



CREWE
TOWN COUNCIL

CREWE



Ada Nield

1894

Early life

Ada was born on the 28th January 1870 in Staffordshire to her father, William Nield, who was a farmer and her mother, Jane Nield.

She came from a poor working class family. Ada had 12 other brothers and sisters.

She left school at the age of 11.

The Victorian period (1837-1901) saw many laws passed improving the education available for all children. In 1870, a law was passed making it mandatory for all children up to the age of 10 to attend school.

Once Ada was 11 years old, her father sold his farm to get more money and moved to Worcestershire.

Around 1887, him and his family travelled to Crewe in search of work.



- **The law changed in 1870. Why do you think this is good?**
- **How do you think school might have changed from 1870 to the present day?**
- **How do you think Ada felt moving away from her home to a new place?**



Credit: Crewe Heritage Centre

Compton's Clothing Factory, Brindle Road

By the age of 24, she was working as a tailor at Compton's Clothing Factory in Bridle Road, Crewe.

A tailor sews clothes to fit people.

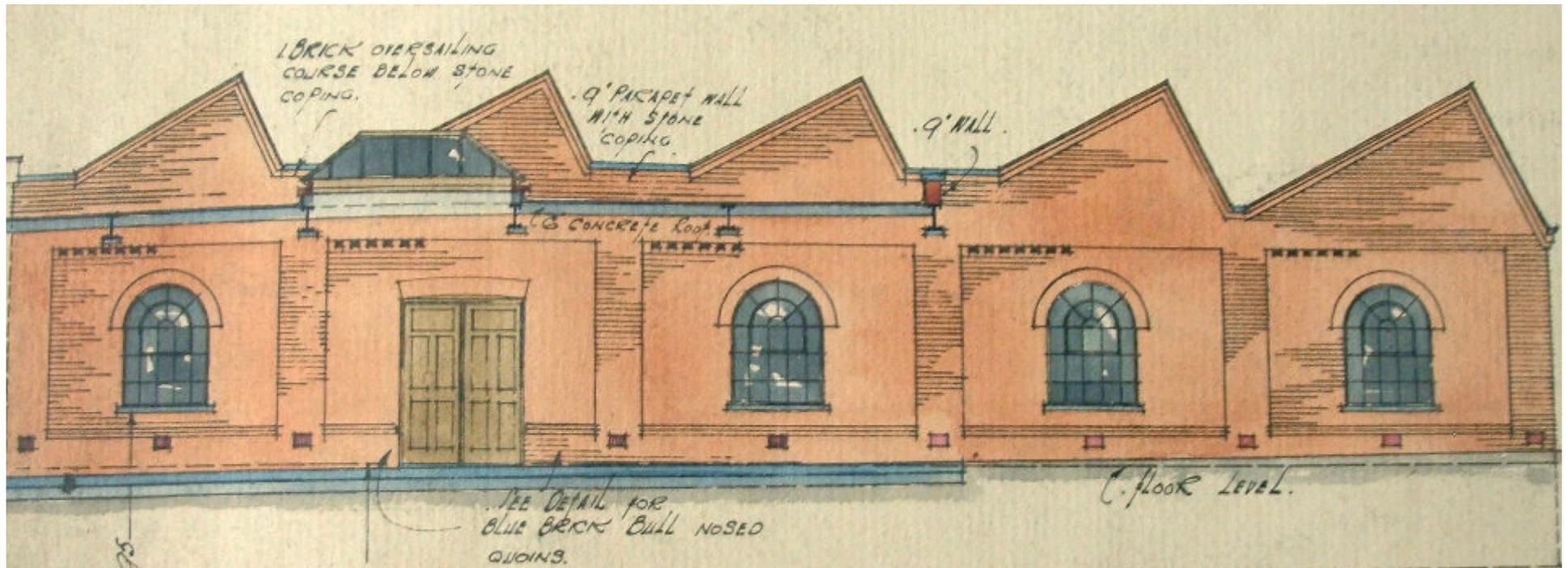
It would have taken her 14 minutes to walk to the factory from her house at 23 Albert Street.

