Charlotte Despard – Suffragist, Vegetarian, Radical

One of the suffrage movement’s most iconic campaigners was Surrey resident, Mrs Charlotte Despard (née French; 1844-1939) who lived at ‘Courtlands’, a large country house with fifteen acres of woods, lawns and formal gardens, in Esher, close to Claremont, from 1879 to 1892.

Charlotte had a conventional Victorian upbringing on her family’s estate at Ripple Vale in Kent. She was one of five sisters and one brother, children of Captain John Tracey William French and his wife Margaret. Her brother, John, became a field marshal and first Earl of Ypres. Her younger sister, Katherine (Harley) was a member of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and the Church League for Women’s Suffrage, and was one of the organisers of the Great Pilgrimage in 1913.

Charlotte often bemoaned her lack of education, stating “There were moments in my hot youth, when I would rail against Heaven for having made me a woman. What might I not have been; what might I not have done had I the freedom and intellectual advantages so largely accorded to men?”

Charlotte was married to Maximilliam Despard (Max was from an Anglo-Irish family) in December 1870. They appear to have shared radical views, views on the education and employment of women, and both favoured home rule for Ireland. Charlotte and Max had no children. Max was one of the founders of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and had made his fortune in the Far East. With his encouragement Charlotte occupied herself by writing romantic novels, such as Chaste as Ice, Pure as Snow (1874). Due to concern over Max’s poor health the couple spent every winter abroad, cruising in the Mediterranean or visiting India and North America.

After Max’s death in 1890, and many months of seclusion, Charlotte was introduced to the work of the Nine Elms Flower Mission by her neighbour Helen, Duchess of Albany (Queen Victoria’s widowed daughter in law). She became heavily involved with charitable work in the Nine Elms area of Battersea, funding and staffing a health clinic, organising youth and working men’s clubs, as well as running a soup kitchen for the unemployed.

Charlotte became a vegetarian and also converted to Catholicism during this time. In her own words “Vegetarianism is pre-eminently a woman’s question. It is horrible to think that women should have to handle and cook deadflesh.”

By 1892 Charlotte was living in Nine Elms, Battersea, which enabled her greater involvement in improving the lives of residents in the local community. In this year she was elected to Kingston Board of Guardians for one year, and in 1894 she was elected to the Vauxhall Board of the Lambeth Poor-Law Union. Her engagement with charitable causes lead to increasing political awareness and she became involved in ‘left wing’ causes. She was an active as well as vocal supporter of the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party.
Charlotte gave up her home at ‘Courtlands’ in 1892 enabling her sister-in-law Eleanora and her brother John French’s children to make their home there. She retained a cottage ‘Earnshaw’ on the estate, which she used for weekends and she hosted trips to the countryside for children and their families from Nine Elms. The trade union organiser, Margaret Bondfield described the cottage as “open house for tired people.” Her nephew Gerald French remembered a group of Saturday or Sunday visitors from Battersea:

“It was certainly amusing to some extent but it had its trying side. For instance, they came equipped with several barrel-organs, which of course they never ceased playing from the time of their arrival until their departure. Their womenfolk accompanied them, and dancing went on during the greater part of the day, on the Lawns and on the drive.

My father [John French] threw himself nobly into the breach, and helped to organize sports for the men… I think he was more amused than anyone at the extraordinary antics of the invaders of our peace and quietness.”

Charlotte became a campaigner for adult suffrage for all, not just women property owners, and became an activist in the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). When the WSPU moved from Manchester to London in 1906, Charlotte became a familiar figure on the platform. She had the bearing of a Victorian grande dame and a distinctive style of dress, she did not wear corsets, she took to wearing a simple black chiffon mantilla rather than the fashionable large hat, and she wore sandals rather than tight boots. Charlotte became the WSPU’s honorary secretary, and together with Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst she was widely recognised as one of the leaders of the suffrage movement.

In February 1907, Charlotte was arrested during a march on the Houses of Parliament which followed the “Women’s Parliament” at Caxton Hall. Together with Emmeline Pankhurst she was sentenced to three weeks in Holloway Prison. However, a rift between the Pankhursts and Charlotte began to develop and by the spring it became clear that the WSPU’s election policy meant that the group was supporting Conservative candidates as a means of opposing the Liberals. Charlotte Despard, together with Edith How Martyn and Anne Cobden Sanderson, sent a message to the Independent Labour Party saying that they would not oppose any Labour candidates. Mrs Pankhurst repudiated this position and the stage was set for the formation of the Women’s Freedom League. The dispute came to a head in October 1907 when Mrs Pankhurst cancelled the annual conference and set up a central committee appointed by her.

