

FRANCES MARGARET THOMAS

‘A doughty warrior in the women’s cause’

Councillor

Headteacher

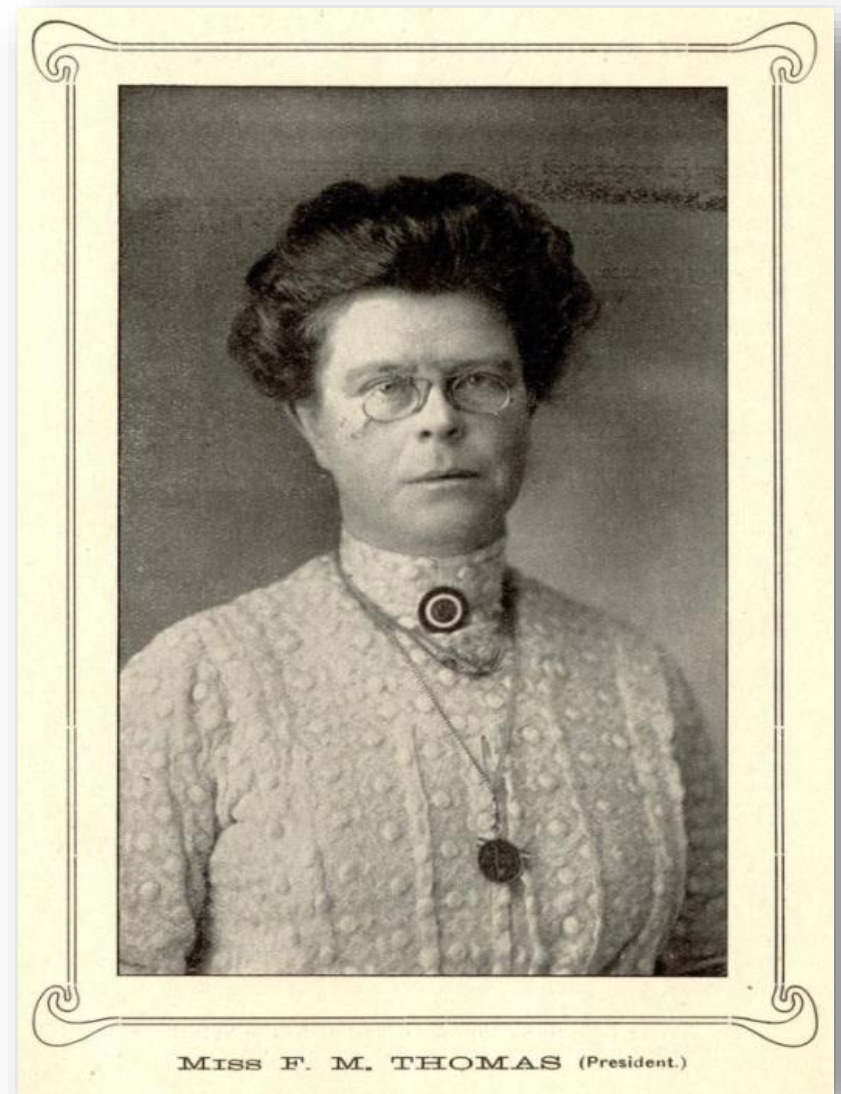
Trade Unionist

Women’s Suffrage Supporter

FRANCES MARGARET THOMAS

Fannie Margaret Thomas as President
of the National Federation of Women
Teachers, 1912

Institute of Education, NUWT Archives




Frances Margaret Thomas

- ▶ Frances (Fannie) Margaret Thomas was born in Dolgellau, February 1868, the second of six children born to Annie Bridget (nee May) and Robert Parry Thomas, an accountant with the National Provincial Bank
- ▶ By 1874 her father's job had taken the family to Aberystwyth. Two years later, she was enrolled at the Board School, the family having now moved to Cowbridge, Annie Thomas's native town


