The Edwardian women’s movements have long drawn the attention of historians of British women’s history. As June Purvis and others have recently noted, much of the existing work has concentrated on the efforts of the Women’s Social and Political Union (W.S.P.U.), home of the militant ‘suffragettes’.\(^1\) Roger Fulford published the first non-participatory account of their actions in his 1957 work *Votes for women*. His aim to ‘tell the story of a single aspect of [the wider women’s] movement . . . and to disentangle it from the general march of women towards emancipation’ formed a narrow model from which suffrage historiography rarely deviated for the next twenty years.\(^2\) Subsequent works have tended to concentrate on the ideologies and policies of the leadership of the W.S.P.U. or of its antithetical ‘elder sister’ the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (N.U.W.S.S.).\(^3\)

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Collectively such works have fostered the development of a narrow picture of an autocratic, fanatically militant, and increasingly sectarian W.S.P.U. standing in diametric opposition to a democratic, law-abiding, and eventually pro-socialist N.U.W.S.S. The London-centredness of both organizations was stressed, as was their middle-class base. Of the other suffrage organizations, the Women's Freedom League consistently appears as a W.S.P.U. splinter group whilst other groups such as the Men's League, the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, and the Church League for Women's Suffrage receive acknowledgement only when their actions coincided with those of the two centre-stage groups.

A decisive break from this tradition followed the publication in 1978 of Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's *One hand tied behind us*, the first detailed local study of the suffrage movement. It uncovered the vast amount of work towards achieving the franchise undertaken by working-class women of the Lancashire cotton districts. Other local studies have followed. This trend has made it possible to undertake serious attempts to reconstruct both the variety of activities which encompassed suffrage activism, and also the differences among women who were united in the campaign. Local studies also make it possible to focus in detail on individual suffrage branches, and to demonstrate that the branch itself was an important place of feminist and political development for many local activists. Liz Stanley and Ann Morley have been particularly keen to present the branch as a relatively autonomous structure, exercising degrees of independence previously unacknowledged.

Drawing on evidence from the Merseyside suffrage campaign, it has been possible to use the close focus of a local study to serve another purpose, that of the re-evaluation of suffrage militancy. Militancy has long been synonymous with

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6 Although the term 'Merseyside' is in itself anachronistic, the W.S.P.U. organized on a Merseyside basis. The Liverpool branch appointed an
suffrage. Its various manifestations—women chained to railings; women throwing themselves under horses; women on mass demonstrations; vast numbers of women, all strong, vocal and in the public eye—have become part of our collective subconscious, to be evoked whenever one hears the word 'suffragette'. Rita Pankhurst has recently observed wryly that the identification of militancy with suffrage is so complete that 'it would appear that the suffragettes have hijacked the movement's image [today] as they hijacked the action at the time'.

The historiography of suffrage divides militancy into two distinct phases, 1905–8 and 1908–12. The first covers early acts of militancy such as heckling and large public demonstrations, whilst the second includes the more violent actions, mainly those from 1912–14 at the height of the arson campaign. Some historians are quite sympathetic to early militancy. Andrew Rosen has praised its 'effectiveness', whilst Martin Pugh states that it 'undoubtedly played a role in destroying anti-suffrage amongst women'. However, both see militancy as a progressive phenomenon which increased in violence, driving women away from the W.S.P.U. in droves. Similarly, Constance Rover believes that 'militant tactics helped the W.S.P.U. until 1912, but after that date were harmful'.

Other historians share the opinion that later militancy was harmful, but can find nothing praiseworthy even in the earlier forms. Whilst David Mitchell consistently belittles any use of militancy as a political tactic and presents it as 'the terrorist organizer with control of branches on the Wirral, which were part and parcel of the Liverpool branch despite the physical divide of the River Mersey. 'Liverpool' was the term which the suffragettes themselves used for the geographical area which we today know as Merseyside. To avoid confusion on this point, I have opted to use 'Merseyside' when referring to Liverpool and Wirral, reserving 'Liverpool' for activity restricted to the modern city boundary.

