

THE CHICHESTER MARTYR

by Nichola Court

[Editor's note This biographical sketch of Madge Turner, campaigner for women's suffrage, is based on a talk, 'West Sussex Women A Centenary of Suffrage', given by the author at West Sussex Record Office on 27 November 2018]

In February 1909, Madge Turner, the daughter of a well-known local merchant, caused 'a mild sensation' in Chichester when news of her arrest and subsequent imprisonment for her involvement in suffragette activities in London reached her home town. The *Chichester Observer*, which dubbed her 'The Chichester Martyr', carried numerous reports and comments on her 'crimes', and covered her 'triumphant return to Chichester' in some detail, as Chichester's first – and seemingly only – militant suffragette, Madge earned a degree of notoriety in the city and its environs, although this would prove to be short lived.¹

Born on 24 July 1884, Ethel Margaret 'Madge' Turner was the eldest surviving child of Edwin Turner and Minnie Light, who were married at St Pancras on 29 May 1882.² Both Edwin and Minnie were the children of successful retailers, and Edwin eventually went on to run his parents' grocery and provision business, Turner & Son, at 26/27 South Street, it was here that Madge and her siblings spent much of their childhood, with the exception of a few years at 6 Cawley Road.³

Little is known of Madge's early years, although the death of her mother in 1901, when Madge was aged 17, left her to assume many of the caring responsibilities for her four younger siblings – Dorothy (b 1886), Winifred (b 1887), Elsie Noel (b 1889) and Arthur Morris (b 1893) – and busy father. Madge was a skilled artist and was enrolled at Chichester's School of Art, where she studied alongside Eric and Macdonald Gill.⁴ A detailed report of an exhibition held in September 1900, to mark the opening of the School of Art's new technical premises in North Street, highlights Madge's sgraffito and design skills, and notes that she has been awarded a certificate for drawing.⁵

It is not clear when Madge first became involved with radical or even Liberal politics, but a short report in the *Observer* on 'the awakening of Liberalism in Chichester' in June 1905 notes that a recent Liberal meeting has resulted in 'the organisation of ladies to assist the cause'.⁶ Madge is listed as having been elected Assistant Honorary Treasurer, with a Miss Turner elected Honorary Treasurer, a Miss Light elected President, and another Miss Light elected to the Committee. It seems very likely, therefore, that Madge came from a Liberal family. As well as being a Liberal, Madge was a passionate and early supporter of women's suffrage, at a meeting in Fishbourne in January 1906, Madge – 'the lively young

Liberal orator of Chichester' – told the audience, 'only a woman knows how nice it is to be a man'.⁷ At least one of Madge's sisters – Winifred – was a fellow suffragist, and there is evidence their father was also in favour of women's suffrage.⁸

At the beginning of June 1908, the Women's Freedom League (WFL)'s suffrage caravan pitched up in Chichester, as part of a tour of the south-east. Founded in 1907 following a split in the Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union, the WFL supported non-violent forms of protest, directed at government and parliament, advocating measures such as non-payment of taxes.

Its south-eastern caravan tour was one of several which took place that summer, with the aim of taking the WFL's campaign and campaigners directly to the country's smaller and more remote towns and villages. Passing briefly through Surrey and Hampshire before reaching West Sussex, and then moving on through East Sussex before ending in Kent, the WFL's south-eastern tour brought with it the charismatic and confident Muriel Matters, an Australian actress who was one of the WFL's earliest, most ardent and most vocal members.

