

**Violet Bland
Suffragette**



**Forced Feeding at
Aylesbury Gaol**

“They twisted my neck, jerked my head back, closing my throat, held all the time as in a vice. I gasped for breath, and suffered tortures mentally lest the food which they were trying to pour down my throat should go into my lungs... They expect, and try, to perform the whole operation in two minutes. There were always six or seven to one, so that there was really no possibility of the victim doing much in the way of protesting...therefore no excuse for the brutality shown on several occasions.

They pinched and clutched my nose unmercifully and at the end of the assault, when I did not rise quickly from the chair because of my helpless and breathless condition, they snatched the chair from under me, and flung me on to the floor... There is no doubt whatever about the attacks being made with the object of breaking us down.”

So wrote Violet Bland, describing the savage and brutal business of force feeding inflicted on her when she and her fellow suffragettes instigated a hunger strike in 1912 in Aylesbury Gaol. She had been born in 1863, the oldest of nine children of a poor railway fitter, William Henry Bland and his wife Violet. Though of humble origins, through hard work and intelligence by 1906 she was the proprietor of a fifteen-bedroom parkland mansion hotel in Bristol. She became active in the Women's Social and Political Union, the Suffragette movement, so joining them in campaigning for votes for women. In August 1910 Violet moved to London, where for the next 25 years she ran a guest house and continued to be actively involved in the campaign for women's suffrage. She was arrested during the November 1910 Black Friday Suffragette march on Parliament. At another demonstration in 1912, joining other suffragettes as they stormed through London, she was arrested for throwing a rock through the windows of the Commercial Cable Company in Northumberland Avenue causing £10 worth of damage. In court, she refused to be bound over to keep the peace, objecting that, though

she had paid £1 per week in rates and taxes, yet still she had no right under the law to vote in elections. She was sentenced to four months imprisonment, and because Holloway Women's Prison in London was already full to capacity, she and a group of fellow campaigners were sent to Aylesbury Gaol in Buckinghamshire.

It was there, in Aylesbury, forty miles from her London home, that she and her fellow campaigners began a hunger strike. The prison authorities ordered that the hunger strikers should be force fed using the brutally violent methods described by Violet Bland, who at this stage was 50 years old. The hunger strike in Aylesbury Gaol inspired more suffragettes imprisoned in other gaols to join the protest, and eventually, eighty prisoners were taking part around the country, making this the largest mass hunger strike in the period of suffragette campaigning. Aylesbury became the focus for protests against forcible feeding, and on April 13, 1912, more than a hundred protesters marched on the gaol and gathered at the prison gates while the prisoners waved handkerchiefs from the cell windows to the supporting crowds below.

Violet Bland served her term of imprisonment and was released. Suffragette campaigning continued until the advent of war in 1914 when the suffragette movement in Britain moved away from campaigning for votes for women and focused instead on the war effort. Women eagerly volunteered to take on many traditional male roles – leading to a new view of what women were capable of. It was the readiness of so many women to work so determinedly for the war effort that won public support for the extension of the franchise to women. In 1918, Parliament agreed to extend the vote to over 8 million women over the age of 30.

Aylesbury Gaol today is a historic building, listed as a Grade 2 by Historic England. There has been a prison or gaol of some description in Aylesbury since 1810. The current prison, modelled on Reading County Gaol, is of early Victorian design, being constructed in 1847. In addition to Violet Bland, another woman political activist incarcerated there was Constance Markievicz, the first elected woman MP, an Irish Sinn Féin revolutionary nationalist, and suffragette who was condemned to death in 1916 following the Dublin Easter Rising. The death sentence was commuted, and she was released in 1917. The gaol now functions as a Young Offenders Institution for males.

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