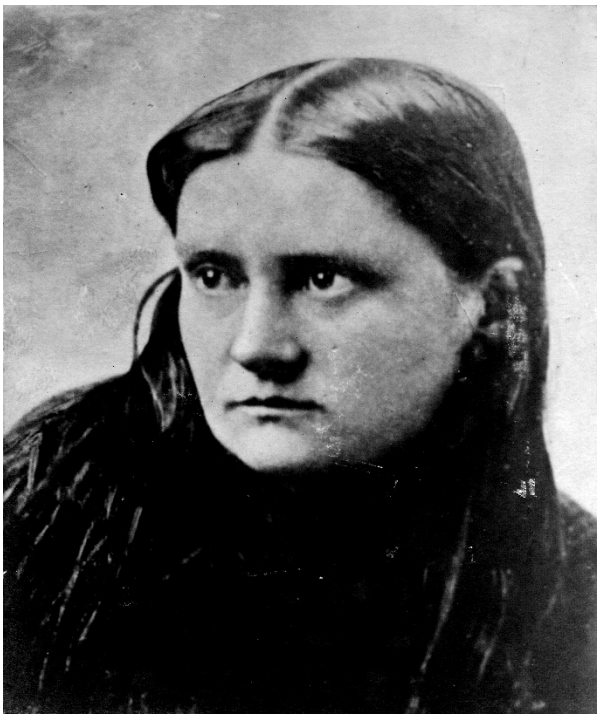
BARBARA LEIGH SMITH BODICHON AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

Introduction

Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827- 1891) was one of the leading campaigners in the nineteenth century for women's rights. She was one of the founders and benefactors of Girton College, Cambridge. Born in Whatlington, and of independent means, Barbara lived for many years in Robertsbridge where in 1863 she had a house built, Scalands Gate, now a private house- Scalands House. There, she entertained leading figures from the worlds of art, literature and social reform, who initialled, or painted on, the famous 'Aunt Barbara's Fireplace'. She was well known for her own paintings.

Her own illegitimacy was a significant influence in Barbara's life and attitudes. Her father was a wealthy radical MP, Benjamin Smith, and her mother was a working class milliner called Anne Longden. Her father supported Anne and their five children (Barbara was the oldest) at Petley Lodge in Whatlington, giving them his own family name and his mother's family surname, Leigh. After Anne's death (probably from tuberculosis) he moved the children to Pelham Crescent in Hastings where he brought them up , helped by his sister Julia Smith (an active feminist) and Anne's sister Dorothy Longden ("Aunt Dolly": Barbara shares her grave in Brightling) . So Barbara had an interesting mix of gentry and working class influences. Barbara was not ashamed of her illegitimacy, but it put her instinctively on the side of disadvantaged or marginalised people.

Barbara's life has been examined by several authors; this article looks at her work for women's rights in Battle in the period 1865-66, although it should be borne in mind that Barbara was an active suffragist right through to the 1880's.



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Campaigns for women's suffrage

During the second half of the nineteenth century, several organisations were involved in campaigns to secure votes for women. Among them were: the Tax Resistance League which was active in Hastings; the National Union of Women's Suffragette Societies which focussed on constitutional reform; and the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), whose founding, with the involvement of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, is commemorated in a plaque on one of the buildings at the London School of Economics. The most famous WSPU member was Emily Davison who was killed throwing herself under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913. Barbara was one of the founders of the Women's Suffrage Committee, where early suffragists organised their campaigns. She was a suffragist but not a "suffragette" , a term which post-dated her: it was coined as a term of abuse by the Daily Mail but having become so well known, the description had been adopted by women's campaigning organisations. It was the weight of reforms in women's representation (school boards, urban and rural district councils, counties and boroughs) subsequent to 1866, as well as the contribution of women to the First World War, which eventually secured the Representation of the People Act of 1918. This gave women aged over 30 the vote; it was another ten years before the Equal Franchise Act gave women aged 21 and over the vote, as for men. In addition to her efforts of 1866, Barbara played a major part in these women's rights developments; she would probably have considered the Married Women's Property Act of 1881, a signal achievement.

Barbara's role in the 1866 petition

Barbara Bodichon came to prominence in these campaigns when helping to organise the petition of just under 1500 signatures which in 1866 called for Parliament to enact limited suffrage for women. Correspondence about tactics is revealed in the letters[1] between Barbara Bodichon and Helen Taylor, stepdaughter of John Stuart Mill, MP who presented the petition to Parliament. He had adopted women's suffrage and their representation in Parliament, as a cause. The vote in Parliament was lost, but the creation of an active pressure group for women's votes, the Kensington Society, in which Barbara played a leading role, was an enduring achievement.

