

Put your walking shoes on for *HerStoria's*

# Women's History Walk around Bradford

By Jo Stanley

**B**radford was one of Britain's major textile cities – before duvets displaced blankets and shell jackets made woollen overcoats redundant. Historically, textile production has always been women's work, so in a sense this declining *Worstedopolis* and its neighbouring mill towns such as Leeds, Blackburn and Burnley, are monuments to female industrial labour. Because of the textile revolution, from 1790 relatively highly-paid girls and women were very visible members of the overcrowded population, not tucked away doing domestic service in private houses. By 1821 eighty per cent of young Bradford women went straight to the mill at fourteen and stayed until marriage, and sometimes afterwards. What's special about Bradford is that some men in the textile unions supported women in their demands for both the minimum wage and the vote.

Today most of the women's noisy, loom-filled workplaces are reduced to fancy apartments for commuters into Leeds and Manchester. And now this heavily Asian West Yorkshire city is marketed as the Curry Capital of the UK, and Film City (because the National Media Museum is there). But some of the history remains too. This walk highlights women's role in that history – as workers, vote-seekers, activists seeking their rights, mothers and media figures.

Our walk covers less than three kilometres and takes two hours. The route has unavoidable steep hills but is just about wheelchair accessible. It starts at the City Hall and ends at the main concert venue, St George's Hall. Both buildings are just five minutes from the main railway station, Bradford Interchange, which is on the Leeds-Manchester line, and so is easily manageable for people wanting to do this walk on a brief day out.



Women were important as legitimate users of this building and as protestors outside it. Inside, one of the first women councillors took her place around 1920. **Margaret Laws** was a JP (Justice of the Peace or magistrate) and ex-scholar of what is claimed to be Britain's first Girls' Grammar School, founded in Bradford in 1875. In the early 1900s, Lady Mayoress **Florence Moser** organised in the then Town Hall to bring about many improvements in poor women's and children's welfare. In 1985-8 one of Britain's numerous Sex Equality Units was set up here, headed by **Lee Comer**. The unit's campaigns included job sharing, sexual harassment, discriminatory language, and the right to wear trousers at school in inclement weather. The unit initiated a 'Take Your Daughter to Work Day' and women-only sessions in the swimming pool; it also halted the setting up of a sex cinema.

The City Hall has long been a focus for dissent by women outside the building. During the famous Manningham Mills strike of 1890-91, the mill girls controlled the square in response to attempts to slash wages and cut the workforce; this was re-enacted in 1990. In the end, poverty and hunger drove the strikers back to work in April 1891 (there was no poor relief or help available for most), leaving the Mill owner, Samuel Cunliffe Lister, victorious and with his profits in tact.

On January 13 1910 a suffragette, Miss Newton, was distributing leaflets here when a mob of boys picked her up, carried her and her leaflets up Sunbridge Road, down Southgate and then back to the Town Hall again. But she didn't let go of her leaflets. Many demonstrations featuring women took place outside here from the 1970s onwards, including the 1988 demonstration against Eric Pickles, the controversial leader of Bradford council 1988-90 whose policies included drastic cuts in public services. Women's 'Reclaim the Night' marches still take place here every November and 'Women in Black' peace vigils every Wednesday.

## Some of Bradford's notable women

**Margaret McMillan** (1860-1931)  
educational and child health reformer

Margaret was born in New York but returned to Scotland as a child. She moved to Bradford in 1893 and was soon elected to the School Board as a member of the newly-formed Independent Labour Party. In the next few years Margaret's reforming zeal and compassion made its mark on the city and improved substantially the lives of Bradford's poorest children. She pioneered home visits and the inspection of schools, and implemented reforms to foster child health and well-being. This approach was all the more remarkable in the context of Bradford, a city which had made use of child labour in its textile industry. When the Education Act of 1902 abolished school boards and transferred their powers to councils, women became ineligible for election. Margaret left Bradford to use her reforming skills in other ways, including working with the new *Workers' Educational Association*.