8 Rosen, Rise up, p. 79; M. Pugh, Women’s suffrage in Britain, 1867–1928 (London, 1980), p. 22.
9 Rover, Women’s suffrage, pp. 23–4.
touch, the taste of blood [in] the W.S.P.U.'s private war' in order to emphasize his interpretation of Christabel Pankhurst as an absurd autocrat with militaristic ambitions, his view is merely the most extreme of many overt condemnations.\textsuperscript{10} Jill Liddington and Jill Norris explain that militancy, which they feel undid the work of many of the constitutional suffragists, 'seemed to carry within it the seeds of its own destruction', and Brian Harrison describes it as 'counterproductive for much of the period between 1906 and 1914'.\textsuperscript{11}

There are some alternative interpretations of militancy. An increasing attempt to reclaim it comes from Liz Stanley and Ann Morley, who stress repeatedly that the more violent actions, which were always directed at property rather than people, came in response to the violence with which women's initial movements into the public political sphere were met; their argument is that militancy was in fact a reactive phenomenon.\textsuperscript{12} Recently, other historians have attempted to move the debate away from militancy altogether, presenting alternative accounts of the suffrage campaign which see it as an irrelevancy. Sandra Stanley Holton has been especially critical of the way in which militancy 'has . . . dominated historical accounts of this period in [W.S.P.U.] campaigning', feeling that this focus hampers closer historical examination of the political tactics of the Union.\textsuperscript{13}

Each of these interpretations rests on a narrow definition of militancy as a form of illegal action which becomes increasingly more violent in order to retain high levels of publicity. However, this view was never one presented by the


\textsuperscript{12} Morley and Stanley, \textit{Life of Emily Davison}, p. 150.

\textsuperscript{13} S. S. Holton, \textit{Feminism and democracy: women's suffrage and reform politics in Britain, 1900–1918} (Cambridge, 1986), p. 35.
W.S.P.U. during any phase of its militant campaign. Its members, although acknowledging the important links between militancy and publicity, were consistently explicit in their own writings about the breadth of actions which Edwardian women regarded as militancy. Any form of action which took large numbers of women into the public sphere was included within their definition. For example, the process of heckling politicians was a long-established form of acceptable behaviour for men, but was perceived by the public as unacceptable and militant when undertaken by women. Public meetings and demonstrations, and chalking the pavements or holding human poster parades to advertise these events were actions just as militant to Edwardian women unused to public activity as the more violent activities such as throwing stones or burning pillar boxes were to others.

Working closely with the Merseyside evidence, it becomes obvious that a variety of militant actions was consistently available. Suffragettes could choose freely the extent and level of their actions. One of the first things which appears to have attracted local women into the militant campaign was its links with and similarity to the socialist Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.). The National W.S.P.U. had been formed in Manchester in 1903 as a suffrage organization within the I.L.P., its original members being I.L.P. activists. Initially indistinguishable from other suffrage societies, its public work consisted of street meetings and lectures to organizations interested in suffrage under the auspices of the I.L.P. This altered in October 1905 when, disillusioned with the lack of impact that their organization was having in the public arena, Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney attempted a new tactic borrowed from the early Labour movement but hitherto unattempted by franchise campaigners.


15 See interview with Christabel Pankhurst, Sunday Times, 6 Apr. 1906.
A planned interruption of a Liberal meeting at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, led to their ejection and subsequent arrest. In court both women refused to pay a fine and were imprisoned. Their actions and the large public meetings which surrounded their release received national publicity. The W.S.P.U. was now transformed into a militant society whose women members were prepared to take direct action in order to get the vote.

Militancy brought growth to the W.S.P.U. By January 1906 Annie Kenney had been dispatched to London and was working with Sylvia Pankhurst in building branches in the capital. Branches sprang up all over the country, including one in Liverpool, where the new militant tactics struck a chord amongst certain individuals already disillusioned with the genteel, constitutional methods of campaigning favoured by the existing suffrage society, the Liverpool Women’s Suffrage Society (L.W.S.S.). Public dissatisfaction with L.W.S.S. methods first emerged in April 1905 when a furious row, reported as a ‘little breeze’, broke out at its annual meeting. The argument was between prominent L.W.S.S. activist Eleanor Rathbone and her fellow members Mrs Alice Morrissey and Mr Buxton, the last two also being active socialists. It occurred when Mr Buxton attempted to overturn a decision to elect the L.W.S.S. Executive Committee en bloc, proposing instead an election by ballot of all members of the society. He felt that at present the Executive Committee was . . . calculated to deprive the members of any share whatever of representation on the committee of the Liverpool Society. 90% of the women who would be enfranchised by the Women’s Enfranchisement Bill would be working women, and yet [they] had no representation on the committee . . . That anomaly would be perpetuated unless a more democratic method of election were adopted.16

In seconding, Mrs Morrissey made further criticism of L.W.S.S. organization:

She had been a member of the society for twelve months and had been very much disappointed in the work. She had thought that the society would be a real live organization and she would wish to take an active part in it. No

16 Liverpool Daily Post, 13 Apr. 1906.
headway would be made unless meetings were to be held in different parts of the town with the objective of educating women in the use of the vote.\textsuperscript{17}