As a tailor, she made the uniforms for the train staff at Crewe for the London and North Western Railway company in Crewe.

We know about Ada mainly from her letters to the *Crewe Chronicle* which started in May 1894. Her letters were anonymous and she signed the letters from 'A Crewe Factory Girl'.



- **Can you spot any similarities between the illustration of the Compton Clothing Factory and the factory in the present day?**



Credit: Cheshire Archives and Local Studies



ENTRANCE

A Crewe Factory Girl

Her letters are an insight into the lives of Victorian working class women and the exploitation they faced compared to their male colleagues.

The factory employed 400 women and girls and 100 men but the men were paid a lot higher than the women.

The letters gripped Crewe who eagerly awaited the next instalment.

Her letters criticised the conditions that women and girls were expected to work in, unfair work allocation, being charged for tea breaks and expected to work for 10 hours a day to earn only 8 shillings a week. That is about £33 a week now.

Ada's main cause for concern was focused on the women and girls in the factory not being paid the living wage. She instead called it a 'lingering, dying wage'.

As a result of her true identity being discovered, she had to leave Compton's Clothing Factory and was recruited by the Labour party instead. However, her letters made a big impact on the factory managers and conditions and pay were improved for all women at the factory.



- **What do you think Ada means by 'a living, dying wage'?**

LIFE IN A CREWE FACTORY.

[BY A FACTORY GIRL.]

**for space, I remain, sir, yours sincerely,
A CREWE FACTORY GIRL.
Crewe, June 26th, 1894.**

An (ex) Crewe Factory Girl

Following this, Ada soon joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) who had offered her employment should her identity as the Crewe Factory Girl be discovered. She became extremely active in this role and was soon elected to be a Nantwich Poor Law Guardian to work with the Local Trades Council, touring in their van committed to improving workhouse conditions for women.