**Julia Varley** (1871-1952)  
union representative and suffragette

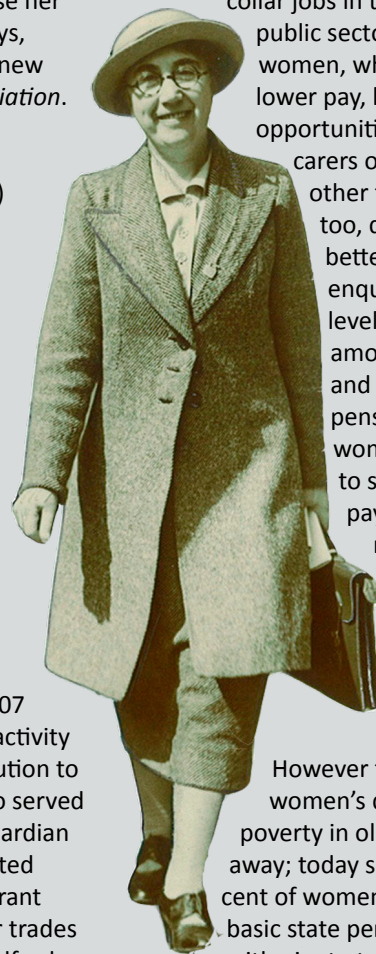
Bradford-born Julia became branch secretary of the Weavers and Textile Workers' Union when just a teenage mill worker; later she became the first woman member of the Bradford Trades Council and served on its executive committee. She was also active in the Votes for Women campaign and was twice imprisoned in 1907 for militant protest. Union activity was not Julia's only contribution to reform in Bradford. She also served in the city as a Poor Law Guardian from 1904-7 and concentrated in particular on helping vagrant women. Julia continued her trades union activities beyond Bradford and in the 1920s served as a rare woman on the general council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

**Florence White** (1886-1961)  
founder of National Spinsters' Pensions Association

Florence was born to a working-class family in Bradford and, like many of her generation who lived through World War One, she never married. Realising the hardships that women such as herself suffered in older age (most spinsters were not eligible for pensions) she set up her campaigning organisation in 1935, calling for pensions for unmarried women at age fifty-five. It struck a chord and her Spinsters' Pensions Association soon had over thousands of members across the UK.

Occupational pensions expanded during the time the NSPA was active, but these changes mostly benefited men. Women were compelled to give up many jobs with pensions attached on marriage; these were mainly white collar jobs in the private and public sectors. But unmarried women, who generally enjoyed lower pay, less employment opportunities and were often carers of aged parents or other family members too, did not fare much better. A Government enquiry found dire levels of poverty amongst older women and in 1940 the state pensionable age for all women was reduced to sixty, although payments were low. A new pension system was introduced by the Labour government in 1948 and the NSPA was wound up ten years later.

However the problem of women's disproportionate poverty in old age refuses to go away; today some thirteen per cent of women qualify for the full basic state pension compared with ninety-two per cent of men. (Statistics from Pat Thane, 'The "Scandal" of women's pensions in Britain: how did it come about?', *History and Policy Paper*, March 2006.



Walk west up Centenary Square, through an underpass and stop in front of the library.

## 2 Central Library

There is a room here dedicated to **Andrea Dunbar** (1962-1990). In her late teens, Dunbar wrote the famously raw play about life on the Buttershaw Estate, on which the 1986 movie *Rita, Sue and Bob too* was based.

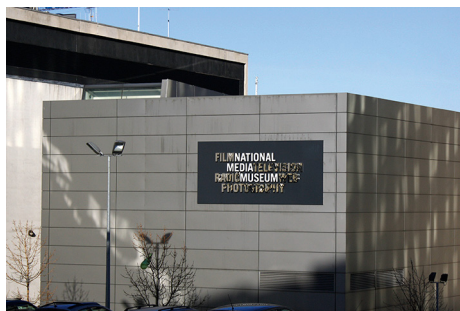
Looking south east towards Manchester Road, all along here were dense housing and mills, some of which you can still see.

In Kent Street, east of Manchester Road, the **Cinderella Club** was founded by Lord Mayor's wife **Florence Moser**. In the late-nineteenth century it provided needy children with clothes and clogs, days out, and holidays in Hest Bank, Morecambe.