Mr Buxton refused to withdraw and negotiate the point in private, adding that:

there had been too much backdoor influence in the past. There were half a dozen women in Liverpool who had been labouring for the cause quite as hard as any of the members of the committee and who would be perfectly willing to bear their part in the work of the society. He strongly resented the idea that the committee should be reserved to ladies of a particular class.\textsuperscript{18}

Miss Rathbone’s reaction typified the approach criticized by Mrs Morrissey. She complained that ‘the subject had been brought forward in a manner which was distinctly discourteous’.\textsuperscript{19} It is unlikely that Mrs Morrissey, trained in the I.L.P. school of debate, would have found anything discourteous in raising a critical amendment at an A.G.M. The episode illustrates the gulf in attitudes towards public work existing within the local movement. Reporting on the meeting for the \textit{Labour Leader}, Mrs Morrissey warned other I.L.P. women that the time had come to consider their attitudes towards the L.W.S.S.\textsuperscript{20} Her I.L.P. work brought her into contact with the W.S.P.U. and she quickly founded a Liverpool branch.

Before discussing in greater detail the rich diversity of tactics which comprised militancy for local suffragettes, it is useful to outline briefly the W.S.P.U.’s Merseyside history. The Union began its local campaign with a series of street-corner and factory-gate meetings which mirrored the tactics of the local socialist movement. Many of the venues selected, such as the Wellington Column and Islington Square, were already well used for socialist meetings. Factory-gate meetings were also initiated, concentrating on factories with a large female workforce such as Copes’ tobacco and Crawford’s biscuits. From an Edwardian perspective these simple actions could in themselves be viewed as militant. Although many women in the Liverpool W.S.P.U. were working-class and recruited from

\begin{itemize}
  \item[17] Ibid.
  \item[18] Ibid.
  \item[19] Ibid.
  \item[20] \textit{Labour Leader}, 21 Apr. 1906.
\end{itemize}
the I.L.P., others had more middle-class backgrounds. The W.S.P.U. on Merseyside was a cross-class organization, and it must be remembered that to middle-class women any public activity could be viewed as militant. Militancy in a more conventional sense, in the form of direct action, was first used by the Liverpool W.S.P.U. in January 1906 against the Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. Several women staged a pre-planned interruption as he addressed five thousand Liberals in the Sun Hall, Kensington. Whilst the interruption reflected Christabel Pankhurst’s and Annie Kenney’s first militant action, more stress was placed on the role of class within the Liverpool campaign. One of the banners unfurled demanded ‘Will the Liberal government give working women the vote?’ and another interruption came from a woman who claimed the right to be heard on the grounds that she was ‘a working woman’. Although no arrests were made, one woman slapped a man who snatched her banner away. Liverpool suffragettes were determined from the start to force themselves into the public eye.

From October 1907 the range of militant actions by the Liverpool W.S.P.U. becomes easier to trace following the first publication of the National W.S.P.U. newspaper *Votes for Women*. This weekly paper contained pages of local reports from all over the country. At first reports of the Liverpool branch came grouped with news of other Lancashire branches by the Lancashire organizer Mary Gawthorpe. In her early columns she wrote of regular open-air meetings being established, normal audiences reaching about one thousand a week by the summer of 1908. Another central part of her local campaign was the weekly ‘At Home’ meeting. These were effectively the weekly branch meetings of the W.S.P.U. In London they often took place in the Caxton Hall, sometimes on a delegate basis, whilst in other areas they were closer to the formal event suggested by their name and were held in the drawing rooms of more affluent suffragettes. In Liverpool, Miss Gawthorpe retained the name ‘At Home’, projecting an

21 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 10 Jan. 1906, with two reports both very hostile to the women interrupters. One gives a verbatim report of the Prime Minister’s speech, including all the interruptions.
image with which previously apolitical women would feel comfortable, but selected for their venue the Engineering Union’s rooms in Mount Pleasant, demonstrating a clear effort to reach a working-class audience. The city-centre venue was one of many available, but was distinguished by its strong ties with the labour and trades union movements. Unlike a drawing room or a public meeting hall in a hotel, it was a place where working men and women would feel instantly at home themselves. At one of the earliest meetings at this venue, it was reported that ‘the room was crowded, many working men were present’.

The socialist Clarion Café was also used by the W.S.P.U. These tactics were aimed at creating and retaining a wide base of support for the organization amongst all classes. They were so successful that on one occasion when suffragettes were arrested while demonstrating against Lloyd George in Liverpool, a large crowd gathered in an attempt to release them, and one man with no previous or later recorded involvement with local politics was prepared to be arrested in their defence.