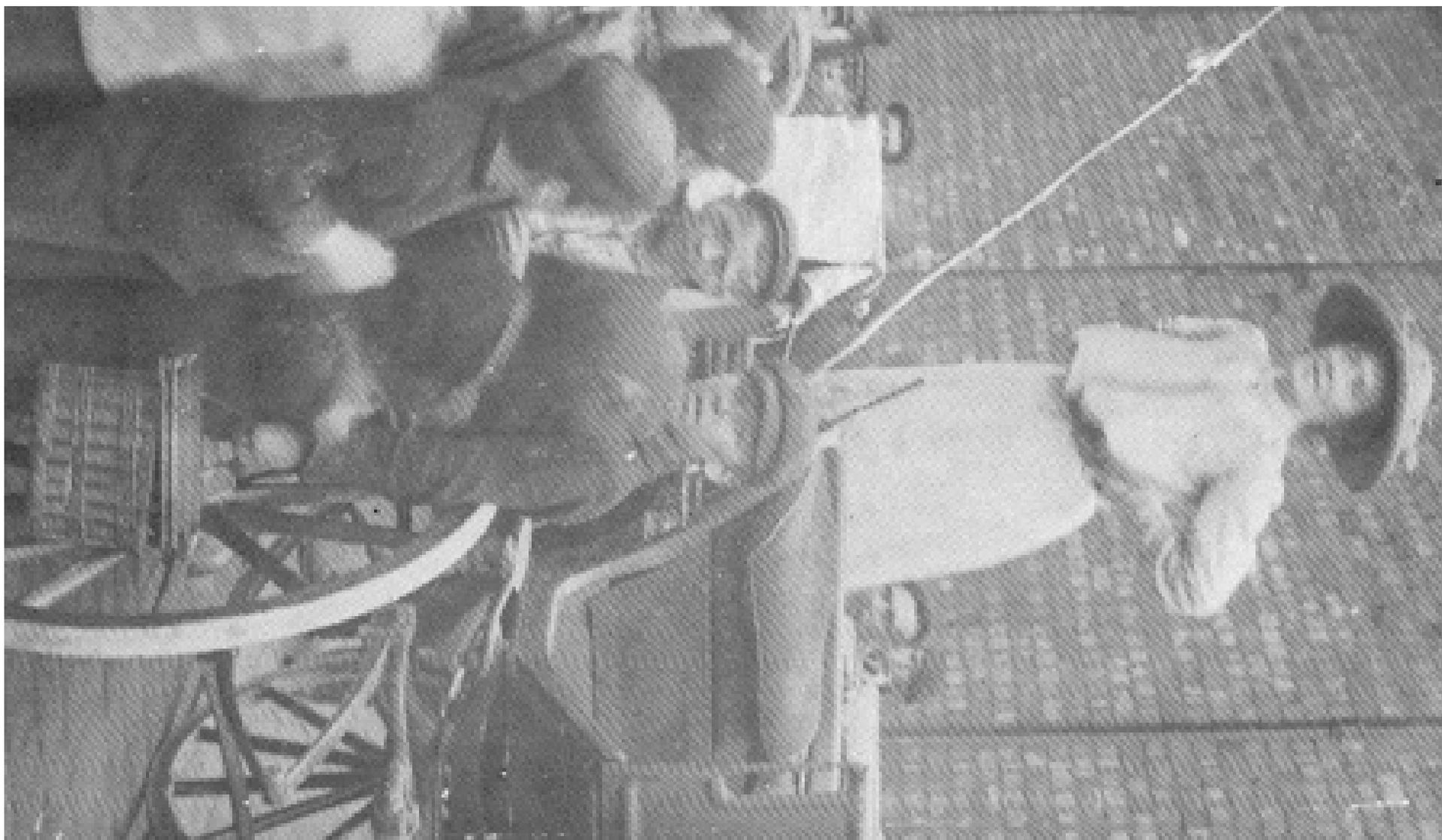
What she had to say was not met very well and only 1 out of 5 of her initiatives were pass through. This initiative meant that the rule forbidding conversation between inmates at the workhouse during mealtime was abolished.

She then became an active supporter of the women's suffrage movement although felt that it was only represented by the middle class. She believed that the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was not looking to secure votes for middle class women.

She was quoted as saying “would enable a man or woman to simply vote because they are man and woman, not because they are more fortunate financially than their fellow men and women”.

Following World War 1, the Representation of the People Act in 1918 was passed which allowed women over the age of 30 to vote. The suffragette movement had won.

Ada withdrew from political involvements from this point and started her own mail- order tailoring business.



Credit: Cheshire Archives and Local Studies



Credit: BFI National Archive

Further newspaper correspondance

Ada continued to regularly write to local and national newspapers through either one- off letters to discuss her opinion or to reply to other letters. She had correspondence with Christabel Pankhurst whom she questioned for not supporting working class women enough.



- **Read the letter of the 'Working Women's Grievance'.**
- **What do you notice about the difference in the treatment of men and women?**
- **How much had changed from 1894 when Ada originally wrote her letters to 1913 when this letter was written?**
- **Why do you think women were treated this way?**
- **Why do you think it took so long for women to be treated equally?**

"EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY."

THE WORKING-WOMAN'S GRIEVANCE.

By ADA NIELD CHEW.

I was at a "progressive" meeting the other evening where it was denied that women suffer from inequality of opportunity, and secondly where it was denied that the vote would help them if they do.

An ounce of experience is worth a pound of theory. And since even working-women have now begun to use their brains, the time has gone when it was possible to get them to believe unthinking statements of this kind. Their experience is dead against it. Take my own as a case in point. I belong to the respectable working-classes. The inequality between the sexes has hit me in the face ever since I was born. It made me a rebel and keeps me one. I have a number of brothers. My mother was a model wife and mother, of the type usually approved by men. She was born and reared with the conviction that men were made to have all the good things of life, and that women should thankfully take what was left. Her religion was the well-being of her beloved sons. Her daughters are of the sex who are born to suffer; it was torture to her that her men children should have to suffer too.