The WFL's caravan campaigners often met with a hostile audience or 'rowdy element', armed with an array of missiles (mouldy vegetables, mud), vermin, bells and shouts, all designed to put the speakers off. Chichester was no exception, and a police escort was required in order to return Muriel safely to her caravan, lodged in Mr Grainger's stable yard near St Pancras church, following her first attempt at public speaking in our 'unprogressive little town',⁹ after several hundred people gathered to hear her speech in Eastgate Square.¹⁰

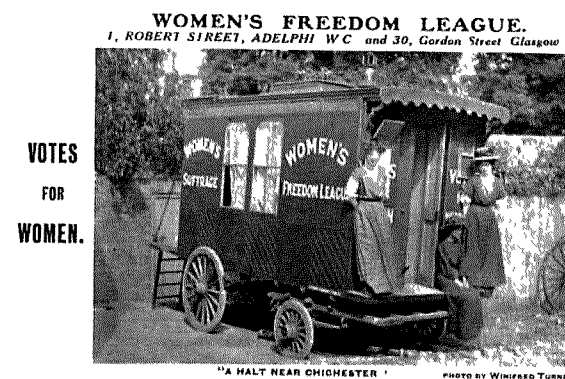


Fig 1 WFL promotional post-card, 'A halt near Chichester' Probably taken in Mr Grainger's stable yard, near St Pancras church, with the East Walls in the background. The photograph was taken by Madge's sister, Winifred, whose occupation in the 1911 census was listed as Photographer's Assistant. Muriel is standing on the left, the seated woman is possibly Lilian Hicks – who accompanied Madge for part of her tour – and the young woman standing on the right is probably Madge herself.

(Photograph reproduced by permission from the London School of Economics, reference Women's Library TWL 2002 327)

According to newspaper reports, Muriel was supported throughout her stay in Chichester by Madge, and it is likely that Muriel's visit was nothing short of inspirational to her, certainly, it seems to have galvanised her into action. At the end of the month, a conference of the Home Counties Women Liberals Association was held at the Assembly Rooms in Chichester, organised locally by Madge and a Miss Light.

Responding to the vote of thanks for the 'kind hospitality' shown by Chichester's 'nice little association' in hosting that conference, Madge commented

It [is] very difficult being a woman Liberal in a place like Chichester, but those of [us] who were, could go on, cheered and encouraged by those who had come from many parts of Sussex to show their interest in them'.¹¹

By July 1908, Madge was paying by subscription for the *Women's Franchise* newspaper – which contained round-ups from many suffrage societies – to be sent to the (South West Sussex) Liberal Association's Reading Room in Chichester,¹² and in that same month, a West Sussex branch of the WFL was formed, with its headquarters at Midhurst.

It was not until 1909, however, that Madge would be arrested for the cause, earning her moniker of 'The Chichester Martyr'. On 18 February, having been elected the West Sussex branch's delegate, Madge was one of 50-60 women who attempted to bear a resolution, passed at public meetings held by various branches of the WFL, to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith. Marching from Caxton House to Downing Street, where they hoped to besiege him, Madge – bearing the West Sussex banner – instead found herself arrested, along with 24 other women. The following day, she was charged and found guilty of obstructing the police in the execution of their duty, since she refused either to be bound over for her misdemeanours or to pay a fine of £2, Madge was sentenced to 14 days imprisonment at Holloway, in the second division.¹³

Madge's return home was marked by two public meetings: the first at Midhurst, from whence she had embarked on her 'eventful mission', and the second at St Martin's Hall in Chichester. The two meetings were markedly different in character. At Midhurst, her 'admirers covered her in glory and dragged her through the streets in a gaily decorated carriage, amid dancing torches and to the lively strains of music', in a procession headed by Anne Cobden-Sanderson (daughter of the Liberal politician Richard Cobden), whilst the 'less sympathetic section emphasised their disapproval by the free use of rotten vegetables, elderly eggs, and noisy jeers and cat-calls'.

A public meeting was subsequently held at Midhurst's Assembly Rooms – where 'the door was practically rushed and all efforts to eliminate the rowdy

element were fruitless'. The police and stewards' efforts to 'maintain order' were 'unavailing and uproar prevailed throughout the meeting', it was almost impossible to follow the speeches over the 'jeering, booing, cat-calls', 'monotonous noise of a tin trumpet' and 'a cornet and mouth organ [which] added to the general din'.