By February 1909 Liverpool W.S.P.U. could fill the Sun Hall in its own right for a public meeting. Christabel Pankhurst visited to speak at ‘the largest indoor [suffrage] meeting yet in Lancashire’, identifying the city as an important centre for suffrage activity. Further indication of Liverpool’s importance came with the decision to appoint a paid organizer to work for the W.S.P.U. locally. The first of the local organizers, Mary Phillips, came to Liverpool in May 1909. She was a sparky Scottish lass who achieved her place in suffrage history through hiding all night in the organ of St George’s Hall so as to interrupt the public meeting of Liberal cabinet ministers Augustine Birrell and the earl of Crewe with a disembodied voice demanding ‘Votes for Women’ through the organ pipes. She was quickly succeeded by Susan Ada

22 Votes for Women, 5 Nov. 1908, contains a full description of a Liverpool W.S.P.U. ‘At Home’.
23 Liverpool Weekly Mercury, 26 Dec. 1908.
Flatman, known as Ada. Under her rule the branch continued to grow, especially on the Wirral, which came under the Liverpool organizer. It also raised its public profile through opening a shop at 28 Berry Street in September 1909. Shops were a crucial part of suffrage campaigning. They offered a meeting venue, provided a public face, and raised both funds and consciousness. Their range of merchandizing was vast, and suited all pockets: literature came in de luxe hardback editions or penny pamphlets, the famous colours of purple, white, and green could be worn in silk or cotton, and W.S.P.U. badges came in enamel or tin. ‘Votes for Women’ tea, china, greetings cards, and soap were also available. The location of the Liverpool shop and the efforts of its hard-working staff of volunteers who kept it open until 8 o’clock most nights helped keep suffrage to the fore within local political culture. There are also certain aspects of shop work which can be interpreted as militancy in themselves. Shopworkers were not held in particularly high esteem within polite Edwardian society, and the migration of many middle-class young ladies into shop work, albeit unpaid, on the behalf of the W.S.P.U. cannot have been welcomed by many of their non-suffrage friends and relations.

Merseyside branches continued to flourish until June 1911, when the arrival of the third paid local organizer brought a slight slump in activity. Miss Alice Davies appears to have been much quieter than her predecessors and far less enthusiastic about maintaining I.L.P. links. She decreased the number of public meetings in the area significantly. However, she was soon replaced by Helen Jollie, who was more in tune with the local pattern of organization. Miss Jollie favoured and re-established I.L.P. links, and initiated many new campaigning methods to complement them. Her campaign thrived until September 1914, when it was abruptly curtailed, along with the majority of other W.S.P.U. work throughout the country, by the outbreak of the First World War.

From within this chronological history of the W.S.P.U. on Merseyside I wish to explore certain episodes which explain

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the breadth and variety of the actions that comprised militancy within the local W.S.P.U. I am attempting here to show how ‘militancy’ within the branch consisted of a broad range of activities in which individual women chose to participate without coercion, always selecting their own forms and levels of activity. Through an examination of the different forms of public activity undertaken by the branch, and of public reaction to them, I will show that ‘militancy’ within Liverpool W.S.P.U. was not simply about breaking the law but was equally about local women individually and collectively breaking the conventions of Edwardian society regarding acceptable feminine behaviour. Thus, heckling at political meetings will be shown to be as militant an action as arson.

Within a local study it is possible to reconstruct almost entirely the wide variety of actions which constituted militancy to W.S.P.U. members. Some suffrage militancy within Liverpool was undoubtedly of the reactive type outlined by Stanley and Morley.27 Although there is no evidence locally of the explicit sexual violence against suffragettes which Susan Kingsley Kent believes characterized male response to the migration of women into the public sphere, some local suffrage meetings were broken up violently as suffragettes were increasingly considered fair game.28 Furthermore, anti-suffrage violence by Liverpool men was not confined to their own area. On 20 August 1909, for example, the unsympathetic Liverpool Courier reported that although the Liverpool W.S.P.U.’s Isle of Man holiday campaign had allowed the cause ‘to triumph to some extent’, extreme violence was also levelled against the women:

Despite special police precautions, considerable disorder ensued, fireworks being let off and a continuous din being maintained by the interrupters. The ladies upon leaving were followed by a huge mob which hustled them in the direction of the harbour. To prevent them being driven over the quay, the chief constable had to draw his baton and the police used force to deal with the mob.29

At least one of the ‘ladies’ concerned, Ada Flatman, felt that this violence was deliberately orchestrated, and identified the

27 Morley and Stanley, Life of Emily Davison, chapter 5.
perpetrators as well known Liverpool youths holidaying on the island. The Courier also concurred that the event was premeditated by organized gangs of young men, probably not Manx in origin. On Merseyside, even the police could not be relied upon to protect suffragettes as in the Isle of Man. On 21 October 1909, the Liverpool Daily Post carried a report of a W.S.P.U. meeting at Liscard which ended in disarray:

Lumps of clay and small stones were thrown, and the ladies beat a hasty retreat, without a word having been said respecting the claims of the fair sex to the franchise . . . the meeting was a farce but the ‘audience’ regarded the fun as immense.30

In her capacity as organizer Ada Flatman complained to the press, her letter revealing much about the way militancy was regarded by the suffragettes themselves:

It had been arranged that I should speak at Pear Tree Grove Liscard last night; the pavements were chalked to that effect and the police notified. On our arrival, we found a great crowd of adults, men and women, anxious to attend our meeting: also 100 or more small children aged from 2 to 14, armed with missiles with which to greet us. The police officer told me he had been pelted, and I want to know where the law of the land is that allows women to be badgered in this manner by children? In your report, you suggest that we were met by our own methods. We are fighting a great political battle, and the stone-throwing has been forced upon us—either that or surrender. These children have no grievance against us. What are their schools and churches teaching them, is the question to be asked, and why do not the police take action in this matter? Women with a grievance are at once arrested and have to serve four months imprisonment for throwing a stone, but Liscard children may stone women and no notice is taken of it. In no other place but Liscard have I found this sad state of affairs that the children are so out of control . . .

Here it is clear that stone-throwing is seen as a reactive phenomenon by its perpetrators, and not as an attempt by them to grab the local headlines.

A key question to ask with regard to militancy is not its effect on national political opinion, but on the immediate response of the locality to the tactics of direct violence against property undertaken by the W.S.P.U. from 1910 onwards. In studying the levels and types of militancy operated by members of the Liverpool W.S.P.U. or by other W.S.P.U. members who entered the city specifically to commit militant acts, it is possible to

construct an alternative explanation of militancy. It was recognized as a necessary political tactic, which should now be viewed as more important to the politicization of women than to the final goal of the franchise; and even in its more extreme forms it won the W.S.P.U. a fresh layer of membership and allowed more established political organizations which had long employed similar actions themselves to begin to treat the W.S.P.U. as a serious political contender.

It was not until 1912 that Liverpool suffragettes first used violence against property, and then not in their own city. In March 1912 a group of Liverpool women was specifically organized to attend the mass window-smashing in the West End of London. Members unable or unwilling to attend were requested to pay a levy to cover the costs of those who did. A brief analysis of the women arrested as part of this action reflects again the wide social base of Liverpool W.S.P.U. whilst simultaneously providing an interesting picture of the type of women who in fact were militant suffragettes. Of the twelve local women arrested, only two were below the age of thirty (Miss Mary Callender, 21, and Miss Dorothy Abraham, 25). Of the remaining women, three were below forty, three below fifty, and two almost sixty (Dr Alice Ker, 58, and Mrs Mary Healiss, 59). The remaining two were not identified by age. Five of the women were married and seven were single. Two had no previous recorded connection with the W.S.P.U., indicating a layer of active membership operating beyond that reflected in existing sources. Some of the women did live in middle-class suburban districts although two lived in the more working-class area of Wavertree and a further two gave their address only as the W.S.P.U. office. So there were no predominant factors linking these women beyond their sex and their decision to participate in this particular militant action. What does stand out, however, is the fact that the popular stereotype of a militant suffragette as an irresponsible young unmarried girl from a middle-class home was not grounded in reality as far as Merseyside was concerned.

Exisiting memoirs of suffragettes agree that there was never any pressure put on women to participate in militancy that

31 Votes for Women, 23 Feb. 1912.
might occasion arrest, but are vague as to strategies available to those who supported the principle of militant action but were unable to risk going to prison. Material relating to the Liverpool branch shows how women who were not imprisoned for acts of violence played a crucial role in enabling those who were to cope. Besides frequent mentions in the branch reports of donations by other members to pay the fares and expenses of working women participating in militant events in London, W.S.P.U. members also offered to provide child care for women who were on ‘active service for the union’. The letters which Dr Alice Ker wrote to her two daughters whilst in Holloway gaol underline the importance both of this support network and of a dedicated core of local members to the workings of a branch. Concerned that her two daughters Margaret (at school) and Mary (at Liverpool University) would not be able to cope in the absence of their widowed mother, Dr Ker wrote, ‘I have written to Mr Sumner the Borough treasurer saying I will pay the fees and the water bill as soon as I come home. If there is any trouble about it, consult Mrs Abraham.’ Dr Ker and Mrs Abraham were close personal friends and W.S.P.U. comrades, and had daughters of similar ages, so it is likely that whilst Mrs Abraham kept an eye on the Ker girls as they waited for their mother so Dr Ker could help cheer the spirits of Dorothy Abraham in Holloway. Other suffrage contacts also proved useful, again outlining the importance of a local support network. On 9 March, having detailed a letter from the same borough treasurer, who had refused any extra time to pay the gas bill, Dr Ker advised her eldest daughter ‘if you come across Miss Robson, you might just mention the incident. He is a great pillar of Christ Church, you know.’ Miss Robson, a local suffragette, later

