

STRIKE AT THE NUTCLOUGH MILL & WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE

World War I brought a stark end to frivolities such as 'Prize Fights' as most men were enlisted early and sent off to fight. By 1916 the Nutclough Mill (officially known as The Hebden Bridge Fustian Manufacturing Co-operative Society) was worked exclusively by women who were appointed to make uniforms for soldiers in the trenches. The work was arduous and the hours were long and yet when the women requested for an increase in their piece rate (the amount each worker produced) they were flatly refused.

Unsurprisingly, with figures such as celebrated suffragette Lavinia Saltonstall living in the vicinity (at 28 Unity St) who actively encouraged local women to demand fair pay, in protest, the Nutclough workers downed their tools and went on strike for six weeks! Sarah and Mary Grace Butterworth of 19 Lees Rd, Grace Greenwood of 31 Lees Rd and Hannah, Betsy Ellen and Edith Crabtree of 8 Lees Rd were amongst them. The government eventually intervened and brought the strike to an end suggesting that from that time forward unions and employers should adopt a clear wages list. The compromise brought compliance for the rest of the war, though records show that none of these women had or ever did actually marry afterwards; possibly as a result of their mistreatment at the hands their employers, but perhaps more likely because of their pressing want for independence.

At that same time married women in the area also began to break away from extended family households in preference of new, less domestically demanding nuclear family set ups which would permit them to earn a living in their own right. Even the more affluent housewives of Heptonstall and Old Town began to move down into the valley with their husbands and youngest children; often leaving the older ones in the care of a grandparent or relative, so that they might be able to support themselves or at least supplement their husband's wages. For example, in 1910 Charlotte Barnes left the rest of her family with relations in Heptonstall and moved down to 14 Windsor Road along with her husband Arthur and young son Arnold in order to work at the former Foster Mill on Victoria Rd; the Fosters having previously bought the whole of Windsor Rd, Windsor View and Crown Cottages to house their employees. Consequently she like other working women were amongst the first 40% to get the vote in 1918.