In the 1840s this was an area of strong Chartist activity. Chartism was an early socialist campaign for political reform and universal male franchise. By 1841 there was also a Female Chartist Association. On Monday May 29 1848, nearby Chartist stronghold **Adelaide Street** (to the east, off Manchester Road) was besieged. 'Amazon' **Mary Mortimer** helped hold at bay up to fifty police, five hundred special constables and two hundred dragoons and infantry. Women threw objects from their houses. Mary was pinned to a door by a trooper's sabre. She yelled 'I'm a Chartist and will die a Chartist' as they dragged her away. Eighteen were arrested for rioting, with Mary the only woman. She and fifteen others were tried but released for lack of evidence.

Facing the library, turn right and walk around to the entrance of the National Media museum.

## 3 National Media Museum



Notable women with collections in the museum include:

**Julia Cameron** (1815-1879) photographer.

Julia was one of the earliest female photographers to gain a reputation. She was a friend of the astronomer John Herschel who sat for some of her most celebrated portraits. Julia photographed many well known people of the day, including Alfred Lord Tennyson. Her women sitters were frequently depicted romantically and she made an elaborate use of props. In 1864 Julia was elected to the Photographic Society of London and showed work at its annual exhibition.

**Dorothy Wilding** (1893-1976) photographer.

Dorothy served as apprentice to a retoucher in London and this gave her access to the world of photographic portraiture. She opened her first studio in London in 1914 and became very successful, employing a team comprised almost exclusively of women. In the early 1920s her work was used to promote the image of glamorous actresses, including Tallulah Bankhead. Soon Dorothy was being commissioned by royalty (and royal 'want to be' Wallace Simpson). She became the first female official coronation photographer, taking portraits of George VI (1937) and Elizabeth II (1952). Dorothy's images were adapted for stamps, including the iconic image of the Queen which appeared on stamps from 1952-1967.



Continue south west alongside the National Media Museum until just before a roundabout. Cross over (carefully!) here to Little Horton Lane.

## 4 Little Horton Lane

Although it is now disrupted by a major roundabout, Little Horton Lane used to continue north east down towards the centre of town. **Bradford Women's Centre** was here in the 1980s. Bradford feminists tried to work with each other across the class divide, unlike in the nineteenth century when

the middle-class womenfolk of textile lords joined together to help working-class women. The Women's Centre was the home of many radical campaigns, including the National Abortion Campaign, and produced the local women's newsletter, *Irregular Periods*.

In the 1970s Little Horton Lane was also the site for the first **Women's Refuge** in Bradford which provided shelter for women fleeing domestic violence. Since then, a number of local refuges have been set up. They are now under the national umbrella of Women's Aid and no longer run as purely voluntary initiatives.

Heading west, cross over Little Horton Lane and go along Edmund Street to its junction with Morley Street.

## 5 Edmund St/Morley Street health centre

The **clinic** (now gone) was one of the first permanent municipal sites dedicated to assisting women's welfare. It built upon the charitable private efforts made in the late-nineteenth century, a time when major social problems, and a climate of middle-class moral responsibility, led women of mill-owning families to set up many Christian organisations to rescue fallen or vulnerable women. This was a crowded city full of mill girls far away from the family guidance of home villages. At times of textile slumps, these women may turn to prostitution to feed their children; other women were too poor or uneducated to look after their families' health. Many refuges were set up for pregnant and destitute women, often aimed at getting them back to respectable work, for example (ill-paid) needlework. Some cynics said that good was being done by the wives of the industrialists who had caused many of the social problems in the first place.

This building was the focus of much work to improve the health of Bradford's poorest people, especially children and pregnant mothers. Bradford had the second highest infant mortality rate in Britain by 1900, and the birth rate was low too (nineteen per thousand in 1921, by comparison to twenty-five per thousand nationally). The main causes of this were defective sanitation, overcrowding, the employment of women in heavy industrial work before, during and after

# Map of Women's History Walk of Bradford



pregnancy, and impure cows' milk.

An Infant Clinic was based in this building. This offered health advice and care to mothers and pre-school children. It was run by chief medical officer, **Dr Helen Campbell**, and staffed mainly by female nurses. Health visitors were based here, and so too were midwives (fifty-two were registered in 1921). Bradford was the first council in Britain to set up a municipal midwifery service. In 1921 these midwives brought

a third of all Bradford's children into the world. In the 1980s this clinic also operated as a family planning centre, partly in response to feminist agitation for contraceptive advice.

