

**William Lever and Edith Rigby**

**An examination of the evidence relating to the  
burning of Roynton Cottage at Rivington, Lancashire  
on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913**

**A Paper by**

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### Introduction

There can be no doubt that Edith Rigby, one of the northwest's more prominent campaigners in the cause of women's suffrage, deserves her place in women's history. Her increasingly confrontational activities inevitably brought her into conflict with the law, and although most of her transgressions were comparatively minor, her refusal to pay fines occasionally landed her in gaol. There, like many others of her conviction, she attempted to intensify public interest by refusing to eat, and consequently suffered the humiliation and distress of force-feeding: experiences that must have been extremely traumatic for a relatively privileged middle-class woman of the pre-First World War era. Such abuse, however, made little or no impression on the resolve of Edith and her fellow activists and, at least for some of them, the experience became a stimulus for increased militancy and a justification for behaviour that was occasionally indistinguishable from terrorism.

### Christabel Pankhurst's Fundamentalist Faction

By 1910, some of the more radical elements of the Women's Social and Political Union had gathered round Christabel Pankhurst, whose reputation for favouring actions such as window-breaking, stone-throwing, petty vandalism and the defacing of statues had been steadily increasing.

On Friday, March 1<sup>st</sup> 1912, in an evidently coordinated plan to disrupt London's leading retail and commercial centres, a large number of windows in Piccadilly, Regent Street, Oxford Street, Bond Street, Coventry Street as well as in Whitehall, Parliament Street, Trafalgar Square, Cockspur Street and the Strand were smashed. The authorities responded by making several high-profile arrests, including some leading WSPU figures. Christabel, ostensibly fearing seizure, fled to France where she continued to organise a campaign that became progressively more militant. It was from there, according to many chroniclers, that she ordered her followers to begin the firebombing of substantial properties, especially houses belonging to prominent members of the government.<sup>1</sup>

The series of arson attacks that followed were, at least initially, little more than symbolic gestures resulting in only minor damage: most were more-or-less botched affairs with many of the would-be incendiaries being seized before the fires were started. By early 1913, however, suffragist paraphernalia found in the vicinity of fires at railway stations, cricket pavilions, football stadiums, racecourses, golf courses and the like was regarded by the press as proof-positive of WSPU involvement, and 'arsonist suffragettes' began to make headlines in the national newspapers. In some cases, when women found close to the scene readily acknowledged

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1. Timothy Larsen, *Christabel Pankhurst: fundamentalism and feminism in coalition*, (New York, Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 5, 6, 7

responsibility, such perceptions were ostensibly confirmed; but there were many others for which no such perpetrators were ever found. Perhaps the most audacious attack of this kind was the partial destruction of a house being built for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George.<sup>2</sup> Probably most spectacular, however, was the one that, although she was never charged with it, gained for Edith Rigby her special place in history.

### **Roynton Cottage**

By 1913, Roynton Cottage, one of Sir William Hesketh Lever's several private residences, had become something of a misnomer. Set among 18 hectares of terraced gardens etched into the southern flank of the West Pennine Moors, it had developed from the relatively functional, though stylish, prefabricated 'shooting box with tiled roof' erected just after the turn of the century, into a large, many-bedroomed, two-storied country mansion. Replete with a servants' hall, butler's pantry and quarters for several live-in retainers including a housekeeper and a secretary, it was, according to various chroniclers, accoutred and appointed like a minor stately home. Surrounded by a stout metal fence, its approaches were guarded by three substantial lodges, each of which was occupied by a trusted employee and his family.<sup>3</sup>

However, although Roynton Cottage was luxurious – even palatial – compared to the homes occupied by most of the inhabitants of the small industrial towns it overlooked, when measured against Sir William's other houses, it was relatively frugal.<sup>4</sup> Clearly not designed to resist the cold, wet, Lancashire winter conditions, when the wind fairly whistles across the aptly named Winter Hill, it was constructed largely of North American *Pinus rigida*.<sup>5</sup> Commonly called pitch pine, it has rather poor structural qualities; and although its high resin content affords a measure of resistance to rot, it also renders it particularly flammable. It is therefore not surprising that, as the evidence relating to the events of the early hours of Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913 clearly shows, once alight, the destruction of Roynton Cottage was both rapid and total.<sup>6</sup>

