

MARCHMONT

ASSOCIATION

Background information pertaining to the Marchmont Association's proposed plaque commemorating the residence of Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst at 8 Russell Square in 1888-93 (Adapted from an article in *From Fields to Fountains – The Story of Bloomsbury's Russell Square* by Ricci de Freitas, 2016).

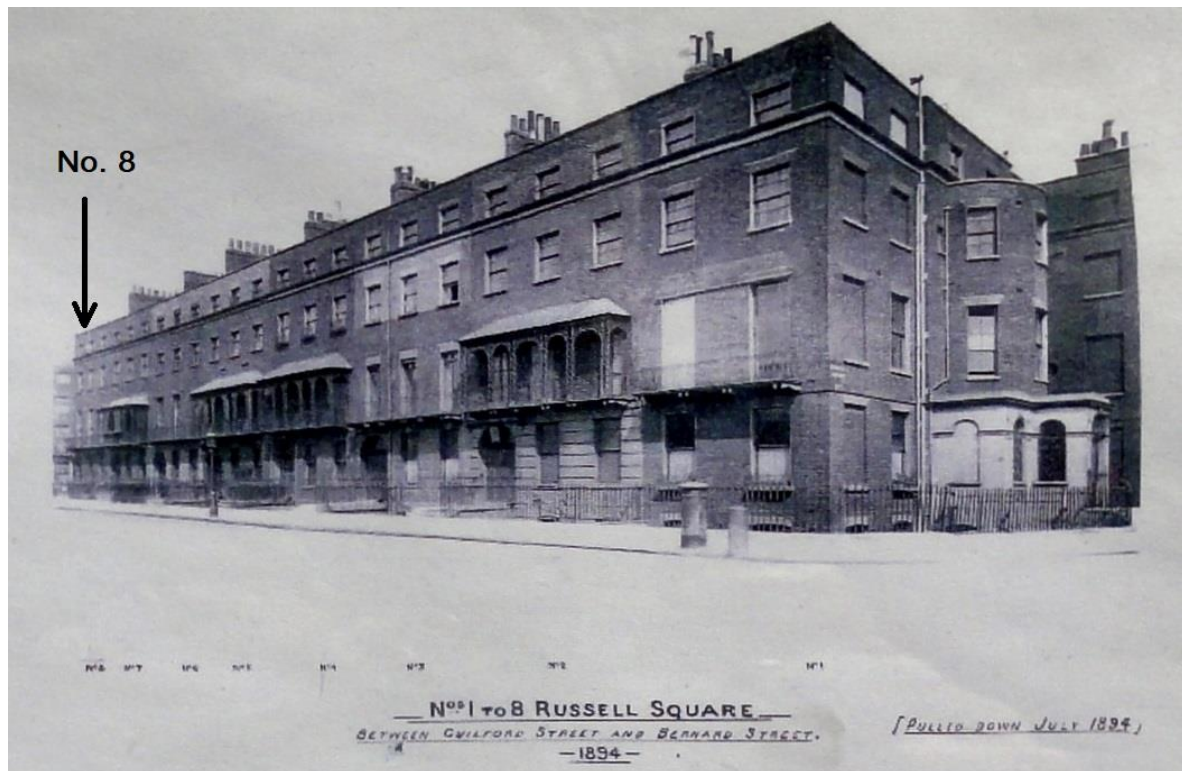
More than any other name, Pankhurst is associated with the struggle for women's right to vote. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), the leading militant organisation campaigning for Women's suffrage in the United Kingdom, was founded at the Pankhurst family home in Manchester on 10 October 1903 by six women, including Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel, who soon emerged as the group's leaders. Sylvia and Adela, Christabel's sisters, were also committed members of the women-only group initially, but this later gave way to family rifts and discord.

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), feminist campaigner and founder of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903, moved to No. 8 in 1888 with her husband Richard Pankhurst (1835/6-1898), barrister, and three of their five surviving children, who went on to be feminist campaigners: **Christabel Pankhurst** (1880-1958), **Sylvia Pankhurst** (1882-1960) and **Adela Constantia Mary Pankhurst Walsh** (1885–1961). The Pankhurst family moved to middle-class Russell Square shortly after the death of their four-year-old son, Francis, from diphtheria, which Emmeline attributed to the poor conditions of the neighbourhood they had left. Richard was also hoping the move would help him pursue a parliamentary career.



Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst

The terrace of which No. 8 was part was originally named Southampton Terrace, and retained the same numbers when Russell Square was developed by James Burton for the Duke of Bedford in 1800. No. 8 is listed in the name of "*Richard Marsden Pankhurst*" in the historical street directories for 1890-93. The house was registered in the name of Frederick Pilkington until 1889. It is likely the family were occupying part of the house to begin with and acquired the entire house after the birth at No. 8 of their last child, Harry Francis, 1889 (*ODNB*). They remained at No. 8 until 1893, with a certain Harry Markham Caldwell listed there in 1894. The terrace (pictured below) was demolished in July 1894 to make way for what would eventually become the Hotel Russell.



Emmeline Pankhurst. In 1889, by now living in Russell Square, Emmeline helped in forming the radical Women's Franchise League. In addition to women's suffrage it supported equal rights for women in the areas of divorce and inheritance. It also advocated trade unionism and sought alliances with socialist organisations. Although the league was discontinued after a few years, Emmeline remained a liberal until 1892 when she joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP). When her husband died in 1898, Emmeline was left with a significant amount of debt, but in 1903 her interest in women's suffrage was reawakened by the enthusiasm of her daughter, Christabel. She founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, five years after her husband died. It was set up as an all-women, suffrage advocacy organization dedicated to "*deeds, not words.*" The group became known for physical confrontations after its members smashed windows and assaulted police officers. Pankhurst, her daughters, and other WSPU activists were sentenced to repeated prison sentences, where they staged hunger strikes to secure better conditions. As Emmeline's eldest daughter, Christabel, took over leadership of the WSPU, antagonism grew between the group and the Government. Eventually the group adopted arson as a tactic, and more moderate organisations spoke out against the Pankhurst family. In 1913 several prominent individuals left the WSPU, among them Pankhurst's daughters Adela and

Sylvia. Emmeline was so furious that *she "...gave [Adela] a ticket, £20, and a letter of introduction to a suffragette in Australia, and firmly insisted that she emigrate,"* in which she complied. The family rift was never healed. Sylvia became a socialist. With the outbreak of the First World War Emmeline and Christabel called a halt to all WSPU militant suffrage activities and a truce with the government was established, with all WSPU prisoners being released. Emmeline put the same energy and determination she had previously applied to women's suffrage into patriotic advocacy of the war effort. She organised rallies, toured constantly delivering speeches, and lobbied the government to help women enter the work force while men were overseas fighting, even organising a parade of 30,000 women to encourage employers to take them on in industry. In 1999, *Time* magazine listed Emmeline as one of the 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century, stating: *"...she shaped an idea of women for our time; she shook society into a new pattern from which there could be no going back."* Although her work is recognised as a crucial element in achieving women's suffrage in Britain, she was widely criticised for her militant tactics, with some historians disputing their effectiveness. She died on 14th June 1928, only weeks before the Conservative government's *Representation of the People Act (1928)* extended the vote to all women over 21 years of age on 2nd July 1928.



Left: Emmeline Pankhurst being arrested outside Buckingham Palace – © National Portrait Gallery, London. Right: Sylvia and Emmeline Pankhurst campaigning for Votes for Women

Emmeline made their Russell Square home into a centre for grieving sisters, attracting activists of many types, including US abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Indian MP Dadabhai Naoroji, socialist activists Herbert Burrows and Annie Besant, and French anarchist Louise Michel. She took pleasure in decorating the house – especially with furnishings from Asia – and clothing the family in tasteful apparel. Her daughter Sylvia later wrote: *"Beauty and appropriateness in her dress and household appointments seemed to her at all times an indispensable setting to public work."* Their art-furnished double drawing room provided a useful gathering place for conferences of the Women's Franchise League, a society aimed at winning the vote for women. The most lavish of these conferences, held over three days in December 1891, was illustrated in *The Graphic* and reproduced 40 years later in *Our Mothers* (ed. Alan Bott & Irene Clephane), a book owned by Virginia Woolf and consulted by her when writing *Three Guineas*.



The Graphic 12.12.1891 - meeting in the Drawing Room of 8 Russell Square

Christabel Pankhurst was regarded as Emmeline's favourite child and worked tirelessly in support of her mother for nearly 15 years. Sylvia noted in 1931: *"She was our mother's favourite; we all knew it, and I, for one, never resented the fact."* She obtained a law degree from the University of Manchester, but as a woman was unable to practise as a lawyer. However, she applied her legal knowledge in speeches and pamphlets to highlight women's inequality and organised large-scale processions and demonstrations in favour of 'Votes for Women', attracting thousands of supporters to the cause. As co-founder of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), she directed its militant actions from exile in France from 1912 to 1913. In 1914 she supported the war against Germany, after which she moved to the United States, where she worked as an evangelist for the Second Adventist movement. Christabel was perceived by her comrade Emmeline Pethwick-Lawrence as embodying an entirely new kind of womanhood: *"Christabel cared less for the political vote itself than for the dignity of her sex...to her the means were even more important than the end. Militancy to her meant the putting off of the slave spirit."* Christabel died on 13th February 1958, at the age of 77, sitting in a straight-backed chair. Her housekeeper found her body and there was no indication of her cause of death.