THE SEX HANDICAP.

The girls in an average working-class household such as this early learn that equality of opportunity between the sexes does not exist. The boy is free out of school hours, or, if by some chance he should not be free, his not being so is recognised as a hardship, which is a salve to his sex dignity. But whilst her brother enjoys freedom the girl is the little domestic drudge, and far from it being so recognised as a hardship she is, on the contrary, regarded as "an unnatural daughter" or an "unnatural sister" if she determines to take as much liberty as her brother. No wonder she is a cheap, meek, downtrodden industrial slave! What else can be expected?

The father's wage, amongst the working classes, is never enough to keep girls at home any more than boys. The time comes when both are of an age to begin to work. It is immediately recognised that the boy must have every opportunity which it is possible to afford. He must be apprenticed to a "proper" trade. It cannot be helped that he is "eating his head off" for a few years. He'll get it back afterwards. And it is very important for a man to have a decent trade.

Now for the girl. What for her? The same opportunity? But there is not the same opportunity to be got. Apart altogether from the trades in which men are exclusively employed, and in which they will probably always have a monopoly, such as coal-mining, engine-driving, etc., there is no opportunity for the girl to be properly apprenticed even to those trades in which woman already works, and which are as capable of being completely managed by women as by men, given equal opportunity. Let me come back to my own case as an illustration. For my brothers there were plenty of opportunities, and each one of them now enjoys a decent job and a decent income. For me there was this choice. I might be a teacher. As a matter of fact I could not, because my brother, who is one, was rather more than we could properly afford. But if I had become a teacher I could never have earned—or, rather, got—as much as my brother; and, however highly qualified I might have become, I could never have reached the pinnacle at the top, because it is banned to women. I might have gone into a shop. As a matter of fact I did—after the employment I had previously had was deliberately taken from me because I protested against its conditions. But the plums in the distributive trade, too, are reserved for men. I got 5s. per week and part of my food.

WOMEN'S CHEAP LABOUR.

The Civil Service was banned to me, as it is to most girls of the working classes, because we could not afford the training. But if it had been open I could never have got such a job as one of my brothers has got because the higher branches of the service are the perquisites of men. My brother, bless him, would be the first to acknowledge that with equal opportunity I could have become as capable of doing his work as he. But no woman may—only because she is a woman. There was one job left for me—factory work. Men who want to make money make a practice of coming to industrial towns to set up their factories, where there are plenty of girls who have no opportunity such as boys have, and are ready prey for the exploiter. There was a Government contractor of this type in the town where I lived. I worked for him. So did 400 other girls, and a number of men. The girls worked longer than the men, taking their work home at night. Some of the work, as, for instance, the pressing of policemen's great-coats, done by the women, was extremely heavy work. Some of the work, such as the "parsing" or examining of the girls' work, and the darning of holes, and braiding of officers' tunics, done by the men, was very light and easy work, and could easily have been done by women. But those sort of jobs were the perquisites of men and were well paid. My average wage—and I was above the average as a worker—was 8s. per week. Experiences such as this, as soon as we have shaken off the shackles of age-old traditions and the tyranny of blind prejudice, are fatal to the retention of any notion that there is equality of opportunity between men and women of the working classes.

Do you suppose that if I and those who worked with me had had a vote that we wouldn't have made the Government see the necessity of a minimum wage for women? A job which, it was understood, was stipulated by the Government should be done by men, was given to us—except when the Government inspector was expected. Why? Because the men's price was 1s. 5d., and we were paid 5d.

Unless women get the vote soon, and are so placed in a position to at least compel the Government to give a lead in this direction, there is going to be more and more dislocation in the industrial world, to the hurt of men and women both.

Further discussion points and activities



- Has anything here surprised you?