Charlotte Despard, Edith How Martyn, Teresa Billington Greig, Octavia Lewin, Anna Munro and Alice Schofield decided to hold a conference regardless – they set up a new constitution and by the end of November the Women’s Freedom League (WFL) came into being. The WFL’s first campaigning tactic was the deployment of “Sandwich-Ladies” on the streets of London, wearing cardboard placards declaring “Votes for Women”. The members of this new group set out to be “constitutional militants” concentrating on “moral” tactics such tax resistance and chaining themselves to objects such as the metal grille that separated the Ladies Gallery in
the House of Commons. Charlotte was one of the first women to refuse to pay taxes (1908), as a protest about the status of women as citizens, an action which lead to the founding of the Women’s Tax Resistance League.

Meetings were organised across the country where Charlotte Despard, Teresa Billington Greig and Victor Duval were the main speakers. In Croydon, Marion Holmes persuaded the entire local branch of the WSPU to leave and reform as a branch of the WFL. Inspired by the campaigning of Charlotte Despard, Muriel Matters joined the WFL’s campaign and their mobile educational caravan set off to bring the suffrage message to Surrey, Sussex and Kent.

The *Surrey Advertiser* reported on 23 May 1908 that a group of enthusiastic supporters of women’s suffrage met the previous Saturday at ‘Earnshaw Cottage’, the Esher home of Mrs Charlotte Despard. The aim of the meeting was to launch a new education campaign for the suffrage movement. Charlotte had provided the WFL with a caravan which she had purchased in Oxshott, she gave it a smart makeover, providing furnishings. Other members of the WFL donated camp-beds, lunch baskets, a kettle and maps. A number of prominent supporters of the suffrage cause had accepted Charlotte’s invitation to give the van, the first to be used in such work, a hearty send off on the 16 May 1908. This method of campaigning was particularly daring for the women taking part, showing that women could take their freedom and their message to the countryside, however they were also vulnerable but showed great strength in that they were determined to bring the campaign to the towns and villages of the county despite many a rowdy reception from the crowds they came across.

Charlotte was one of the main speakers at the first caravan stop outside the Bull Inn, Leatherhead. Following a hostile reception the WFL caravan moved on to Guildford, then Godalming and Haslemere, where crowds gathered to heckle. The *Surrey Advertiser* described the events surrounding their progress in full, with sympathy for the justice of women’s cause (*Surrey Advertiser*, 23 May and 30 May 1908).

In 1908 Charlotte together with her friend Mabel Collins wrote and published *Outlawed: a novel on the Women’s Suffrage Question*, based on her experiences campaigning and on her imprisonment in Holloway Gaol.

Following her arrest for leading a delegation to the Prime Minister, and subsequent release from prison, early in 1909, Charlotte continued to take to platforms across Surrey. As the elected president of the WFL she spoke in favour of Women’s Suffrage. She proved to be quite a draw for local audiences in Epsom and Woking. A local branch of the WFL was set up in Woking and Mrs Despard gave the main speech at a public meeting reported in the *Surrey Advertiser* on 13 February 1909. She was back in Woking in June attending a WFL garden party and fete, where she again gave a speech sharing the platform with Countess Russell and Mrs Arncliffe Sennett. During the same month she was invited to speak at a garden meeting held at ‘Stonifers’, on Reigate Hill.

Charlotte, in addition to her political campaigning and social work, gave speeches in favour of universal and women’s suffrage throughout London and the country at
large. In 1910, during the run up to the census in 1911, she promoted the census
boycott as a weapon to pressure the Government into passing the Conciliation Bill.
She also promoted the tactic of tax resistance as another method to put pressure on
the legislators. On her census form the enumerator listed Mrs Despard as resident at
2 Currie Street, Battersea, writing that she was about 70 years of age and a widow. It
was noted that Mrs Despard “Refused further information – a suffragette”.

On the 18 June 1911 Charlotte took part in the Suffrage Procession at the head of
the WFL’s section. In a collection of newspaper cuttings compiled by Helena
Auerbach, of the Reigate and Redhill Women’s Suffrage Society there are accounts
of the events of this day, which also included other Surrey suffragists and
suffragettes Ethel Smyth, Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and Helena Auerbach herself
(SHC ref 3266/1). Charlotte was received with a cheer from the assembled crowds
as she headed the WFL delegation bareheaded and carrying a sheaf of yellow lilies.
Also in that year, she became editor of *The Vote*, the WFL’s magazine, however,
there were some moves to oust her from the leadership as some felt that she lacked
focus. The majority of the executive board resigned and Charlotte retained her
position as ‘de facto’ leader.

Despite a busy schedule, Charlotte found time for her other political interests. In
October 1911 she was the guest of Guildford Independent Labour Party and gave a
speech outlining her views on socialism and pacifism (reported in *Surrey Advertiser*,
9 and 11 October). At the end of January 1912 she was the invited speaker at a
public meeting on women’s suffrage organised at the Borough Hall, Godalming,
attended by many local supporters of the NUWSS (*Surrey Advertiser*, 31 January
1912), including Lady Julia Chance, Theodora Powell, Sophia Pilcher and chaired by
Councillor Munro. Later that year Charlotte headed the ‘Women’s March’, from when
it left Edinburgh, to London (12 October). From 1912 she worked with her close
friend, the pacifist feminist, Kate Harvey, and together they bought twelve acres of
land in Upper Hartfield on the edge of the Ashdown Forest to establish an ‘open-air
school’. With her wealth, Charlotte was able to contribute generously to help finance
this undertaking but this relationship came to an end after Charlotte became more
involved in Irish affairs. In 1913, she attended the Budapest Congress of the
International Suffrage Alliance as leader of the WFL.