*Walk south west along Morley Street, to see the MacMillan Building, part of Bradford College.*

## 6 MacMillan Building

This was named after education and health campaigner, **Margaret Macmillan**. In the 1970s and 1980s **Bradford College** led the way in developing women-only courses in motor mechanics and manual trades.

*Walk along Ash Grove up to Great Horton Road.*

## 7 Great Horton Road/University

At number 18 was the Ladies' Charity, which operated round the end of the nineteenth century. It helped pregnant women with second-hand clothes and sometimes blankets and coal.

Along much of the length of Great Horton Road is The University of Bradford which was, in 1981, one of the first in the country to have a Women's Studies course. When **Professor Shahina Pardham** was working at the university (early 2000s) she was voted Asian Woman of the Year.



Continue to walk down Great Horton Road downhill (northeast) towards the Alhambra Theatre.

## 8 Women's Baths



Just before the Alhambra, in what is now The Sir Titus Salt pub, was once the site of the Women's Baths. East European and

Caribbean women, habituated to such baths back home, were regular bathers. Despite local objections, the baths were closed in the 1980s.

## 9 The Alhambra Theatre



The Alhambra Theatre is Bradford's main theatre space. The job architect on its redesign in 1982 was a rare woman architect, **Christine Leyland**.

The **Odeon cinema**, formerly on Godwin Street, to the north of the Alhambra, was, in 1998, the site of the British premiere of *Fairy Tale: a true story of the Cottingley fairies*. This film retold the story of the successful photographic hoax perpetrated by two little girls from nearby Cottingley, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths. Their photographs of fairies were widely believed to be authentic proof of an 'other world', and they even convinced Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. In 1921 he arranged for a medium to come and talk to the girls and wrote a book about the phenomenon the following year.

Like women up and down the country, Bradford women often picketed the cinema in protest against the increase in films advocating violence towards women, including *Dressed To Kill* (1980).

## 10 Thornton Road

Moving north past the Odeon turn into Thornton Road. Where the NCP car park is now, the radical Fourth Idea Bookshop and café once stood. It was the Women's Liberation contact address in the 1970s and 80s, and used to offer pregnancy testing. Further west along Thornton Road was the site of Bradford Community Printshop, another collective, where *Irregular Periods* was sometimes produced. Continue along Thornton

road to the site of Bradford's first mill, Holme Mill, marked with a plaque.



Cross Thornton Road and walk up Tetley St, until you get to Sunbridge Road. Turn right to return to the centre and you will come to the trades council building at number 90.

## 11 Trades Council Building

Textile trades unionist **Julia Varley** was a delegate in the 1890s, then in her very early teens. In 1901 she was also elected as a Poor Law Guardian. Julia was a suffragist and came from a local left-wing family. Two of her sisters shared her views and went to London to join suffrage demonstrations. Julia went on to be women's organiser of the Transport and General Workers' Union. At number 148/50, in 1898, you would have found the 100-bed Bradford Women's Home and Shelter which continued till at least 1969.

Continuing along Sunbridge Road to the junction of Godwin Street you'll find the TJ Hughes building, formerly the Co-op.

In Bradford the Co-op was founded in 1860 in a cottage off Bowling Old Lane. Bradford Central Co-operative Women's Guild claims to be the oldest women's organisation in Bradford still in existence. It started in 1891. Despite its progressive ethos, the Co-op famously refused to extend credit to the Manningham mills strikers in 1890.

## 12 Mechanics Institute Library

On Kirkgate is the **Mechanics Institute** which was a cultural centre with a library, which was used by women as well as men. It was here that the first exploratory meeting of the *National Spinsters' Pensions Association* took place in 1935. Organised by **Florence White** from over her confectionary shop in



Lidget Green, the meeting initiated a campaign to introduce an annual ten shillings (fifty pence) pension for all women at age fifty-five. Interest in the idea gained national attention and the Association ran until 1958. Concerned that only a few women qualified for a state pension, in the 1930s White organised a *Spinsters' Union*. At that time, out of around 175,000 single women aged fifty-five to sixty-five, only 80,000 qualified for a pension and the rest had to keep working, go on public assistance, beg or find a generous husband. This was despite many of these ineligible

spinsters having contributed to the Department of Social Security all their lives to the tune of around £4.5 million p.a. Membership of White's *Spinsters' Union* was 125,000 in 1938 and there were nearly one hundred branches.

