

# SUFFRAGETTES IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

**Women's suffrage in the United Kingdom** became a national movement in 1872. The Reform Acts in the 19th Century extended the franchise to most men. During this time establishing woman's suffrage on some level was a political topic, although it would not be until 1872 that it would become a national movement with the formation of the National Society for Women's Suffrage and later the more influential National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The movement shifted sentiments in favour of woman suffrage by 1906. It was at this point that the militant campaign began with the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

In 1913 Militant Suffragism came to Kelso when the Kelso Chronicle of 13th April reported:-

*There was a considerable commotion in Kelso on Saturday morning when it became known that a couple of women, presumably suffragettes, had been caught red-handed in an attempt to destroy by fire the fine new stand at Kelso Racecourse. . . Constables (from Kelso) were in watch, and the women pounced upon and arrested. In the walk down to Kelso Police Office the ladies gave lusty vent to the suffragette song "March On." – which had been adopted by the W.S.P.U in 1910: Following their trial at Jedburgh Sherriff Court on 19th May 1913 the accused, all from Edinburgh, were given a range of sentences, **Agnes Colquhoun Thomson** (aged 67) – not proven and discharged, **Elizabeth Thomson** (aged 65) – found guilty but, due to her age, leniency was urged and she was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. **Arabella Charlotte Scott, Edith Hudson, and Donald McEwen** were found guilty and given nine months' imprisonment. They were escorted the next day to Calton Jail in Edinburgh.*



Kelso Race Course today (Photo courtesy of Christine Henderson)

## The Kelso Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies

The Kelso Committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (which was the non-militant and non-party branch of the movement) took the decision on August 1914 to join with other groups in the town to fund raise and provide comforts for soldiers.

In February 1914 Dr Elsie Inglis addressed the Kelso branch of the National Suffrage Society where she reckoned that only half a dozen women in Scotland were engaged in acts of militancy. However this appeared to be contradicted in a speech to the Peebles Society's AGM

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 led to a suspension of all politics, including the militant suffragette campaigns. Lobbying did take place quietly. In 1918, a coalition government passed the Representation of the People Act 1918 enfranchising women over the age of 30 who met

minimum property qualifications. Ten years later, in 1928, the Conservative government passed the Representation of the People (equal franchise) 1928 giving the vote to all women over the age of 21.



## DR ELSIE INGLIS

Although Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst threw themselves into the war effort as fervently as they had thrown themselves into the suffrage struggle, not all women followed them. Many got involved in peace organisations. The war opened up many opportunities for women to work and earn good wages. Dr. Elsie Inglis created all-women hospital units to serve Allied armies in the field.

Despite her already notable achievements it was her efforts during the First World War that brought her fame. She was instrumental in setting up the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service Committee, an organisation funded by the women's suffrage movement with the express aim of providing all female staffed relief hospitals for the Allied war effort.

The organisation was active in sending teams to France, Serbia and Russia.

## Kelso's contribution to Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service

Throughout the war years and beyond the people of Kelso and District held various fund raising events to provide funds for beds etc. These took the form of limelight lectures, flag days arranged by the Provost, whist drives and appeals at concerts etc.

When Elsie Inglis approached the Royal Army Medical Corps to offer them a ready-made Medical Unit staffed by qualified women, the War Office told her "My good lady, go home and sit still". It was, instead, the French government that took up her offer and established her unit in Serbia.

Elsie Inglis, herself, went with the teams sent to Serbia where her presence and work in improving hygiene reduced typhus and other epidemics that had been raging there. In 1915 she was captured and repatriated but upon reaching home she began organising funds for a Scottish Women's Hospital team in Russia. She headed the team when it left for Odessa, Russia in 1916 but lasted only a year before she was forced to return to the United Kingdom, suffering from cancer.