The crowd calmed somewhat once Madge began to speak of her 'stories of prison life' and the beliefs which led her there, but the uproar began again once Mrs Cobden-Sanderson took the stage and presented Madge with her prison badge. Those gathered on the platform did well to avoid the rotten oranges and vegetables which were hurled at them, but the other planned speeches were abandoned and the ladies left the Assembly Rooms to a torrent of 'jeers and insults'.¹⁴

The meeting at Chichester was decidedly more decorous. Around 30 people were present and the speeches passed without interruption, Madge was able to give a detailed account of the build-up to her arrest and her time in Holloway to an *Observer* representative.¹⁵ She describes surrendering her clothes and possessions, her prison garb, the monotony and 'long, lonely hours' of the day, which afforded her plenty of time to think, and, as she said at the meeting at Midhurst, 'the more I thought, the more determined was I to go on with this movement'.¹⁶

And go on, she did. After her imprisonment in 1909, Madge became a more frequent speaker for the WFL, presiding over meetings in Chichester, as well as speaking at open-air meetings at Bosham and Horsham, for example.

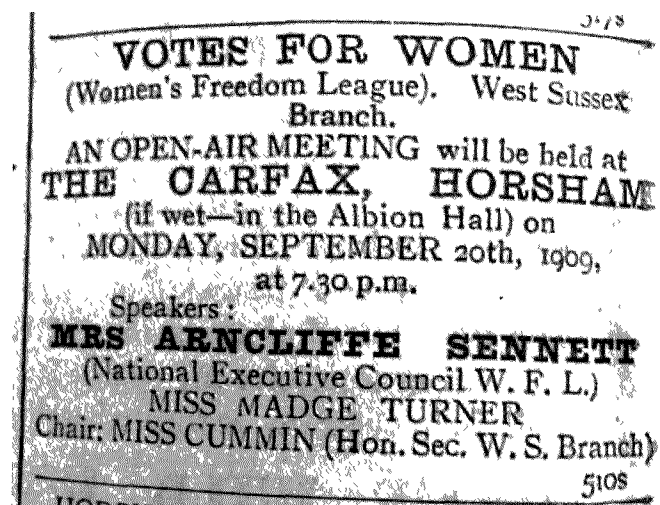


Fig 2. Advert for a 'Votes for Women' (WFL) meeting at the Carfax, Horsham, on 20 September 1909, with Madge Turner listed as a speaker. *West Sussex County Times*, 18 September 1909 (Author's collection)

Within a year of her arrest, however, Madge seems to have left conservative Chichester behind, in order to concentrate her energies elsewhere. In February and March 1910, the WFL's 'organ', *The Vote*, carries reports of meetings in Stroud, Gloucestershire, written by Madge, and by April 1910 *The Vote* records that Madge is due to be in Edinburgh for the month, where she was to help establish a branch shop, speak at meetings and raise awareness of (and funds for) the WFL. On 7 May 1910, Madge is listed in *The Vote* as the WFL's 'organiser' for Edinburgh, a paid position.

Madge would go on to spend the entire summer of 1910 working for the WFL in Scotland, but by November of that year she was reportedly working as an organiser in the London region. That same month, on the 18th, Madge was arrested for a second time, probably one of the 115 women (and four men) arrested as part of the notorious Black Friday demonstration. Many of the 300 people who marched on the Houses of Parliament that day complained of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the gathered and waiting police and crowd, and the charges against all those who were arrested were eventually dropped as it was felt that prosecution would serve no public interest.