The Mechanics Institute was also the venue for a lecture given by London-based suffrage leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett to the Bradford Philosophical Society in 1873.

*Proceed east along Bridge Street, past City Hall until you reach St Georges Hall.*

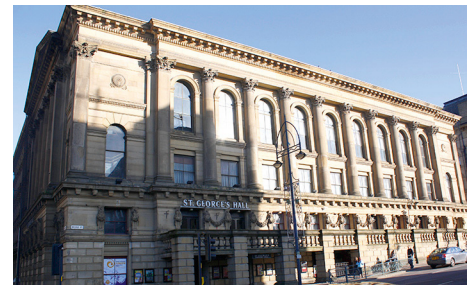
### 13 St George's Hall

In 1830—where the steps now stand—this spot was acclaimed the best place in Bradford for catching trout from the local streams. This hall, built in 1853 and one of the largest public halls in Britain at that time, was the venue for some important meetings in Bradford women's early history.

On May 24 1869, a grand celebratory meeting was held for Bradford's Liberal MP Edward Miall who had just won his seat. Women saw him as the means to get the vote and this 4,000-strong gathering seemed to promise a new era. Women were transformed by seeing what 'we' could do together. Edward Miall MP spoke:

Happy will be the day when in England... and throughout the world... woman takes her real and proper position – as companion and men's helpmeets in national affairs... We shall have gentler politics when the gentle sex takes to politics.

This meeting in Bradford was reported nationwide. In the opinion of the right-wing *Globe*, at the event 'all the horror of women's emancipation could be seen'. It said that the cheering and shouting showed women 'losing all their natural dignity ... [and]



the quietude and graces so becoming to ... (a woman's) beauty.' The newspaper warned that it was 'the shape of things to come.' In fact, it wasn't, quite. There were no more large meetings about women's suffrage here or anywhere in Bradford until more than a decade later.

In November 1881, St George's Hall was the location of another huge meeting, this time 3,000-strong, at which Bradford's Provisional Women's Suffrage Committee was established. This was the start of local women's own organised struggle for the vote.

By 1910 there was much suffragist and suffragette action in the city. Popular meetings were held here and speakers travelled to Bradford from across the UK. On January 13 1910 two suffragettes hid under the platform for twenty-two hours until, grubby and hungry, they launched themselves out to heckle Prime Minister Asquith at a Liberal rally, protesting that he was not doing enough for women.

### 14 Law Courts

Finally behind the Victoria Hotel were the old **Law Courts**. Some of the women tried here include suffragette **Irene Casey** who in 1913 was sentenced to three months hard labour for setting fire to a letterbox in Peel Place. In Armley jail she went on hunger strike and was so ill that after six days she was released. In the 1980s some women peace protestors were tried for demonstrating in nearby Forster Square, where they had dressed as teddy bears, a pantomime horse and a sugar plum fairy. Still resplendent in fancy dress, legal history was made as one woman won the right to keep her teddy bear head on. She claimed that it was a hat and, as a woman, she was entitled to wear a hat in court. Her right was upheld.



Poster for Spinsters' Rally organised by Florence White. West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford (78D86/1/3)

## BONUS LOCATIONS

If you can to extend the walk by around forty-five minutes, stroll north up Cheapside and Manor Row from Forster Square.

### Manor Row, Grammar School House

Dorothy Keeling (1881-1967), social worker, was born at Grammar School House, where her father was headmaster of Bradford's Boys' Grammar School. After time spent as a workhouse visitor, Dorothy joined the Bradford Guild of Help, a movement founded in 1905 to foster cross-class friendship and social betterment. She moved to Manchester, and then to Liverpool where she became a significant figure in social reform in that city.

### Eldon Place

Next head towards the Manningham Lane junction with Eldon Place, then walk left (west) up to Eldon Terrace. Here was St Monica's Home For Fallen Women until at least 1969. It is likely to have been in Edith Cavell House, which in 1989 became a crèche for Bradford council workers, and is currently a centre for children.