32 This was publicly done by Mrs Healiss, mother of suffrage prisoner Georgina Healiss, and reported in Votes for Women, 2 July 1909, as an example of an alternative form of militant action. That Mrs Healiss herself later chose to go to prison after participating in the window-smashing of 1912 underlines the flexibility within militancy: differing levels of participation could be selected by individual women at different times.

33 Fawcett Library, London, autograph letter collection, Dr Alice Ker to Margaret Ker, 14 Mar. 1912.
became active in the Church League for Women's Suffrage, so presumably had connections with Christ Church herself. The intent here would appear to be to shame Mr Sumner publicly into relenting from his harsh treatment of the Ker family. That such a course of action was possible again highlights the fact that militant actions did not necessarily remove public sympathy for the cause even within the respectable setting of the Anglican community.

Dr Ker was also anxious that her girls did not neglect the cause. ‘From March 9th to 16th is self-denial week’ (a regular W.S.P.U. fund-raising event), she wrote. ‘Try to do without some things and keep account how much. You need not pay the money in just now . . . but keep the reckoning and we will pay it into the war chest later on . . . You might sell your theatre tickets for Saturday. I feel now as if I would never spend another unnecessary penny on anything else.’34 There is also a sense in her letters that she wanted Margaret to keep in touch with the branch not only for political reasons, but so that she received the full support available. ‘Go often to Renshaw Street’ (the W.S.P.U. office), she wrote on one occasion, ‘I am sure there will be much to hear.’35 Then, ‘You must not let anything interfere with your Terminals [exams], but when they are over do go to any big meetings they have (or little ones for that matter), and help all you can . . . You might go and see Patricia [Woodlock] when you have time. I told you that before. I hear she is addressing meetings at a great rate.’36 And to another local suffragette, she confided, ‘I am so glad that Margaret has you near her just now when I am so completely shut away from her. Please use her like you would a little sister, and advise her as you would your own sister in the absence of your mother. I hope she will work well at the exams; that will be good both for her and the Cause.’37

Although these are the only surviving prison letters from a member of the Liverpool W.S.P.U. they show a broad pattern of involvement among women within the organization, and it is possible that the prison letters of Mrs Abraham and other

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34 Ibid. same to same, 7 Mar. 1912.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid. same to same, 14 Mar. 1912.
37 Ibid. Dr Alice Ker to anon., 16 Mar. 1912.
local women, had they survived, would provide us with a very similar picture. Far from presenting a picture of unthinking fanatical militants, Dr Ker’s letters reconstruct an image of a group of activists participating in a well considered political struggle, not for the thrill of martyrdom, but from the considered conclusion that there remained no other way.

From 1912 to 1914 acts of violent militancy, arson, bombing, and damage to property characterized the suffrage campaign nationally and on Merseyside. The pages of *The Suffragette*, which replaced *Votes for Women* as the National Union’s newspaper in 1912, show that Liverpool was well to the forefront of the new campaign, with almost as many instances of direct action as London. Among other incidents, suffragettes fired a school at Greenbank Drive (adjacent to the home of leading constitutional suffragist Eleanor Rathbone), burned the altar of St Anne’s church, Aigburth, and placed bombs in the Stock Exchange and Sefton Park Palm House. In addition there were arson and acid attacks on numerous local pillar boxes and damage to the prestigious Liverpool Exhibition. However, rather than these actions driving women away from the local W.S.P.U. they revitalized the Liverpool branch during this period, with many new recruits being attracted into membership. One obvious explanation for this is the simple but often overlooked fact that violent militancy retained an important position within the campaigning tactics of the Liverpool W.S.P.U. without ever taking the ‘progressive’ form of replacing other tactics completely; it was always simply one more choice amongst a wide range of possible actions.