Christabel Pankhurst – © National Portrait Gallery, London

By 1914 **Sylvia Pankhurst**, the second eldest daughter of Emmeline and Richard Pankhurst, began working full-time for the WSPU in 1906, eventually becoming honorary secretary. In the years before the outbreak of war, Sylvia was one of the chief figures among the militant suffragettes and was imprisoned numerous times, but ended up following a different trajectory which eventually caused a deep rift with her mother and Christabel. Moved by the plight of the poverty-stricken women she encountered in Bow when she moved there in 1912 to lead the WSPU's East London campaign, she came to see the struggle for women to have the vote as just one strand in a larger struggle for equality. When she began to connect women's suffrage to other issues, the WSPU refused to tolerate it. While the WSPU had become independent of any political party, she wanted an explicitly socialist organisation tackling wider issues than women's suffrage, aligned with the Independent Labour Party. She had a close personal relationship with anti-war Labour politician Keir Hardie. In 1914, she broke with the WSPU to set up the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) which, over the years evolved politically and changed its name accordingly, first to the Women's Suffrage Federation and then to the Workers' Socialist Federation. She founded the newspaper of the WSF, *Women's Dreadnought*, which subsequently became the *Workers' Dreadnought*. It organized against the war, and some of its members hid conscientious objectors from the police. The WSF continued to move leftwards and hosted the inaugural meeting of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). In the early 1930s, Sylvia drifted away from communist politics, but remained involved in movements connected with anti-fascism and anti-colonialism. After the post-war liberation of Ethiopia, she became a strong supporter of union between Ethiopia and the former Italian Somaliland, and MI5's file continued to follow her activities. In 1948, MI5 considered strategies for "*muzzling the tiresome Miss Sylvia Pankhurst*". Pankhurst became a friend and adviser to the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and followed a consistently anti-British stance. She moved to Addis Ababa at Haile Selassie's invitation in 1956 with her son, Richard, and founded a monthly journal, *New Times and Ethiopia News*, which reported on many aspects of Ethiopian life and development. She died in Addis Ababa in 1960, aged 78, and received a full state funeral at which Haile Selassie named her "*an honorary Ethiopian*".



Sylvia Pankhurst – © National Portrait Gallery, London

Adela Constantia Mary Pankhurst Walsh (1885–1961), the youngest of the Pankhursts' daughters, was a suffragette and pacifist. At eighteen, Adela became the youngest of the early members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) formed by her mother in October 1903, and her enthusiastic campaigning led to arrests and prison terms. Adela has received little attention in British suffragist history, although she had a colourful career in Australia where she fully demonstrated the radical tendencies and organisational acumen she had inherited from her mother. Having settled in Australia in 1920 she founded the Australian Communist Party with her husband, trade unionist Tom Walsh. Later, however, she became disillusioned with communism and abandoned left-wing politics altogether – even expressing some sympathy for the fascist movements in Nazi Germany and Italy. She founded the Women's Guild of Empire, a Christian organisation against Communism and in favour of preserving Australia's place in the British Empire. Continuing to drift more to the political right, on the outbreak of the Second World War she was asked to resign from the Women's Guild. The following month she caused a stir when she and her husband went on a goodwill mission to Japan and in March 1942 she was interned for her pro-Japanese views. She was released after more than a year in custody, just before her husband's death in April 1943. After the war Adela did not play an active role in politics. She died in Australia in 1961.



Adela Constantia Mary Pankhurst Walsh c.1908

Although there were divergent views within the women's movement regarding the validity of the use of violence and civil disobedience, of which Emmeline Pankhurst was a keen advocate, it was the autocratic proclamation by Emmeline Pankhurst at a conference in September 1907 that eventually caused the movement to split and heralded the formation of the Women's Freedom League, which had its home at the Minerva Club, 28a Brunswick Square from 1907 to 1961. *"We never went to prison in order to be martyrs. We went there in order that we might obtain the right of citizenship. We were willing to break laws that we might force men to give us the right to make laws"* - Emmeline Pankhurst.

Sources:

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