The text of the Petition, with 1499 signatures, included the following principles:

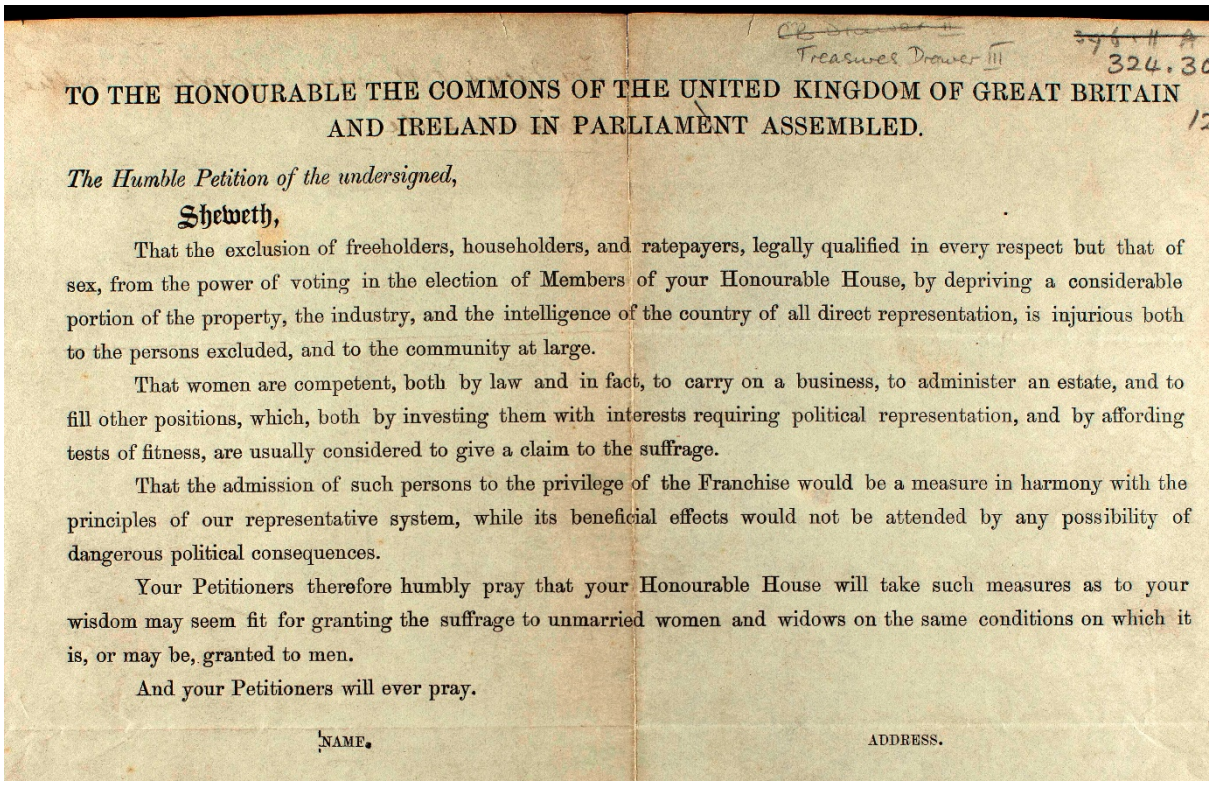
'..The exclusion of freeholders, householders and ratepayers, legally qualified in every respect but that of sex, from the power of voting…..(deprives) a considerable proportion of the property, the industry, and the intelligence of the country of all direct representation, (and) is injurious both to the persons excluded, and to the community at large.

Women are competent , both by law and in fact, to carry on a business, to administer an estate, and to fill other positions, which, by investing them with interests requiring political representation, are equally considered to give a claim to the suffrage.'

[1] We are indebted to Liz Chapman, formerly Director of Library Services at the LSE, for this research.

Barbara Bodichon and her colleagues set out these principles in a document which, outside the House of Commons, was handed to John Stuart Mill MP by Miss Garrett (later to become Mrs Elizabeth Garrett Anderson) and Miss Emily Davies as shown in the illustration which follows. It is from Millicent Garret Fawcett, in her early twentieth century article "History of a Great Movement" that we hear that Garrett and Davies, worried that the petition was so large, hid it under an apple stall until Mill appeared. From this source we believe that, in the picture, Mill is saying:" Ah, this I can brandish to great effect".