Some idea of the terrific nature of the heat generated could be gathered from an eye-witness description of the iron beams which had formed part of the building. These were "twisted

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2. Although Emmeline Pankhurst claimed responsibility for the attack and was sentenced to three-years in gaol for it, she almost certainly played no part in it. Timothy Larsen, *Christabel Pankhurst: fundamentalism and feminism in coalition*, (New York, Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 5 – 7
  3. M. D. Smith, *Leverhulme's Rivington*, Second Edition (St. Michael's on Wyre, Wyre Publishing, 1998), pp. 33 – 42
  4. See, for example, Thornton Manor, Cheshire [http://www.heritageopera.co.uk/Heritage\\_Opera/thornton.htm](http://www.heritageopera.co.uk/Heritage_Opera/thornton.htm)
  5. M. D. Smith, *Leverhulme's Rivington*, Second Edition (St. Michael's on Wyre, Wyre Publishing, 1998), p. 33; see also, <http://www.nearctica.com/trees/conifer/pinus/Prigid.htm>
  6. 'Mr. Jonathan Simpson, who was architect for the whole series of buildings, told our representative that the residential part [of Roynton Cottage] was chiefly a timber structure ....', 'Suffragist Outrage at Rivington. Roynton Cottage Burned to the Ground. Miscreants Leave Impudent Messages', *Bolton Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 3.

and bent into all sorts a grotesque shapes. One iron girder which had spanned the residential part was bent almost double. ... As to the household appointments, all that were left behind were bent and twisted fire grates, radiators, and a huge cistern, which had crashed down from its supports.” The place, indeed, was completely razed, walls and interior, to its very foundation.<sup>7</sup>

### The Fire

According to a lengthy report published later on the same day in the Bolton Evening News (BEN), the fire began at about midnight. By one o'clock the flames were visible from various locations in the valley below the moor and small groups of people, realising that Lever's house was burning, began to make their way there to see what could be done. Strangely, although at least two people were reported to have contacted the fire brigades of the nearest two towns, Horwich and Chorley, neither service seems to have made any effort to attend. Thus, by 2.30 am, although a small band of stalwarts had managed to salvage a few items of value, all the wooden parts of the structure had gone and Roynton Cottage had effectively ceased to exist. In line with prevailing perceptions, for the local press there was no doubt that the fire was the result of an attack by suffragist arsonists: an unsurprising assumption, in view of the number of similar incidents ascribed to the militant faction of the WSPU that had already taken place during 1913. Moreover, at least in the opinion of the local newspaper reporters, 'evidence' discovered near to the scene of the fire positively established their involvement.<sup>8</sup>

The most tangible of these was a small cardboard box, later described as 'a brown portmanteau or suit case with brass fittings', which was reported to have been found tied to some metal railings about 100 metres from the Cottage grounds 'on the Bolton side'. Addressed to Reginald McKenna (the then Home Secretary) 'via Horwich', it contained a pair of lady's grey suede gloves and a piece of paper. The gloves were described as being 'of rather a large size', and one of them, although which one was not made clear, was 'gashed across the hand part' and stained with blood. Two short messages were typed on the piece of paper, both addressed to the king, exhorting him to urge his government to agree to the enfranchisement of women.

At another, unspecified, location someone found a box of matches, a metal spanner, and a paraffin-soaked copy of 'The Suffragette' newspaper with a short statement, apparently linking Lever to an article on 'White Slavery', written in pencil on its front cover. There were also unconfirmed reports of the discovery of tracks left by 'motor car wheels ... found near the spot the perpetrator or perpetrators of the deed entered the [Cottage] grounds' and of a car travelling

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7. 'Suffragette Folly at Rivington, Sir W. H. Lever's Bungalow Destroyed, Art Treasures Ruined, Set on Fire While Caretakers Were Asleep', *The Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 5; see also 'Suffragist Outrage at Rivington. Roynton Cottage Burned to the Ground. Miscreants Leave Impudent Messages', *Bolton Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 3.

