

Julia Scurr (1871-1927)

Julia was born in Limehouse in 1871, to John O'Sullivan, an immigrant from Cork, Ireland, and Martha Rapp, (sister of William, our ancestor), born in London. She married John Scurr in 1900, and they made a formidable partnership.

First active in the Irish movement, she became particularly concerned with women's rights and the improvement of their conditions.

In 1905 Julia organised a deputation on unemployment of 1,000 women from Poplar to meet the Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour. In 1907 she was elected to the Poplar Board of Guardians, became well known in this capacity, and served as a Guardian until her death.

Julia and her husband John were good friends of George Lansbury (Labour Politician, Mayor of Poplar and Leader of the Opposition in Parliament 1931-35), and Julia was renowned for having organised the feeding of 7,000 dockers' children throughout the 1912 dock strike. She also worked to improve the rights of the Irish community in the East End of London.

In June 1912, Julia, as one of the Poplar Board of Guardians, presented a report criticising the lack of Day Rooms and recreational space at The Bow Infirmary. She stated that the residents stood around in unheated corridors and appeared depressed and unhappy. One man was refused discharge because he had no clothes. Julia reminded the governors that it was an infirmary, not a place of detention. Her male colleagues dismissed the report as being exaggerated.

Julia was a friend and colleague of Sylvia Pankhurst and an active member of the East London Federation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU, better known as the Suffragettes), which was founded by Sylvia in 1913, and differed from its parent organisation in being democratic and including men, such as George Lansbury.

By this point, Sylvia had many disagreements with the line the WSPU was taking. She wanted an explicitly socialist organisation tackling wider issues than women's suffrage, aligned with the Independent Labour Party, based among working class people in the East End of London. She also wanted to focus on collective workers' action, not individual attacks on property.

These and other differences, including personal ones, led to Sylvia's expulsion, along with the East London Federation, from the WSPU. In early 1914, they renamed themselves the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) and launched a newspaper, the Women's Dreadnought.

In June 1914, Julia led a deputation of East End women to see Prime Minister Asquith, over low wages paid to women. This crucial meeting was considered a turning point in the suffragette battle for votes for women. She asked him to consider the position of married women: "Any rise in the price of rents, foods and other household commodities affects us women vitally, and we need not point out that these are intimately bound up with the question of free trade versus protection, which bulks so largely in the political programme of today".

"The position of working-class women is one that we all feel deeply. Our husbands die on the average at a much earlier age than do the men of other classes. Modern industrialism kills them off rapidly both by accident and by overwork.... we are left often with a family of young children to support... The Poor Law has treated us mercilessly. It is hated by every poor woman. In many cases outdoor relief is altogether denied to the widow, as it is to the deserted wife, and only the Workhouse is offered, which means separation from the children. Where out-relief is given it is surrounded by the most humiliating conditions, which cause us, as self-respecting women, very great indignity and distress."



Julia addressing a crowd of protestors

Campaign and date unknown



Herbert Henry Asquith
Prime Minister 1909 - 1916

"We women of east London are much concerned with regard to social conditions in our district. There is very great poverty around us and rents are high. There is much unemployment amongst men and a very large proportion of the wives are the principal breadwinner, though they are both the childbearers and keepers of the home." Women in the home were as much wage earners as those in the factory, and they gave a child-bearing service to the state. "They have the greatest of all reasons to desire (the state's) security and welfare. In our opinion our country, especially in districts like east London, is in many ways grossly unfit to receive the children that we bring into the world. We feel that we have a right to help in improving the conditions under which we and our children live."



Julia Scurr

"The demand which we have come to make to you today is one that we believe has not hitherto been made by any women's suffrage deputation... It is the form of the franchise which you have declared your intention of establishing for men in the near future. It is the one for which your party is said to stand — a vote for every woman over 21."

She claimed that they had mass support behind them. Organised labour throughout the country had for long been making this demand. Where popular unrest existed, she said, all great statesmen knew that the remedy was to remove the cause. If Asquith himself had fixed objections to votes for women she asked him to act in the tradition of Wellington who brought in Catholic Emancipation (1829) against his own personal convictions when the good of the country demanded it, as did Robert Peel when he repealed the corn laws (1846).

She ended with an appeal for the "political prisoners".

At first, the group campaigned for universal suffrage and agitated parliamentarians, with the assistance of Keir Hardie. But with the outbreak of World War I, they began also to attack participation in the war. This view initially lost the group support, but they began work to alleviate suffering in the East End.

The ELFS got a chain of cost price restaurants set up, and itself set up a toy factory, free clinic and Montessori nursery. They also agitated for widow's pensions and dependant's allowances.

As public opinion turned against the war, the group gained new support, and its newspaper increased its circulation. To reflect its now broader political positions, in March 1916 it renamed itself the Workers' Suffrage Federation (WSF). Similarly, the newspaper was renamed the Workers' Dreadnought.

