

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

A Heritage Lottery Funded project

(Julia Sarah) Anne Cobden-Sanderson
1853–1926

By Clara Manasian Cook

“I am a law breaker because I want to be a law maker”

Anne (also known as Annie) Cobden was born in London in 1853, one of six children born to Catherine Anne and Richard Cobden. Richard Cobden was a radical politician and statesman and Catherine Anne was the daughter of a timber merchant. Anne’s early years were spent at Dunford House in Midhurst, but when her father died in 1865, when Anne was just 12 years old, she was sent to Germany to continue her education. Despite her young age when she lost her father, his career as a statesman and radical politician affected Anne’s beliefs and political consciousness.

After her mother moved to Wales in 1869, Anne spent long periods of time amongst family friends, including the poet and novelist, George MacDonald, and the well-known designer, printer and socialist activist, William Morris. She resided at ‘The Retreat’ (later known as Kelmscott House, a Georgian brick mansion at 26 Upper Mall in Hammersmith, overlooking the River Thames, which later became the home of William Morris until his death). Within these social circles, subjects such as socialist politics, arts and literature were often discussed.

In 1881, Anne, her sister Jane and their friend Jane Morris, travelled to Siena, Italy, where Anne met the young lawyer Thomas James Sanderson. They quickly fell in love, were engaged in February and married on 5th August 1882. Both Thomas and Anne adopted the joint surname Cobden-Sanderson, an unusual act of equality of the time period, but as her husband poignantly wrote in his diary, it was done ‘in order that she might not lose her name’. The couple had two children, Richard (1884–1964) and Stella (1886–1979).

Both Thomas and Anne had progressive political opinions and the early years of their marriage were spent reading, travelling and engaging in philanthropic activities and studying theosophy and vegetarianism. The couple continued to be good friends with William Morris and were influenced by the economic ideas of the progressive American writer Henry George. Anne eventually went on to become a socialist and in 1890 joined William Morris’ Hammersmith Socialist Society. Anne encouraged Thomas to take up the hobby of bookbinding and through manual work and with Anne’s help, Thomas set up The Doves Bindery in 1893, which eventually became the Doves Press in 1899.

Anne Cobden-Sanderson became more involved in the socialist movement in Britain after 1900, and in 1902 she joined the Independent Labour Party organising a series of lectures for the party. She continued her social work in London and supported Margaret and Rachel MacMillan with their pioneering Bow Children’s Clinic which provided dental help, surgical aid and lessons in breathing and healthy posture.



Anne and the MacMillian sisters also campaigned for school meals and compulsory medical inspections. Anne was also focussed on the issue of women's rights and she was prominent in the campaign for the right to work.

For several years Anne had been a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), but she was frustrated with its lack of success and in 1905 she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). She is recorded as having been the first prominent constitutional suffragist to have defected to the militants. In October 1906, Anne, along with members of the WSPU, Mary Gawthorpe, Charlotte Despard and Emmeline Pankhurst were arrested at a large demonstration outside the House of Commons in Westminster. Anne was found guilty at her trial and was sentenced to two months in Holloway Women's Prison.

The arrest, trial and imprisonment caused quite a controversy at the time, with newspapers reporting that Anne supposedly said in court: 'We have talked so much for the Cause, now let us suffer for it... I am a law breaker because I want to be a law maker.' Anne's friend the playwright and co-founder of the London School of Economics, George Bernard Shaw, wrote in *The Times* in 1906, that 'one of the nicest women in England is suffering from the coarsest indignity' of being imprisoned. Anne bore the imprisonment well. Her prison diaries, written on several sheets of rough blue paper given to her by the warden of Holloway, show a woman who was thoughtful and strong spirited and who continued to follow the cause of women's suffrage even from the confines of her twelve- by six- foot prison cell. She describes accurately in her diaries the routine of prison life, the food and her fluctuating health.

Despite some quiet questioning of herself and her actions, she remained faithful to her ideals while confined in prison and on the final pages of her diary she states: 'why have I come to feel that the enfranchisement of women is at this moment of supreme importance to the progress of humanity? Because I do not believe that the present industrial system can continue, but will give place to one based on more moral and eternal principles and for the building of which it is necessary that women should take this part.' Anne Cobden-Sanderson was released to great fanfare and the NUWSS organised a banquet at the Savoy Hotel in her honour on 11th December 1906.

The following year, Anne and other members of the WSPU began to question the leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and their habit of making decisions without consulting members. Feeling that the organisation was becoming undemocratic, Anne Cobden-Sanderson and six other women left the WSPU and founded the Women's Freedom League (WFL). Anne was one of the WFL's most tireless campaigners speaking in outdoor meetings and taking part in militant protests. She was arrested again in August 1909 while picketing outside 10 Downing Street with a petition to Herbert Asquith. She was arrested a third time while leading a procession to Parliament in November 1910, but avoided imprisonment through the intervention of Winston Churchill, whose wedding she had attended in 1908 and who had previously been a dinner guest at her house.

After hard campaigning but continuing frustration, Anne decided to turn her attention to the tactic of tax resistance to gain the Government's support for women's suffrage. In October 1909, Anne helped to establish the Tax Resistance League (TRL) with the motto of 'No Vote No Tax'. Around the same time as the formation of the TRL, Anne became interested in land reform and published a pamphlet highlighting her father's past involvement in progressive politics entitled: *Richard Cobden and the Land of the People* (ILP. 1909).



Anne was increasingly concerned with unemployment and publicly critical of the treatment of the poor in her local area of Hammersmith, so much so that she was elected on a reform platform to the Hammersmith board of guardians in March 1910, which she retained until 1922. When the Labour Party announced its commitment to women's suffrage at their annual conference in January 1912, the NUWSS entered into negotiation with the Party. The NUWSS announced its intention in April 1912 to support Labour Party candidates in Parliamentary by-elections and established an Election Fighting Fund (EFF). Anne Cobden-Sanderson, who had been a long-time supporter of the Labour Party, donated generously to the EFF.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 led to a split amongst women's suffrage campaigners. The NUWSS' official stance was that Asquith's government should do everything possible to avoid war, but two days after war was declared in August 1914, Millicent Fawcett declared that the NUWSS was suspending all political activity until the conflict was over. The NUWSS would support the war effort but not become involved in persuading young men to join the fight. Not everyone within NUWSS agreed with this stance and Anne Cobden-Sanderson joined the ranks of female peace campaigners. In January 1915 Mary Sheepshanks published an open Christmas letter to the women of Germany and Austria from 100 British women pacifists. Anne was amongst some of the campaigners who signed the letter. Although she never made it to the First International Congress of Women held in The Hague in 1915, she continued to support the cause of peace and mixed largely in pacifist circles in London.

After the war Anne remained active in the Labour Party in Hammersmith and although she was not present at the formation of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 1915, she continued to donate to the organisation up until her death. Anne Cobden-Sanderson died at 15 Upper Mall, Hammersmith on 2nd November 1926. In the week following her death, newspapers throughout England paid tribute to her in their obituary columns. The Daily Telegraph called her 'a character of intellectual power' and the Manchester Guardian described her as a 'singularly gentle lady who did rather startling things.' The journalist for the Manchester Guardian finishes his short obituary for Anne with the words: 'She combined great charm of manner with real courage and unconventionality when the call [to protest] came'.

