (MWPC), campaigning for the rights of women in marriage.

When she moved to Congleton she met Benjamin Elmy, a local mill owner and fellow atheist and feminist. They believed in "free love" (making a commitment to live together without marrying) and she moved in with him – something which went against the rigid moral structures of Victorian Society.

At the age of 39, Elizabeth became pregnant. Some members of the MWPC believed she should resign because the scandal would harm the women's movement. Under great pressure Elizabeth and Ben eventually went through a civil marriage ceremony at Kensington Registry Office but she refused to make a promise of obedience or to wear a wedding ring or give up her surname. They moved to Buxton House, Buglawton, and Elizabeth gave birth to a son, Frank, in 1875.

They were not popular in Congleton and disturbances occurred in the town when they organised public meetings dealing with secular topics.

One of Ben Elmy's mills, at Eaton, burned down and the business eventually failed in 1880. As well as looking after a young child Elizabeth worked a 50-hour week in a local mill and they relied upon friends for financial support. She was a strong and determined woman, said Mrs Hulse, and despite this she soon returned to campaigning.

In 1889 Elizabeth was joined by Richard Pankhurst, Emmeline Pankhurst and Ursula Bright in forming the Women's Franchise League. However, she was constantly in conflict with some members of the committee and she resigned. She joined the Women's Social and Political Union and whilst she was in favour of civil disobedience she found that she couldn't tolerate the increasing levels of violence being used and broke with them.

Her last public appearance was in 1913, said Mrs Hulse. The Great Suffrage Pilgrimage, a non-violent march for women's right to vote, and which ended in Hyde Park, was diverted through Congleton and Elizabeth led the march through the town on her pony, Vixen.

Mrs Hulse said that Elizabeth's name, along with 58 others, is etched on the plinth of a statue of Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square in London. A local group – Elizabeth's Group – is fundraising to create a statue of her in Congleton.



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Elizabeth died in March 1918, aged 84, after a fall at her home. The Representation of the People Act had been passed one month earlier, enfranchising women over the age of 30.

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