The WSF supported the 1916 Irish Rising and became a leading proponent of improved social welfare while continuing agitation for a universal franchise. As such, it opposed the Franchise Bill, which ultimately gave women in Britain the vote in general elections, as the restrictions on women voting were much stricter than those on men. The Representation of the People Act, which became law in February 1918, gave women over the age of 30 the entitlement to vote, as long as they met one of the following criteria: being a householder; being the wife of a householder; being the occupier of property with an annual rent of £5; being a graduate of a British University, or similarly qualified but not a graduate. Women were also eligible to stand as MPs, although none of the Suffragettes, in their first election, were successful.

Julia was a Poplar Councillor from 1919-1925 and was imprisoned as a result of her involvement in the Rates Strike in 1921.

All Borough Councils were charged precepts to pay for cross-capital authorities - the London County Council; Metropolitan Police Authority; Metropolitan Asylum Board and the Water Board. Precepts were not based on the Borough's ability to pay; in effect Poplar was paying towards the costs of rich boroughs for certain common services, but not receiving similar pooling to help poor relief.



Rates Strike Supporters

Poplar in 1921 had a rateable value of £4m and 86,500 unemployed to support. By contrast West London could call on a rateable value of £15m to support only 4,800 jobless. As the recession bit ever harder, Poplar's burden grew weightier. Its weekly 'outdoor relief' (dole) bill rose from £4,500 in June 1921 to £7,630 three months later.

George Lansbury proposed that the Council stop collecting the rates for outside, cross-London bodies. This was agreed, and on 31 March 1921, Poplar Council set a rate of 4s4d instead of 6s10d. In response the Government on 7 July 1921 obtained an instruction by the Court to the Council to carry out its legal duties and collect the money. The Council refused to comply and reaffirmed its action by setting the next quarter's rate at 5s3d. The London County Council and the Metropolitan Asylum Board applied to the Court for the Councillors to be declared in contempt of the order. Writs were served on 31 Councillors by the LCC, and on 29 by the MAB.

On 29 July, the Councillors were summoned to Court. They met outside Poplar Town Hall and marched to the Court with 2000 of their supporters. In court impassioned pleadings were made explaining why it was impossible to pay the precepts. The Court granted an absolute rule of attachment meaning that the Poplar Councillors had to pay the rates or go to prison.

On 2 August, Sir Alfred Mond, Minister of Health, announced a change to the Metropolitan Poor Fund in favour of poorer boroughs. It was widely accepted that Poplar's action had won this concession and Mond hoped that the Council would now back down. Two days later, Poplar Council reaffirmed its strategy, and set a rate (in advance) for the next quarter of 4s3d.

On Sunday 28 August, a demonstration in Tower Hill brought 4,000 people from Poplar together with contingents from neighbouring areas Stepney, Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. The banner at the front of the march declared that 'Poplar Borough Councillors are still determined to go to prison to secure equalisation of rates for the poor Boroughs'. George Lansbury appealed to protesters to step up the action with a rent strike should the Councillors go to jail. 31 August saw the last Council meeting before prison. 6,000 people attended a mass meeting outside Poplar Town Hall. Arrests began the next day. Five women Councillors, including Julia, were sent to Holloway prison; twenty five men to Brixton.

Prison conditions were appalling, but outraged protests soon yielded improvements, and on 11th September the Councillors were given permission to meet in prison. They did so a total of 32 times, with, from 27 September, the women Councillors brought from Holloway to Brixton to join the meetings. They discussed prison conditions, Borough business and winning their release. Demonstrations were held outside the two prisons on most evenings. On 21 September, public pressure led the Government to release Nellie Cressall, who was six months pregnant.

Whilst the Councillors were in prison, the Trades Union Congress passed a resolution saluting their action. The National Union of General Workers also agreed a resolution of support which was delivered by their representative J R Clynes to the Councillors in jail, together with a £25 donation to the hardship fund for the Councillors' families.

Rather than acting as a deterrent to other like minded councils, several Metropolitan Borough Councils announced their intention to follow Poplar's example.

Faced with Poplar's intransigence and big public support, the Government and the London County Council were desperate to find a way to back down and arrange the Councillors' release. They found a way. They called a conference to discuss the issue, and allowed the court to release the prisoners to attend it. On 12 October, the Councillors were set free.



Julia (nearest Policeman) and her fellow female Councillors on their way to Holloway Prison

The Councillors' release was celebrated enthusiastically in Poplar. A women's meeting at the Town Hall on 12 October, originally called to campaign for the prisoners' release, went ahead with the (unexpected) attendance of some of the freed Councillors.

Julia was Poor Law Guardian from 1907 to 1927, a member of Poplar and Stepney Sick Asylum (later St Andrew's Hospital), and in 1925, was elected a member of the London County Council for Mile End.

There are several mentions of Julia in Sylvia Pankhurst's writings, and according to her, Julia was admitted to Bromley Infirmary in the last years of her life as she was deteriorating mentally. She died in 1927, at the age of 57, six years after her imprisonment. George Lansbury wrote that he had no doubt that the period of imprisonment, and the treatment she received, was directly responsible for her early death.

John Scurr, MP for Mile End 1923-32, had obviously fallen on hard times towards the end of his life because Father Bernard Whelan of Westminster Cathedral appealed for donations towards his medical costs in The Times newspaper shortly before his death. John died in July 1932 after a long illness, according to his obituary in The Times.



Julia and John Scurr