When war was declared in 1914 the WFL rejected the pro-war position of their fellow
suffragists in the WSPU and the NUWSS and promoted a pacifist stance. They
continued with their campaigning for the vote. By 1915 Charlotte had joined the
Women’s International Council, the National Council for Civil Liberties, the Women’s
Peace Crusade and the No-Conscription Fellowship. In April 1915 the *Surrey Comet*
reported on a pacificist address entitled “The War and After” that Mrs Despard gave
at the Kingston Humanitarian Society (*Surrey Comet*, 21 April 1915). In 1917 she
resigned as president of the WFL to concentrate on her work in the Women’s Peace
Crusade.

In the post-war election in 1918, Charlotte stood as a Labour candidate for Battersea
North but was unsuccessful, polling only 33% of the vote. She was however
delighted by the victory of Constance Markievicz, the Sinn Fein candidate, a fellow suffragist campaigner.

In parallel with her pro-suffrage campaigning from 1909 onwards, Charlotte gave her support to the campaign for Home Rule in Ireland. Her brother, John (now Viscount French) became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1918, a position he held throughout much of the Irish War of Independence (1919–1922). It must have been extremely problematic for him having a sister who was funding and actively supporting Sinn Fein. Following the death of the hunger-striker Terence Macswiney in 1920, she devoted most of her time and funds to the cause of Communism in Ireland, moving there in 1920. In Dublin, she lived and worked with Maud Gonne (b.1866, Tongham Manor, Surrey), to establish a reception centre for displaced people and she campaigned against the British policy of internment. When Civil War broke out in 1922, Charlotte formed the Women Prisoners’ Defence League with Maud along with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Their aim was to help, comfort and secure the release of Republican prisoners. The organisation was banned a year later. Charlotte also funded a jam factory with the aim of providing employment to Republicans.

In 1921 she moved to ‘Roebuck House’, a mansion on the outskirts of Dublin. The house became an IRA safe-house and was frequently raided by the police. Charlotte was classed as a dangerous subversive under the 1927 Public Safety Act by the Irish Free State government for her opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

The Parliamentary franchise was granted to all adults on equal terms, regardless of gender or wealth in July 1928 and the WFL held a victory breakfast at Hotel Cecil in London. Among the suffragists present, on her 84th Birthday, was Charlotte Despard, feted as an honoured veteran of the struggle for women’s suffrage.

Her campaigning never ceased and during a tour of the Soviet Union in 1930, Charlotte was very impressed with what she saw. On her return she joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and became secretary of the Friends of Soviet Russia organisation. This made her unpopular in some quarters and in 1933 her house in Dublin was burned down by an anti-Communist mob. She later transferred the house to Maud Gonne and moved north to Belfast. By the mid 1930’s her finances were much reduced and she was declared bankrupt in 1937.

Charlotte Despard died in November 1939, aged 95, after a fall at her new house, Nead-na-Gaoithe, Whitehead, near Belfast. She was buried in the Republican Plot at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

Contributed by Miriam Farr, volunteer for The March of the Women project.

Sources

From an album compiled by Women’s Freedom League members Edith, Florence and Grace Hodgson (SHC ref 10065/1)

Reigate and Redhill Women’s Suffrage Society scrapbook compiled by Helena Auerbach (SHC ref 3266/1)

Sales particulars for part of ‘Courtlands’, in 1877 (SHC ref SP/21/1)

Ordnance Survey map sheet XII.14: 1896, 25 inch to the mile

*Surrey Advertiser* newspaper, 1908-1918, on microfilm at Surrey History Centre

1911 census returns, Ancestry accessed online via Surrey Libraries at Surrey History Centre

Kathy Atherton *Suffragettes, suffragists and Antis: the fight for the vote in the Surrey Hills* (2017)

Diane Atkinson *Rise up, Women!* (2018)

Krista Cowman *Women of the right spirit; paid organisers of the WSPU, 1904-1918* (2011)


Elizabeth Crawford *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland: a regional survey* (2006)

Jill Liddington *Vanishing for the Vote* (2014)

Jane Robinson *Hearts and Minds: the untold story of the Great Pilgrimage and how the women won the vote* (2018)


Read ‘The March of the Women’ project page about the Women’s Freedom League

Read ‘The March of the Women’ project page about women in Surrey’s Local Government, including Charlotte Despard


Vote 100 blog about the Women’s Freedom League
https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-
heritage/transformingsociety/elections/voting/womenvote/overview/womens-freedom-league/

For papers of Charlotte Despard held at The Women's Library, see
https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/687b92b6-978c-3580-a440-bea4001b4c32