

Amelia Scott 1860-1952 - Suffragist & Feminist

By Dr Anne Logan

Location of Plaque—36 London Road

Her Name Lives on at Pembury Hospital

A well-known public worker, Miss Amelia Scott, of 4, Lansdowne Road, Tunbridge Wells, died on Tuesday, aged ninety-two. Miss Scott was a poor law guardian and in recognition of her work for the Pembury Institution a ward in the Pembury Hospital has been named after her. Miss Scott also helped to form the Tunbridge Wells branch of the National Council of Women [NCW] in 1895.



With this brief tribute, the *Kent and Sussex Courier* marked the passing in March 1952 of a woman whose activities forty years previously had been featured in the local press on a weekly basis. Amelia Scott not only served on the Board of Guardians, she was also a local councillor, suffrage activist and committed churchwoman. During her lifetime she promoted an impressive range of community projects in her home town, from a hostel for working women to social housing. She participated in the cultural and political transformation by which the Poor Law gave way to the Welfare State.

Amelia's many campaigns in the Tunbridge Wells area included not only support for the non-militant women's suffrage society but also for amenities for working women and girls. These included the establishment of a working girls' social club and the provision of a women's lodging house pre-1914, and campaigns for women police and a maternity home post-war. She was awarded the Order of the Golden Palm by the King of Belgium for her help to Belgian refugees during World War One and attended a Buckingham Palace garden party for women war workers on account of the soldiers' laundry which she managed from 1915 to 1918.



Amelia Scott

Amelia's influence was not restricted to the local area. She regularly participated at NCW Annual Conferences and served on its national executive. In 1906 the Tunbridge Wells branch, under her direction, hosted the conference. She also established a national committee of the NCW, called the Public Service Committee, and was its secretary for 17 years. In 1919, when women were allowed to become magistrates for the first time, the committee – previously just for women in local government – became the Public Service and Magistrates Committee (PSMC). She corresponded with many of the leading figures of the NCW including Louise Creighton (founding president and wife of a Bishop of London) and worked closely with Florence Keynes (mother of Maynard) on the PSMC. Her high-profile correspondents also included Beatrice Webb, Eleanor Rathbone MP, Millicent Fawcett (suffragist leader) and Clementine Churchill. In 1918, together with other interested parties, the NCW established the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (later the National Council for One Parent Families) and Amelia was an early member. Unmarried mothers were, to say the least, a controversial cause in 1918, and her involvement is a measure of her care for those who were marginalised and stigmatised in society.

Amelia was born in Surrey in 1860 but by the following year the family had moved to Southborough. Her father, Syms Scott, was described on the census return of 1861 as an accountant and the family were reasonably prosperous, employing at that time three servants, a housemaid, nursemaid and cook. Amelia had several older siblings and her younger sister, Louisa, was born in Southborough. By the time of the 1871 census her father had died and the two younger sisters and their mother were living in Tunbridge Wells, now with only one servant.

Ten years later Amelia was staying with her aunt at her grandmother's house in Southborough, the three of them being attended to by a cook and three maids. Thus Amelia's background was comfortably middle class – her aunt and grandmother were described as 'living on own means' – although the family was not exactly wealthy. Her grandmother was the widow of a clergyman and there is clear evidence of Amelia's own religious belief and commitment.

After their grandmother's death Amelia and Louisa set up home together in Tunbridge Wells. The sisters, neither of whom ever married, stayed together until their deaths: the younger woman died, at the age of ninety, only ten days after her sister. Louisa participated in many of her older sister's activities. The younger woman featured on several of the committees that her elder sister was involved in. The Scott sisters were comfortably off for their times, but not wealthy. They lived in respectable residences, looked after by a single servant. They each inherited one-sixth of their father's estate and do not appear to have earned a living at any stage. But budgets were tight. In 1906 Amelia mused on 'St. Francis's ideal of a simple life'.



Amelia Scott's memorial window at the Tunbridge Wells Hospital chapel at Pembury.

'May we not catch the spirit of St Francis today? ... Would not absolute sincerity in religion... in relationship with the world and our fellow men... bring about a simpler life – a life free and unfettered, a life of perfect joy? Would not everything be much simpler if there were no pretensions? Why must one with a limited income [act] as if she were as rich as her wealthy friends? Must her clothes be as numerous and as fine? Would the very rich care so much for display if no-one aped them or vied with them?'

It is very likely that she was the one with the 'limited income' who could not afford to rival the finery of wealthier ladies.

There is very little evidence of Amelia's initial education or of the first thirty or so years of her life, although she probably participated in the conventional philanthropic activities such as running mothers' meetings and teaching Sunday school classes. In 1894 she attended a conference of the NCW whilst staying with a friend near Bristol.

This seems to have been an epiphany: '[i]n those days in Tunbridge Wells we lived in our own small, self-satisfied circles, both in religion, politics and class,' she later recalled. 'At Bristol I walked into a wholly different atmosphere, and it was an

atmosphere where I *would* be'. Inspired by this conference, Amelia formed an NCW branch in Tunbridge Wells, holding the initial meeting in her own home and serving as its secretary for the next thirty-five years. Soon after, she became a Poor Law Guardian (PLG) for the Tonbridge Union. Together with five other local branch members, she received social work training in London. It seems, therefore, that around her mid-30s, she had truly found a vocation as a social activist.

Amelia was an avowed supporter of women's suffrage from 1905 and in 1913 took part in the non-militant suffrage 'pilgrimage' to London organised by the newly-formed Kentish Federation of Women's Suffrage Societies. She gave speeches en route, including at the Royal Victoria Hall, Southborough. Her leaflet bag, emblazoned in colours of red and green, is now kept at the Women's Library.

To all her activities Amelia brought a range of skills: as organiser, committee member, worker, fund-raiser, propagandist, tactician, politician and public speaker. She took part in routine tasks – mending soldiers' clothing and, in her old age, knitting for the Seamen's Mission – as well as in more public aspects. As a PLG she not only regularly inspected the workhouse premises at Pembury but also visited people for whom the Union was responsible including those who had been sent to the County Asylum at Maidstone. She did not confine herself to acceptably feminine tasks on the Board of Guardians: she was on the Union's Finance Committee as well as the Children's Committee, the House Committee and the Mental Deficiency Committee. Her career as a PLG continued until 1930 when the Board's functions were transferred to the Kent County Council's Public Assistance Committee.

Amelia was aware of the many changes that had taken place in her lifetime, as the Tonbridge Union workhouse was gradually and incrementally converted into Pembury Hospital and wrote about them in her book, *The Passing of a Great Dread*. As with her other writing, this work provides evidence of her religious faith:

'The whole world, through their actions, is beginning to see that "God's perpetual providence" is carrying out the work of men's salvation, and that things which were cast down, are being raised up, and that things which have been old are made new, and that all things are returning to perfection through HIM from whom they took their origin even our LORD JESUS CHRIST'.

She maintained life-long interest in Pembury hospital and sent Christmas flowers to a ward only weeks before her death, by which time the hospital was part of the National Health Service.

Amelia Scott regarded her work as a progressive force, albeit steeped in traditional virtues of religious duty and altruism. The completion and continuation of projects was very important to her and this thoroughness is an indication of her professionalism and attention to detail. She was paradoxically both a modern, independent woman of the twentieth century and a Victorian spinster who lived quietly with her sister and a servant.

Acknowledgements: The above is a revised and shortened version of an article published in *Women's History Magazine*, no.62 (2010). I would like to thank Helen Boyce, without whom only a very little of my research on Amelia would have been possible.