As noted above, Liverpool W.S.P.U. enjoyed a resurgence under the guiding hand of its fourth paid organizer, Helen Jollie. The first indication that the branch was again to enjoy high levels of activity within the public space that it had so successfully colonized between 1907 and 1910 was the announcement that the shop, closed by the third organizer Miss Davies, was to reopen. Miss Jollie stressed that it was to be financed entirely by the local Union, and a special fund was opened for the purpose. An increase in acts of violent militancy within Liverpool meant that the city was in special need of extra finance. Helen Jollie duly announced the opening of a separate legal defence fund, which would both
cover the costs incurred when individuals were caught and simultaneously allow non-participants to play a role in direct action. Lists of finances in *The Suffragette* display the extent to which the W.S.P.U. relied on small individual donations. From November 1912, when Jollie’s lists of Liverpool financial donations began to appear, to June 1914, when the final list was printed, 164 individuals made a total of 376 donations to the Liverpool branch, most being individual donations rather than collections. Over and above the usual membership subscriptions, they included donations for office funds and the money for self-denial week, and show the range of support enjoyed by Liverpool W.S.P.U. Although the majority came from single women (103), fifty were from married women and seven from men. The remainder were donated under pseudonyms such as ‘Spanish Sympathiser’. They also demonstrate the varying financial status of local supporters. The amounts given ranged from 5d. to £10 2s. 6d. Although there were five donations of above £10, indicating some support for the Union amongst wealthier Merseysiders, most were for amounts below £1, the majority of these (178) being for less than 5s. While some individuals made more than one donation a year, many gave only once for an event such as self-denial week or the trial of popular local suffragette Margaret Ker. The wide range of sums donated again stresses the pattern of an organization that built wide alliances among women of many backgrounds within the district. Much of the work in Liverpool was thus funded not by a few rich sponsors, but by small amounts painstakingly collected from many different sources. The figures again suggest that extreme militancy was no detraction for supporters. At the height of the arson campaign in the city in 1913, £53 6s. 8d. was collected for self-denial week.

Publicly donating money to an organization involved in an arson campaign can in itself be seen as one form of militancy for Edwardian women concerned about their respectability. For others who were more willing to take public action, the arson campaign was not the only option. As stressed previously, militancy also involved the movement of women into the public political sphere during this period. To ease this, Helen Jollie used a wider variety of techniques than any previous organizer in Liverpool. She relaunched the weekly
open-air meetings, and held weekly poster parades of fifteen or more to advertise The Suffragette. When the nationally acclaimed speaker Mrs Flora Drummond visited the city for two large meetings in the city centre and Garston Co-operative Hall, Helen Jollie relied on the tried and trusted Liverpool methods of daily street meetings and poster parades to attract support. The display of posters also afforded publicity, an idea pioneered by the Wirral suffragettes. They were displayed by shops and local businesses, raising the profile of the union locally and ensuring that its colours remained on public view. In this aspect again, militancy does not appear to have deterred local businesses from linking with the W.S.P.U. Many appear to have been more than willing to display the colours despite the fact that in other areas such support did not serve as ‘insurance’ against attack from suffragettes.\(^{38}\) Indeed, the sole example of official hostility throughout the militant campaign came when Liverpool city council refused the loan of a local library for a lecture entitled ‘Militant Methods’. The W.S.P.U.’s Liverpool premises were never subjected to reprisal attacks as were those in other cities.

Helen Jollie brought a sparkle to the local suffrage campaign at a time when much of the joy appeared to have gone from the movement, with its leaders exiled or in gaol, increasingly heavy sentences handed out to its membership, and even its newspaper threatened with prosecution for incitement and regularly censured. Quite simply, Miss Jollie could make political campaigning seem fun, and it was possibly this sense of excitement in direct action that brought new members flocking in under her leadership. On several occasions she took her branch out to the cinema or the theatre for a new type of protest. The first time that this occurred, in the Palais de Luxe Picture House, the audience was amazed to find that the intermission provided them with an on-the-spot view of suffragettes in action. One woman made a speech while others handed out leaflets about forcible feeding. Helen Jollie reported ‘many remarks of sympathy and appreciation of the women’s courage’ and that the manager

\(^{38}\) See Atkinson, *Purple, white, and green*, p. 28, for details of attacks on London stores displaying the colours.
himself bought a paper and apologized for any discourtesy the attendants may have shown the women during their ejection. Four dozen copies of *The Suffragette* were sold on this occasion.39 Sometimes the protests were planned to fit in with the performance. The previous interruption followed a film about the Statue of Liberty, and obvious parallels were drawn. The most furious protest was at the Liverpool Rep, when James Sexton’s play *The Riot Act* was being performed. This play was the first attempt to portray local working-class life upon the stage, and attracted an audience of atypical working men. However, as the only female character in the play ‘was disloyal, lied, had a past, made open love to her employer, and was a suffragette’, the W.S.P.U. singled it out for special attention.40 Helen Jollie rose in the stalls to counter the picture Sexton painted of her branch members more than once. Similarly, during the local staging of the opera *The Dance of Death*, French soldiers sang ‘The hour has come to fight for freedom / Today our tyrants we defy / For Liberty to live / Or for Liberty to die’ before an interval during which suffragettes addressed and leafleted the audience. This time the campaigners were ejected so violently that one lady in the audience was moved to donate £5 as a protest against their treatment. The theatre and cinema protests represented a type of militancy that did not harm property or carry the risk of prison, but did lay its participants open to public ridicule and physical violence.41