8. 'Suffragist Outrage at Rivington. Roynton Cottage Burned to the Ground. Miscreants Leave Impudent Messages', *Bolton Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 3.

along Rivington Lane 'a very few minutes after the discovery of the fire'. Other anecdotal reports included rumours of a woman asking directions to Roynton Cottage at 'about midnight'; an unconfirmed sighting of a motor vehicle at around the same time, and uncorroborated accounts of 'women in the park making enquiries as to the Bungalow on Monday'. A report in *The Times*, that another written message was found which implied that Roynton Cottage had been destroyed as retribution for Lever's disloyalty to the Liberal party, was never substantiated.<sup>9</sup>

### **Edith Rigby's Confession**

Press confidence that the fire had been the result of a 'suffragist outrage' perpetrated by persons unknown persisted until, on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> July, an eminently plausible culprit emerged. On that day, Mrs. Edith Rigby, the wife of a Preston GP and a prominent WSPU activist, appeared before the Stipendiary Magistrate at Liverpool Police Court in connection with a somewhat different matter. Claiming that it was she who had set fire to 'one of [Sir William Lever's] superfluous houses', she stated that it had been done in order to create 'a beacon lighted for the King and country to see'. Responding to the magistrate's suggestion that her statement had 'no bearing' on the current litigation, she replied: 'It has this bearing: I lighted the fire alone that night. I walked there and did it alone.'<sup>10</sup>

The events leading up to Mrs. Rigby's statement were well covered in the press. On Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> July – more than 24 hours after the fire at Rivington – she presented herself before the Head Constable at Liverpool, declaring that she was responsible for the detonation of a small explosive device in a café beneath the Liverpool Cotton Exchange late in the evening of Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> July. Significantly, she made no mention of the destruction of Roynton Cottage – a far more high-profile affair – and nor did she choose to similarly submit herself to the police at Bolton or Preston. Moreover, she made no reference to it during her trial at the Liverpool City Sessions on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1913 when she was convicted of feloniously placing a bomb in the Liverpool Exchange buildings with intent to cause damage.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, other than an account in her biography, written by her niece Phoebe Hesketh and published in 1962, there are no records of Edith Rigby expanding on her 'confession' concerning the fire at Roynton Cottage. Unfortunately, however, Ms. Hesketh's narrative varies so much from contemporary newspaper reports that it can only be regarded as complete fiction. While her

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9. 'Sir W. Lever's House Destroyed', *The Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 8.

10. 'Suffragist's Confession of Outrages', *The Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 11; 'The Fire at Sir. W. H. Lever's Bungalow', *The Morning Post*, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1913; 'Rivington Bungalow Fire, Confession by a Doctor's Wife', *Bolton Evening News*, 13<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 4; see also 'Mrs. Rigby Committed For Trial', *The Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 14.

11. Although it was later stated in court that 'no great damage had been done by the explosion', Mrs. Rigby was found guilty and sentenced to nine months' imprisonment with hard labour. 'The Explosion At Liverpool Exchange', *The Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1913, p. 8.

assertion that Mrs. Rigby enlisted the aid of two men – one a member of the ILP and the other her husband’s chauffeur – is reasonably plausible, the rest of her account puts the time of day that the fire was started well wide of the mark. She proposes that the three set out at ‘about midday’ on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> July 1913, driving the 30 kilometres from Winckley Square, Preston to ‘the old pub “The Black Lad”’, just below Rivington Village. Leaving the chauffeur and the car at the pub, the other two carried ‘a large keg of paraffin’ through Rivington Village and up the steep hillside to a point ‘just short of the bungalow’. There, it is proposed, Mrs. Rigby crawled alone ‘through the thick bushes’ to the bungalow and, having walked ‘twice round the place to make sure it was empty’, she set the fire, lighted it, and managed to run back to the Black Lad ‘before the damage was apparent’. This round trip of more than three kilometres, one is invited to accept, was accomplished ‘within an hour’.