By 1911, it seems that Madge had left Chichester well and truly behind her. After a year spent working for the WFL around the country, the census records her living at 65 Gloucester Crescent, Regent's Park, with Lily Scott (aged 20, a coffee bar waitress from Richmond) and Alison Neilans. A bookkeeper by training, Alison was a prominent suffragette and eventually served on the WFL's National Executive Council. She was imprisoned in Holloway on three occasions, serving three months for her part in the 'Bermondsey Outrage' in October 1909, during which time she was force fed by stomach tube after going on hunger strike.¹⁷ It is not clear when Madge and Alison met, but the two women would become lifelong colleagues and companions, thrown together by their work for the WFL, where 'their comradeship laid the foundation of their deep and lasting friendship'.¹⁸

In 1915, Alison was appointed Assistant Secretary of the newly-formed Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, a gender equality pressure group whose aims included securing the abolition of state regulated prostitution and 'opposing any laws which were aimed at or may be applied to some particular section of the community'.¹⁹

In 1917, Alison became Secretary and, in 1919, Madge was appointed Assistant Secretary and Librarian, she was also responsible for the Association's documents and was initially joint, then sole, editor of its journal, *The Shield*. The pair would retain their roles until ill health forced Alison to leave the Association in 1941, at which point Madge took on the role of Secretary.

For two years, Madge worked tirelessly for the Association and nursed Alison with 'whole hearted devotion',²⁰ whilst a gradual paralysis slowly took

over her body, at their home in Asmunds Place in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where they had lived since at least 1918.²¹ Madge would retire in 1945 and spent three years happily tending her garden, both at Asmunds Place and the cottage in Kenardington, Kent, where she and Alison had spent many joyful weekends and holidays away from the hustle and bustle of city life,²² and it was here in Kenardington that Madge was buried, following her death in 1948.

Given how well-known her family was and her own flirtation with fame, it is perhaps surprising and certainly disappointing that Madge is hitherto unknown in the city of her birth. After leaving it behind for the good of the cause (and possibly herself), Madge returned briefly in December 1915 for the marriage of her sister, Elsie, at St Peter the Great church. This was a quiet occasion, performed in the company of a handful of relatives, due to the recent death of their popular and much-respected father, Edwin, in August, this loss was preceded by the death of their brother, Arthur, at Gallipoli, in March.²³

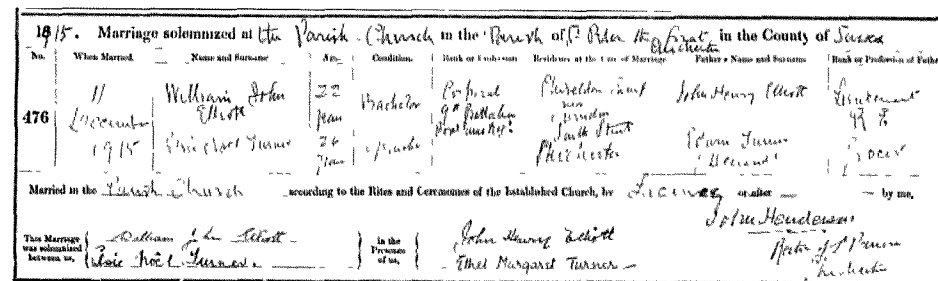


Fig 3 Entry from the marriage register for St Peter the Great, recording the marriage of Elsie Turner and William Elliott, 15 December 1915, signed by Madge (West Sussex Record Office, Par 44/1/3/3)

As the *de facto* head of the family, Madge gave her sister away and signed the marriage register as witness,²⁴ and it is fascinating to see her neat and careful handwriting, which appears to be the only remaining physical trace Chichester has of its 'Martyr'.²⁵ Although the Turner & Son business continued in South Street until around 1926, there seems to be no trace of the Turner family in the city today, and this perhaps explains why Madge has been forgotten, despite her political exploits and achievements.

It is hoped that this article will go some way to redress this and to bring Madge the recognition she deserves.