During this period, Helen Jollie attempted to broaden the appeal of the Liverpool W.S.P.U. in other directions. The public meetings she advertised in *The Suffragette* covered broad themes including Dr Ker on ‘The medical aspects of women’s suffrage’, Miss Hacky on ‘The position of women within the Post Office’, and Mr Fenn on ‘Why I am a Socialist’. Sharing a concern for the importance of education with the early socialist movement in Liverpool, Helen Jollie also organized a suffrage library from which members could borrow books.

The library was regularly advertised in the local reports columns of *The Suffragette*. As the W.S.P.U. was widening its concerns, other political organizations within Liverpool began to take it more seriously. The only time that the Liverpool Labour Representation Committee ever discussed suffrage, for instance, was in 1913 when it passed a resolution condemning the treatment of Mrs Pankhurst under the Cat and Mouse Act. This resolution also recognized that women within the Union were engaged in a political struggle, the first time that a local political party made such an admission. The move back to highly public political activity reactivated some older W.S.P.U. members, while a new generation, male and female, began to involve itself in selling the paper, holding street meetings, and running the shop, as well as in direct protests such as the theatre and cinema events. Picnics and boating parades were added to the agenda too, all with a political propaganda flavour. As the arson campaign was conducted in secret, it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the age, class, or previous W.S.P.U. involvement of suffrage arsonists, but its high level of success in the area, with virtually no arrests made, indicates a well organized and tightly knit campaign. Despite regular attempts to gather information by the local police, the W.S.P.U. managed to conduct both public and secret campaigns simultaneously.

Even from this brief selection of militant actions, it is possible to deduce that militancy on Merseyside at least was a far more diverse phenomenon than that which features in much suffrage historiography, and one that attracted a higher degree of public support than might have been expected. Even within the pages of the local newspapers where condemnation was frequent, it was rarely overt. Predilection for alliteration made it almost impossible for Edwardian journalists to resist the temptation to refer to suffragettes as ‘silly’, but this was often as far as their insults went. Furthermore, even this overlooked the fact that many of the women themselves were aware that their actions may well have looked silly, but that through suffrage militancy they

were demonstrating that ‘Doing something silly is . . . woman’s alternative to doing something cruel . . . We use no violence [against people] because we can win freedom without it; because we have discovered an alternative.’

Through castigating the alternative as ‘silly’, the local press missed out on much of the humour that was acknowledged by the suffragettes themselves. For example, when a window of the Reform Club in Liverpool was smashed by well aimed suffragette stones in protest at the presence of a cabinet minister, Ada Flatman and Lady Constance Lytton held a public meeting at which they stated that local women were indeed ‘still in the stone age’. This remark was reported by the Liverpool Daily Post under the heading ‘The Women’s Stone Age’, the paper seemingly oblivious to the women’s intended humour.

For their silliness, whether in attacking property or simply publicly challenging male politicians, suffragettes risked imprisonment, force-feeding, violence, and public ridicule. Yet they continued to devise increasingly imaginative ways of stretching the boundaries of political action. The evidence taken from the experience of suffragettes in Liverpool shows how it is possible to reinterpret militancy in this way, not as the logical conclusion to an increasingly marginalized and sectarian political campaign, nor as the silly excesses of a few, but as a carefully planned political tactic. The success of the tactic was in its ability to increase the appeal of the suffrage movement by allowing women who were excluded from the main political sphere as represented by Westminster to take part in their own forms of direct political action. The case of Liverpool W.S.P.U. shows how even the more violent actions did not deter women from joining in the suffragette campaign. Rather, the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of militant actions, all of which involved a breaking of convention, led to its becoming the largest women’s organization within Edwardian Liverpool. Moreover, the Liverpool example also serves as a lesson for those interested in researching the autonomous political involvement of

43 E. P. Lawrence in Votes for Women, 8 Mar. 1908.
44 Liverpool Daily Post, 13 Jan. 1919.
women as distinct from that of mixed-sex political groups. That is, to remind us to look in different directions for what we class as political, and to be less rigid in imposing our modern definitions upon historical subjects. The rich diversity of local W.S.P.U. campaigns and the equal seriousness with which they were all treated by their participants serves as an eloquent reminder of this point.