- Download the Letter Resource Pack.
- Get into a group of 3 and collectively read one letter together.
- What has shocked you about these letters?
- Pick out the key messages Ada is conveying through her letter and present these quotes back to the rest of your class. Think about how Ada is feeling in these letters and use that in your presentation.
- How did the *Crewe Chronicle* react to her letters? Did this surprise you?
- Ada felt very strongly about women being treated equally to men and worked hard to get this message across. Is there anything in your life at the moment that you feel strongly about?
- Write a letter to your local newspaper talking about this. Remember to include a mixture of facts and opinions and your use of words to convey emotions.

- **Read this quote from one of Ada's letters.**



“We are not asking for pity, sir, we ask for justice. Surely it would not be more than just to pay us at such a rate, that we could realise a living wage — in the true sense of the words — in a reasonable time, say one present working day of from 9 to 10 hours — till the eight hour day becomes general, and reaches even factory girls. Our work is necessary (presumably) to our employers. Were we not employed others would have to be, and if of the opposite sex, I venture to say, sir, would have to be paid on a very different scale. Why, because we are weak women, without pluck and grit enough to stand up for our rights, should we be ground down to this miserable wage?”

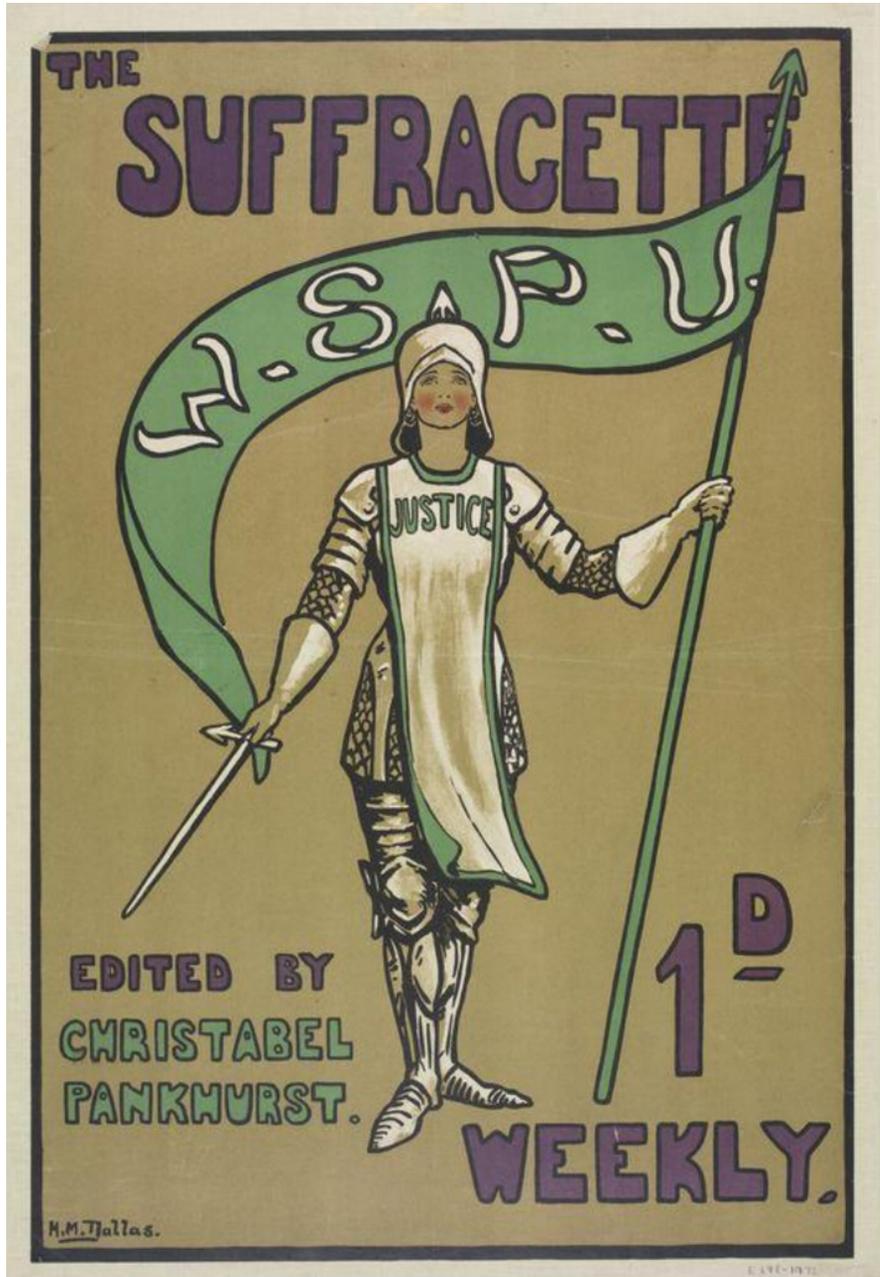
- **How might you feel working 10 hours a day?**
- **Do you think this still happens in the world today?**
- **How do you feel about this?**