1 The *Chichester Observer* carries accounts of Madge's arrest, imprisonment, release and subsequent speeches in its editions of 24 February, 3 March, 10 March, 17 March and 7 April (1909)
 2 Edwin and Minnie's first child, Olive Mary, was born in 1883 and died in January 1885, Madge was the couple's second child

- 3 Minnie's father, William, was a hardwareman and stationer, his shop was in St Pancras, where the family also lived for some time On the 1881 census, Minnie is listed as Assistant to her father
- 4 As regular worshippers at St Peter the Great, where Arthur Gill was curate from 1897-99, the Turners would have known the Gill family The Turners were involved in parish affairs, with Edwin serving as churchwarden before being elected people's warden
- 5 *Chichester Observer*, 3 October 1900 Madge's artistic skills would later be put to good use for the Women's Freedom League, when she designed a daily-tear off calendar for 1912, in order to raise funds for the organisation Available in colour or black and white, it sold out in two weeks, although it is noted that a few hand-made ones, 'done in pen and ink and sketched in by Miss Turner', were available at the higher price of 1s *The Vote*, 1 and 16 November 1911
- 6 *Chichester Observer*, 7 June 1905
- 7 *Bognor Observer*, 17 January 1906
- 8 *Votes for Women* records a contribution of 2s 6d to the £20,000 fund, made by the Misses Madge and Winifred Turner, 17 September 1908 An advertisement for a 'Votes for Women' meeting at Chichester's Assembly Rooms, to be held on 3 July 1909, states 'Tickets and all information to be obtained from Mr E or Miss M Turner, 27, South Street' *Chichester Observer*, 23 June 1909
- 9 *Women's Franchise*, 8 April 1909
- 10 Reports of Muriel's visit to Chichester can be found in the *Portsmouth Evening News* (3 June 1908), *Chichester Observer* (3 and 10 June 1908) and *Women's Franchise* (11 June 1908)
- 11 *Bognor Observer*, 24 June 1908
- 12 *Women's Franchise*, 30 July 1908
- 13 Prisoners were separated into three divisions, depending on their crime (and class) The suffragettes argued that, as political prisoners, they should be held in the first division, which would have allowed them to have visitors, write letters, read books and to mix with other prisoners As second division prisoners, the suffragettes were kept in solitary confinement, were not allowed books or writing materials, and were only allowed visitors and to receive letters after serving one month
- 14 *Chichester Observer*, 17 March 1900
- 15 *Chichester Observer*, 7 April 1909
- 16 *Chichester Observer*, 17 March 1900
- 17 The 'Bermondsey Outrage' refers to the efforts of Alison Neilans and another suffragette, Alice Chapin, to disrupt the Bermondsey by-election of 28 October 1909, by pouring fluid into the ballot boxes at two polling stations
- 18 London School of Economics [LSE], Women's Library, 3AMS/A/07/23 TURNER (obituary)
- 19 From the administrative history of the archive of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (fonds level description) LSE, Women's Library, 3AMS
- 20 LSE, Women's Library, 3AMS/A/07/23 TURNER (obituary)
- 21 The 1918 electoral register for Hendon parish lists Madge and Alison as living at 25 Asmuns Place, in 1939, they are listed as living at 21 Asmuns Place In the probate calendars for 1942 and 1948 respectively, Alison and Madge are listed as having lived at 34 Asmuns Place
- 22 Madge loved nature and was a keen and successful gardener Following her retirement, she was asked to write a book on British wild flowers, but died before she could correct the proofs
- 23 *Chichester Observer*, 15 December 1915 Madge had also returned to Chichester for her father's funeral
- 24 WSRO Par 44/1/3/3
- 25 In 1924, following the death of her husband, William Elliott, Elsie and her daughter, Sheila (b 1921), moved to Asmuns Place, where they lived with Madge and Alison Following her sister's death in 1926, Madge raised her niece, who became 'like a child of her own' (LSE, Women's Library, 3AMS/A/07/23 TURNER (obituary)) Sheila would live with her aunt for the rest of Madge's life, and nursed Madge through her final illness