Dolgellau, Gwynedd



Frances Margaret Thomas

- ▶ It seems that Fannie remained a 'scholar' at Cowbridge Board School until she was appointed a 'pupil teacher' there in March 1883, a few weeks after her fifteenth birthday
 - ▶ This involved a five-year apprenticeship, teaching for a certain part of the day but also receiving tuition from a serving mistress in the same school
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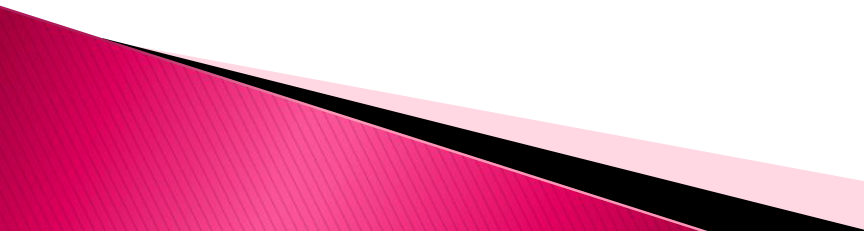
Frances Margaret Thomas

- ▶ Meeting the requirements of the annual school examinations, she obtained financial rewards for successful progress and at the end of her term of apprenticeship, in March 1888 was promoted to assistant teacher
 - ▶ Combining teaching duties with evening study for the entrance examination, she successfully gained a place at Swansea Training College and, in January 1889, at the age of twenty, she enrolled on the two-year (unsalaried) college course
- 

Frances Margaret Thomas

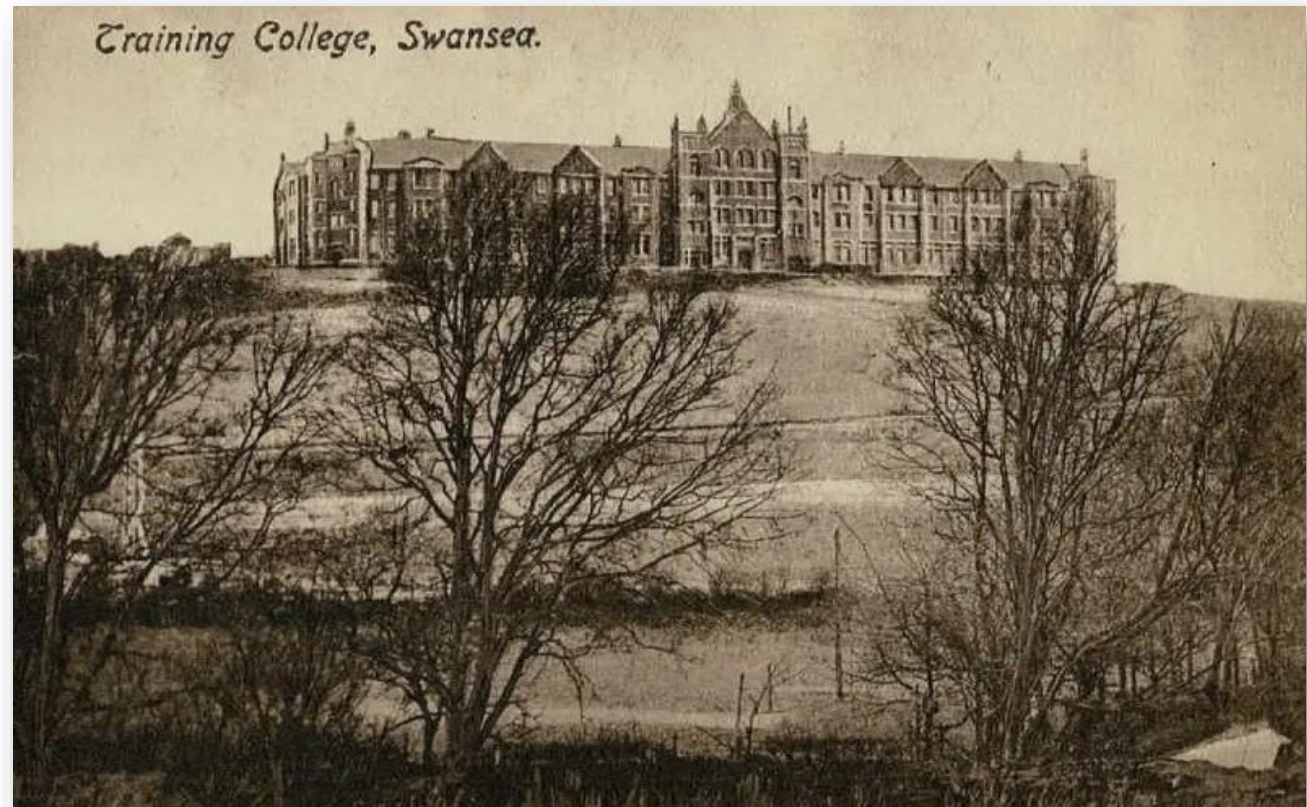
- ▶ In a letter to his school board in October 1888, her headmaster reported that ‘Miss Fannie M. Thomas, formerly Pupil Teacher, and now Assistant Teacher at the Cowbridge School, was one of the successful Candidates at the Scholarship Examination recently held at Swansea, being placed in the excellent position of No. 305 for England and Wales and the fifth in the Swansea Training College’