- **Watch the short video about the life of Ada Nield Chew.**



- **Take a look at these suffragette banners and posters.**
- **Suffragettes used a mixture of words, images and rhymes to get their message across.**
- **Think about the topic you felt strongly about earlier.**
- **How might you create a poster using the same techniques that suffragettes used to get your message across.**
- **You might want to plan your poster first on paper or create a small prototype before creating the final version.**



Credit: Harvard University



SUFFRAGETTE PROCESSION JUNE 17, 1911.



Credit: Bain News Service



- **For a highlight of Ada's quotes- see below.**

Every Monday morning a boy comes round with a bag and a tray of numbered checks. We each are compelled to buy one of these checks the one on which our number is inscribed. Some cost two pence, some three-pence. If we pay two-pence, we have the inestimable privilege of a seat in the tea-room and a mug of tea every afternoon. If we pay three-pence, we have, in addition, the privilege of some hot water at lunch- or dinnertime. Now, there are a number of us who never take this tea. I am one of them. We thus pay two-pence for simply nothing at all. Personally I have two reasons for not drinking the tea. First because I do not like it, secondly because I do not consider that I need it, and I object either to drink tea which I do not like, or to drink tea which I do not consider that I need, and I object also to pay for what I never get.

The rates paid for the work done by us are so fearfully low

As for recreation and enjoying the beauties of nature, the seasons come and go, and we have barely time to notice whether it is spring or summer.

To take what may be considered a good week's wage the work has to be so close and unremitting that we cannot be said to 'live' — we merely exist. We eat, we sleep, we work, endlessly, ceaselessly work, from Monday morning till Saturday night

Now, sir, our working day — that is, in the factory — consists of from 9 to 10 hours.

Now we factory girls are aware of the public opinion of us. That we are regarded as quite the lowest class of female workers. As a noisy, cheeky, idle, ignorant, shallow class of girls.

The fact that we are suffering from a great evil which stands in urgent need of redressing

I told you last week that the favourites are of various kinds. Amongst them are widows who have children to maintain, and women who have sick husbands, and other pitiable cases which I could mention.

Those of us who for any reason, laziness or otherwise, do not manage to arrive before the doors are locked, are allowed to come in at half-past-eight or nine o'clock on payment of a penny.

The employer proceeded to interrogate me in the most merciless manner.

8 shillings a week...I wish some of those, whoever they may be who mete it out to us, would try to 'live' on it for a few weeks, as the factory girl has to do 52 weeks in a year. To pay board and lodging, to provide herself decent boots and clothes to stand all weathers, to pay an occasional doctor's bill, literature, and a holiday away from the scope of her daily drudging, for which even the factory girl has the audacity to long sometimes

Are you prepared, my reader, to come and work hard with us 9 hours in the factory, and then to come home with us and begin again, and sew till you can sew no longer, from sheer fatigue — such fatigue as some of you, I hope have not felt — and then to rise early again with some of us and do a little more before it is time to wend our way back for another day of it.