Even if the chauffeur had driven extremely slowly, they could not have arrived at ‘the Black Lad’ later than mid-afternoon and, even if the walk up to the Cottage and back had taken more than two hours, not one, then according to Ms. Hesketh’s version of events, the fire was started during the afternoon of 7<sup>th</sup> July and not, as the newspapers reported at the time, in the early hours of 8<sup>th</sup> July. Moreover, as well as the obvious problems concerning the time of day, there are one-or-two circumstantial aspects of this tale that also challenge belief. Whichever route was taken, the walk from the pub to the Cottage would have necessitated passing fairly close to the occupied South Lodge, and during her circumambulation of the Cottage Mrs. Rigby would have been clearly visible to the residents of all three lodges. It is simply not possible, therefore, to accept that she could have poured the contents of her large keg of paraffin over parts of the already highly flammable wooden building and then, together with her accomplice, ran to the Black Lad before anyone noticed that something was amiss: why were they not seen, why did no-one notice a smell of burning wood, or hear the noise that a blazing building makes? Did none of the lodge residents own a dog? The answer, clearly, to these and several other pressing questions is that Ms. Hesketh’s tale is no more than a whimsical fiction that probably stems from a desire to maintain and enhance the mythical aura surrounding her ‘notorious’ aunt Edith.

### **The Evidence**

Clearly, the police gave very little credence to Mrs. Rigby’s confession; otherwise she would surely have been arrested or at least questioned. According to the records, however, neither she nor anyone else was ever interviewed or charged by any police force in association with the burning of Roynton Cottage. Perhaps the authorities were beginning to suspect that some of the so-called ‘suffragist outrages’ may well have been accidents, falsely claimed as acts of vandalism by members of the WSPU. Moreover, although much of the contingent evidence seems to have been fairly persuasive, on closer examination it was at best circumstantial as well as, for the most part, unreliable and compromised.

For example, the person who claimed to have found the 'brown portmanteau' told the BEN that he had been walking towards the fire when he saw it tied to some railings. Having 'snatched it down' he opened it to find 'a type-written paper and a pair of lady's suede gloves' which, for some reason, he decided to try on. When he realised that they were wet with blood, he took them off again and put them back into the case along the sheet of paper. He then hid the case in some bushes and continued walking towards the fire. It was only later, after the 'exertions slackened', that he thought to hand it over to the police who, perhaps not surprisingly, seem to have attached remarkably little significance to it.<sup>12</sup>

Their scepticism may well have been stimulated by the nature and disposition of other 'evidence' purportedly found near the scene: the paraffin-soaked copy of *The Suffragette*, the box of matches, and the spanner. The newspaper reports do not mention exactly where these items were found and nor do they reveal the identity of the person or persons who found them. Nor was there any mention of blood which, if these items had anything to do with the 'brown portmanteau' could reasonably be expected. The idea submitted by the BEN that the spanner was used to 'break the windows' seems to have been mere speculation, especially when it is obvious that there were many places on the outside of the building where the wooden structure could have easily been lit. The BEN also reported that wheel marks made by a car, and signs of a forced entry through some metal railings had been discovered 'not far from the main entrance on the Old Hall Barn side', almost opposite to the place on the Bolton side of the estate where the suitcase was discovered, and therefore seemingly unconnected to it. Of even less significance are the various conflicting and unconfirmed reports relating to cars, women, and people 'making enquiries' in the park at various time and on various days.

Although Ms. Hesketh's highly dubious account of Mrs Rigby's 'confession', together with an examination of the historical evidence casts some doubt on the involvement of either Edith or the suffragist movement in the burning of Roynton Cottage, most contemporary British and foreign newspapers agreed that one or the other or both were responsible; a conviction subsequently echoed by journalists, authors and quasi-historians. However, as tempting as the existence of a convenient, ready-made solution may be, it is the historian's task to investigate thoroughly whatever primary and secondary source information exists. That Roynton Cottage was destroyed by fire during the early hours of 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913 cannot be disputed, but if the popularly accepted explanations for its demise are refuted, the question remains: who, if anyone, was responsible?

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12. 'Suffragette Folly at Rivington, Sir W. H. Lever's Bungalow Destroyed, Art Treasures Ruined, Set on Fire While Caretakers Were Asleep', *The Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 5.