The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (suffragists who believed in constitutional methods of protest) was located at 5 Eldon Terrace from at least 1913. By that time Greater Bradford had four NUWSS branches.

Proceed east down Eldon Place and stand at the junction of Eldon Place and Manningham Lane. If you look right (south) to where the high-banked row of shops is now, you can see at 61 Manningham Lane the former site of the Women's Social and Political Union offices (the suffragettes, whose militant protests were at odds with the quieter tactics of the older NUWSS).

The WSPU was the radical suffrage organisation begun in 1903, led by Emmeline Pankhurst who visited Bradford several times. The WSPU office was there in at least 1908, and probably 1906, when the branch was formed. Among its first members was **Julia Varley**. Many WSPU branches were founded around this time and of the fifty-eight WSPU branches in the UK,

a quarter were in Yorkshire, mainly in the textile towns. So we can imagine that lots of women textile workers would have come here from their mills, in their clogs, to pick up leaflets or attend meetings. From 1907 the WSPU harnessed the political energy of mill girls through a major recruiting drive in the north led by **Annie Kenney** and **Adela Pankhurst**. In June 1908 600 local women went to London for the WSPU demonstration in Hyde Park. Bradford women carried a banner designed by **Sylvia Pankhurst** to include Bradford's coat of arms. From September 1908 Bradford council forbade suffragettes to continue chalking the pavements, so WSPU members came in to these premises to get blackboards which they set up in the streets— inventing a form of mobile graffiti.

### Bradford Girls' Grammar School

Around the back of Manningham Lane/Eldon Terrace is Hallfield Road.

In 1875, a new Bradford Girls' Grammar School, founded by the Bradford Ladies' Association, was established here. It opened in September in cramped accommodation at Hallfield Road School, attached to Busbys Department Store (formerly on Manningham Lane). The local newspaper envisaged the new school as producing girls 'fit to be intelligent companions for intelligent men'. The school moved to new buildings in 1936.

The Labour MP **Barbara Castle** (1910-2002) attended Bradford Girls' Grammar School, eventually becoming Head Girl. In her final year she organised a mock election to coincide with the 1929 election, with herself standing as the labour candidate.

Barbara Castle credited her years in Bradford, the 'cradle of socialism' and location for the founding conference of the Independent Labour Party in 1893, as the formative years of her life. Barbara was elected MP for Blackburn in 1945, retained her seat for thirty four years, and became a cabinet minister in Harold Wilson's government. As Minister for Transport she promoted legislation on equal pay and as Secretary of State for Social Services she introduced the payment of child benefit to mothers. When she died, aged ninety-one, she left her papers and political diaries to the University of Bradford.

## Need to Know

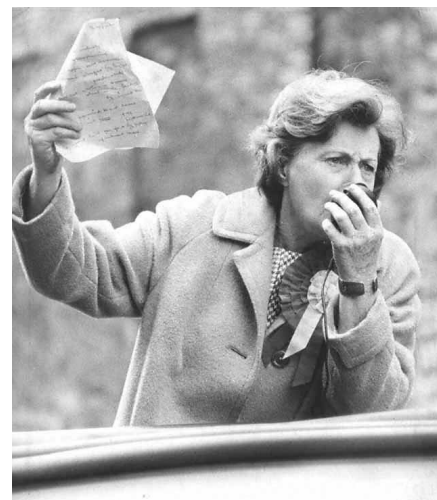


Dr **Jo Stanley**, FRHistS, is a writer and creative historian. You can find out more about her at

[www.jostanley.biz](http://www.jostanley.biz). She is Honorary Research Fellow at Lancaster University and her books about gender and the sea include *Hello Sailor! The hidden history of gay life at sea*, with Paul Baker (2002) and *Bold in her Breeches: Women Pirates Across the Ages* (Ed, 1995, 1996, 2003).

Currently Jo is writing *Risk! Women on the wartime seas*, to be published by Yale University Press. With a side-career in lifestory exploration, Jo also wrote *Writing out your life: a guide to writing creative autobiography* (Scarlet Press, 1998).

This walk has benefited from the help of Carol Greenwood and Helen Broadhead, the late Maureen Galvin, Deb Collet and Julie Pryke.



Barbara Castle campaigning in the sixties. Image courtesy of Blackburn Labour Party