In the 1860's, petitions to Parliament were routinely destroyed after use, so there is no original remaining in this case. But, sensitive to the importance of publicity to their cause, Anderson and Davies had copies, complete with the names of the petitioners, printed soon afterwards. Pictured is one of these copies (photograph by Peter Greene):



TO THE HONOURABLE THE COMMONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED.

The Humble Petition of the undersigned,

Sheweth,

That the exclusion of freeholders, householders, and ratepayers, legally qualified in every respect but that of sex, from the power of voting in the election of Members of your Honourable House, by depriving a considerable portion of the property, the industry, and the intelligence of the country of all direct representation, is injurious both to the persons excluded, and to the community at large.

That women are competent, both by law and in fact, to carry on a business, to administer an estate, and to fill other positions, which, both by investing them with interests requiring political representation, and by affording tests of fitness, are usually considered to give a claim to the suffrage.

That the admission of such persons to the privilege of the Franchise would be a measure in harmony with the principles of our representative system, while its beneficial effects would not be attended by any possibility of dangerous political consequences.

Your Petitioners therefore humbly pray that your Honourable House will take such measures as to your wisdom may seem fit for granting the suffrage to unmarried women and widows on the same conditions on which it is, or may be, granted to men.

And your Petitioners will ever pray.

NAME. ADDRESS.

The idea was to amend the Reform Bill, extending the vote, which was already before Parliament, by substituting "person" for "man". Mill's amendment was lost by 196 votes to 73.

There were 17 women from Battle who signed the petition. Outside of the urban areas this was a notable number for Battle's size. Ann Dingsdale[2] argues that Barbara, with her interest in the lack of votes for female heads of household, sought out as signatories, those she knew and used for services: shopkeepers, trades people and local worthies. Barbara's large social network would also have helped. The Battle petitioners were as follows, with occupations as deduced from the census, where the individuals can be identified reliably:

Sarah Avery – possibly an Ashburnham sawyer's wife
Mary Ann Blackman - stationer
Ann Burgess- stationer/bookseller
Caroline Burgess – ironmonger/coal merchant
Ellen Burgess - draper
Leah Chettle - watchmaker
Mary Ann Dench – draper's assistant, shared a house with Blackman
Delphia and Elizabeth Edwards - housewives
Rebecca Fisher – draper's assistant
Julia Ronalds – independent means and carer
Mary Ann Russell – no reliable identification has been possible

[2] "Generous and Lofty Sympathies: the Kensington Society, the 1866 women's suffrage petition and the development of mid-Victorian feminism" 1995

Jane Slatter – independent means
Emily and Elizabeth Ticehurst – independent means
Caroline and Emily Waller – daughters of a saddler
Another signatory was the notable Bathsheba Pilbeam, who ran a pub in Hailsham.

Some of these women ran businesses in the High Street so their support would have been important. Notable among them was Leah Chettle, who ran the local watchmakers with husband Thomas - their shop sign is on display in the Battle Museum of Local History, but with Thomas' name on it of course! Battle women were also involved in subsequent petitions of 1869 and 1872 – doubtless tactics were plotted at Scalands but there is no evidence of public meetings in Battle.

Different tactics at Hastings

In contrast to Barbara's peaceful petitioning, some years later in the early 1900's, Hastings became more of a hotbed of protest: there were many marches and demonstrations for women's emancipation there, led by Muriel Matters, the women's movement's first paid organiser. In 1914 there was a protest in Hastings with the intention of withholding taxes if suffrage was not extended. The riots (as they were described at the time) disrupted theatre performances and church services. Muriel's public protests were nationwide and not confined to Hastings: famously she chained herself to the grill in the Ladies Gallery of the House of Commons, through which women were obliged to peer if they wished to view the proceedings. The grill had to be removed with her and she took the opportunity to speak in the House- the first woman to do so. This event was commemorated in subsequent suffragette events by marchers carrying a symbolic grill.

Other notable women of Battle

It is worth remembering that there were several notable women in Battle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who had nothing to do with the women's suffrage campaigns. Examples are: the Duchess of Cleveland, owner of Battle Abbey; Annie Brassey, prominent in the enormously wealthy railway production family; Mabelle Egerton (also of the Brasseys) and Margaret Ashton who served in extraordinary capacities in the First World War.

Adrian and Sarah Hall
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