### The Mystery of the Sleeping Cottage Dwellers

According to the local press, one of the first people to get to the scene of the fire was 'Mr. Adamson, the residential engineer of the Liverpool Water Works' who arrived at Roynton Cottage at 'about 2.15 am' to find that '... the whole residential part was evidently doomed, for very soon afterwards it was one huge mass of flames.'<sup>13</sup>

His first task was to rouse the sleeping inmates of the three entrance lodges, Mr. E. J. Rigg, principle entrance; Mr. T. Brainfield, Belmont Lodge; and Mr. Gill, Bolton Lodge.<sup>14</sup>

Given that all three lodges were situated well within thirty metres of the Cottage, it seems most remarkable that none of the residents saw smelled or heard anything unusual until the fire was well-advanced. This is particularly mystifying when it is clear that several other people saw the fire much earlier and from far greater distances. For example, at approximately 'one o'clock the fire was seen by James Worthington' from near Dryfield Lane which is well over a mile away. Even further away at the Toll Bar Inn on Chorley New Road, Horwich, James Price saw the fire from his bedroom window at 'about 1.30'. At around the same time, Alderman James Lawrence 'observed the fire from his residence [Anderton Hall] ... situated ... across the park [a good mile and a half] from Roynton Cottage.' Others, including a group of 'men employed at the Loco Works' whose homes were at least two miles away in Horwich, 'rushed to the place on observing flames', arriving at the fire in time to render 'valuable assistance'.

The group of impromptu helpers, which eventually included police officers and fire personnel, 'stayed on until about six o'clock, and then left to resume their daily duty.' Later in the morning 'Superintendent Wilson went over the ground ... along with Inspector Farquharson and Sergeant Walton.'

Perhaps, forensic science had not developed sufficiently to warrant more than this cursory inspection, or it may well have seemed to the police that there was not enough evidence to support foul play. However, if the police seem to have been rather casual in their assessment of the situation,<sup>15</sup> it is clear that Sir William's commercial interests were soon in professional hands.

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13. 'Suffragette Folly at Rivington, Sir W. H. Lever's Bungalow Destroyed, Art Treasures Ruined, Set on Fire While Caretakers Were Asleep', *The Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 5; see also 'Suffragist Outrage at Rivington. Roynton Cottage Burned to the Ground. Miscreants Leave Impudent Messages', *Bolton Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 3.

14. 'Suffragette Folly at Rivington, Sir W. H. Lever's Bungalow Destroyed, Art Treasures Ruined, Set on Fire While Caretakers Were Asleep', *The Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 5; see also 'Suffragist Outrage at Rivington. Roynton Cottage Burned to the Ground. Miscreants Leave Impudent Messages', *Bolton Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 3.

15. 'Suffragette Folly at Rivington, Sir W. H. Lever's Bungalow Destroyed, Art Treasures Ruined, Set on Fire While Caretakers Were Asleep', *The Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 5.



Mr. Simpson, of Bolton, architects for Sir William Lever, and Mr. H. Stanley Atherton, surveyor of Bolton, were early on the scene, and under their supervision the ruins were made safe.... They also secured that there was no interference until the insurance agents viewed the scene, and agents of the various offices concerned put in an appearance during the afternoon. It is estimated that the damages amount to about £20,000, but that is a sum subject to investigation as the value of the contents needs ascertaining.<sup>16</sup>

Lever lost no time in replacing Roynton Cottage, and within a few weeks the ruins had been cleared and work started on the construction of a somewhat larger and less combustible structure. By 1914, as Europe began the madness that precipitated its degeneration to decades of hardship and anxiety, Roynton Cottage mark II was completed.

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16. 'Suffragette Folly at Rivington, Sir W. H. Lever's Bungalow Destroyed, Art Treasures Ruined, Set on Fire While Caretakers Were Asleep', *The Chronicle*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 5; see also 'Suffragist Outrage at Rivington. Roynton Cottage Burned to the Ground. Miscreants Leave Impudent Messages', *Bolton Evening News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913, p. 3.