

Ada Nield Chew: England's forgotten suffragist

While suffragettes such as the Pankhursts and Emily Davidson dominated the headlines, many less-known activists fought key battles away from the spotlight. Orlagh McCabe and Kirsty Bunting introduce Ada Nield Chew, a radical suffragist whose campaigning on behalf of working women in Britain far transcended the fight for the vote.

A Crewe Factory Girl

In the late summer of 1894 in the thriving railway town of Crewe, a 24-year-old tailor named Ada Nield was sensationally dismissed from Compton Brothers clothing factory. Her offence was inciting female co-workers to unite and demand what she called a “living wage” instead of their current “lingering, dying wage”. For weeks Ada’s anonymous letters, signed “A Crewe Factory Girl”, had been printed in the Crewe Chronicle, garnering support from men’s unions as well as the local MP.

Her letters also attracted the attention of organisers from the Independent Labour Party (ILP), who offered her work should her identity be discovered – which it was. By the end of the year Ada had been elected as a Poor Law Guardian (she was one of the very first working-class female Guardians) and was working with the local Trades Council. But this was just the beginning of a career spent agitating for representation and equality for poor women.

Ada was born to a farming family in Butt Lane, Talke, north Staffordshire, the eldest girl among 13 siblings, and her early years were devoted to childcare and chores. She received no formal education beyond the age of 11, but Ada’s early love of popular magazines and novels helped her cultivate her engaging writing style. Throughout her active political life, barely a month went by when her words didn’t appear in the pages of political papers such as Common Cause, The English Woman, The Freewoman, Labour Leader and the Clarion, and in her early forties she published short articles documenting the daily toil of working-class northern women.

On the road

By 1896 Chew was enjoying the independence of life on the road in the ILP Clarion Van, canvassing support for the party. This suited her itinerant temperament; she recoiled at the thought of a traditional life of domesticity. After marrying the prominent ILP organiser George Chew in 1897, followed a year later by the birth of their only child, Doris, Ada refused to be bound by convention. She frequently took Doris out of school to join her on her travels for the ILP and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), for which she was a leading organiser between 1900 and 1908, travelling to remote communities of working women and educating them about their access to union representation. Ada was a driving

force in the WTUL's campaign to improve conditions for workers in the Staffordshire potteries, in particular victims of industrial accidents and lead poisoning.

Doris recounts witnessing her mother take to the hustings at a series of by-elections, wherever an ILP candidate was standing in England and Scotland. Yet her strenuous efforts were applied to election campaigns in which Ada, as a woman, had no right to vote. Surely this was frustrating for her, but she understood that the vote was coming – and that, when it did, there was necessity for an established party to represent working class women such as herself.

The significance of Ada's contribution to the formative days of Labour is often overlooked. She lived long enough to see the party she had raised public support for win a landslide majority government in 1945, but died just months later.

Suffrage and the vote

Like many women involved in the trade union and labour movement, Ada gravitated towards suffragism. Today Ada's very visible involvement with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (she was NUWSS organiser for the Rossendale Valley constituency) and her role in convincing the society to back the Labour Party may be less widely discussed than her 1905 spat in the pages of the *Clarion* with Christabel Pankhurst of the Women's Social and Political Union. She accused Christabel of prioritising the enfranchisement of "the entire class of wealthy women" whilst "the great body of working women, married or single, would be voteless still." Ada's belief in peaceful protest, as well as her working-class background, set her apart from the middle-class, militant Pankhursts.

Radical maternity and 'the problem of the married working woman'

Of her many achievements, Ada may have been proudest of her contribution to the development of welfare support structures for working mothers and their children in the north of England, which would, she hoped, "open a new and glorious field of work to women in which their special sort of human genius would have scope for development."

Ada was adamant that in order for women to live dignified and healthy lives they must be economically independent, and recognised that this was near impossible for working mothers. In her writing, Ada advocated the need for nursery care for all babies of working women, to be paid for, she suggested, by levying additional taxes on all incomes of over £1,000 per annum. These nurseries, she specified, must be run by "trained mothers" who would be providing a "state service of high rank."

Ada's vision was prescient of the welfare system and free early years provision (under the 'sure-start' system, which was not introduced until 1998). Her celebration and elevation of working-class mothering contrasts sharply with early 20th-century political rhetoric from the likes of MP John Burns which sought to blame 'neglectful' working mothers for child illness and death, instead of tackling the real cause: poverty.

War, work and retirement

Ada, as a practical pacifist, refused to participate in war work of any kind. She opposed the NUWSS's suspension of the fight for women's vote in order to concentrate on supporting the war effort. Instead she joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

In October 1914, Ada led a deputation of the National Federation of Women Workers and The Women's Labour League to the Rochdale Health Committee, convincing the local authority to establish health and maternity centres for the working women left to support families on the home front. A year later, concerned for the sufferings produced by wartime unemployment, she successfully established a relief committee that doled out food from vans to Rochdale mothers and their infants.

Ada continued her campaigning between the wars. However, she was also a businesswoman, running a series of successful rag, textile and health-food stalls and shops across the north of England. This entrepreneurial spirit had been evident even at the age of 17, when Ada ran her own milk round. Thanks to this industriousness she was able to retire in comfort, even travelling the world before dying, aged 70, at her home in Rochdale with her devoted daughter Doris.

Doris documented her mother's multifaceted career as 'factory girl', protest writer, trade unionist, Clarion vanner and campaigner for social justice in her biography *Ada Nield Chew: The Life and Writings of a Working Woman* (1982). In 1983 Alan Plater adapted this work for Granada TV as a three-part series called *The Clarion Van*. Jill Liddington and Jill Norris's *One Hand Tied Behind Us: The Rise of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Virago, 1978) charts Ada's contribution to the movement alongside her peers in Manchester and Lancashire.

The approach of the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People's Act provides an opportunity to remember and celebrate once again the contribution of peaceful and working-class suffragists such as Ada Nield Chew. Doris summed up her mother with these words: "In everything she said and did it was the working woman she was concerned for, and as a working woman she spoke [...] If ever there was a woman who combined a fierce sense of injustice with compassion for others and determination to 'stand on her own two feet', it was my mother, Ada Nield Chew."

Kirsty Bunting and Orlagh McCabe are senior lecturers in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. They coordinate a series of school workshops, talks and community events, as well as a travelling exhibition and a forthcoming conference, celebrating the life and legacy of Ada Nield Chew

For information about the authors' schools project and conference inspired by Ada Nield Chew, visit www.localyouthengagement.org

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