Swansea Training College

- ▶ Opened in 1872, Swansea was until the 1890s the only teacher-training college for women in Wales and from its early years the number of applicants far outstripped the accommodation available
 - ▶ In keeping with similar institutions in England, it sought to instil among its women students the prevailing Victorian ideology of femininity, womanhood and domesticity
- 

Swansea Training College

The first college in Wales to admit women to higher education. Its first enrolment was 38 students, at a site in Swansea city centre. The college moved in 1912 to the building in Townhill, Swansea, shown on the card



Swansea Training College

- ▶ During Fannie's time there (1889–90) the very wide-ranging curriculum was largely the same as it had been at its inception
- ▶ The Bible, school management, penmanship, reading and recitation, English language and literature, arithmetic, geography, English history, domestic economy, vocal music, drawing, needlework and cutting out, calisthenics, French, animal physiology and physiography

Swansea Training College

- ▶ Within this, however – under the dictates of the Education Department and Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) – there was a major emphasis on courses in needlework, cookery and domestic economy in order to equip pupils for their probable future roles as housewives and mothers


Council of Education

- ▶ 'Domestic matters will form the principal matter for thought in the daily life of almost all the girls in our elementary schools', insisted a Committee of Council of Education minute in the early 1870s'
- ▶ 'It would be good for the girls to learn to be useful in the state of life to which it has pleased God to call them'

Frances – Certified Teacher

- ▶ Becoming a ‘certified teacher’ in December 1890 Fannie took a post at Redwick, a coastal village near Magor, Monmouthshire, where she was the sole teacher
- ▶ Fannie evidently made a favourable impression on HMI, one of whom wrote thus:
- ▶ ‘There have been two changes of teachers during the year and Miss Thomas has been in charge only about four months, but she has already effected considerable improvement’

Frances – Certified Teacher

- ▶ Before the end of that academic year she had successfully applied for a new position in a very different part of Wales, being appointed headmistress in the slate-quarrying village of Tan-y-Grisiau, near Blaenau Ffestiniog
 - ▶ Her reasons for exchanging the highly-anglicised south-east for the deeply-Welsh north-west are unclear
- 

Tan-y-Grisiau, near Blaenau Ffestiniog



Frances – The Headteacher

- ▶ Fannie stayed in Tan-y-Grisiau for three and a half years before returning to south-east Wales in January 1895, taking up employment with the Llangeinor School Board, which covered the region north of Bridgend
- ▶ After short spells at two infant schools in the Ogmore Valley, in November 1895 she was appointed headmistress of the Ffaldau Infants' School, at Pontycymer – her predecessor having been forced to resign her post upon marriage

Ffaldau School

- ▶ Founded in 1888 as a mixed and infants' institution, over the next 20 years it became **'so large as to become almost unwieldy'** as it eventually sought to accommodate some 900 pupils that a new boys' school was opened in 1908
- ▶ Fannie now became head of the separate girls' school (which remained in the old building), a position she held until her retirement twenty-three years later, in May 1931, at the age of sixty-three. Thus ended a long and dedicated career

Ffaldau Girls' School, February 1925

Miss Fannie
Margaret
Thomas

First right,
second row



Frances – The Headteacher

- ▶ What made Fannie Margaret Thomas distinctive and exceptional was that alongside, and within, her teaching career, she had a passionate commitment to feminist and political activism
- ▶ Accordingly, in the Garw Valley where she was headmistress at the Ffaldau School for thirty-five years, she was a compelling figure, whose notoriety has endured in popular memory
- ▶ **‘She is well known in myth and legend’,** writes a local historian, **‘having taught relatives of older residents here’**

Ffaldau Primary School



Frances – ‘Fannie Bloomers’

- ▶ One contemporary has this recollection: ‘The Girls’ School in Pontycymer was run by a Miss Thomas, known to everyone as ‘Fannie Bloomers’, who ruled her school with a rod of iron’
- ▶ ‘In the old school with the galleries she would take 150 children in English, with the assistance of two other teachers, and she herself would be positioned on a high chair at the centre of proceedings’. ‘She was stern and fair, she was also very British and made sure her classes remembered such things as Empire Day
- ▶ When entering her class she would make a grand entrance reminiscent of her performance in the local production of such plays as ‘The Tempest’ in which she acted in a highly mannered style which was fashionable at the time’

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- ▶ The first woman in the Garw Valley to wear breeches earned her the nickname 'Fannie Bloomers', while her obituary in the *Western Mail* – supported by local testimony – stated that **'she was the first woman in South Wales to ride a motor-cycle, and rode to school on it from her home in Cowbridge'**

Frances Margaret Thomas

- ▶ Both of these may be seen as feminist statements, as can the story that Fannie would go into the public bar at the Royal Hotel in Pontycymer and refuse all requests to remove herself to the ladies' lounge, before drinking a pint of beer and then leaving
- ▶ She also started the first tennis club in the Garw Valley 'at a time when the game was looked upon with disfavour, and provided amusement for onlookers'

Fannie Thomas – N.U.T. Member

- ▶ When Fannie began her career as a certified schoolmistress the natural step was to join the National Union of Teachers (N.U.T) – formed in 1870 as the National Union of Elementary Teachers before changing its name in 1888
- ▶ By 1911, the number of full-time teachers in Wales had increased from 5,000 in 1891 to over 14,000 with women outnumbering men. Though, as many remained uncertificated, they were often ineligible for NUT membership

National Union of Teachers

- ▶ Despite women's numerical strength within the NUT, it remained heavily male dominated
- ▶ The number of female members sent as delegates to annual conferences steadily increased but they remained vastly outnumbered by men, while the proportion of women on the national executive reached only about 10 per cent before the First World War

Hamilton House, London – N.U.T. Headquarters since 1915



c. By Philafrenzy – Own work

Fannie Thomas – Activist

- ▶ At a time when discontent among women about inequalities within the profession was coming to the fore, by the early years of the century Fannie Thomas was active in NUT affairs in the Bridgend region
- ▶ It was no doubt this that roused her feminist consciousness and from 1907 she was also involved in the newly-formed Ogmore and Garw Association

Fannie Thomas – Equal Pay League

- ▶ A victory over benefit rights in 1903 inspired some members to create the Equal Pay League (EPL) the following year, the first feminist organisation within the NUT. Its first annual report (1904) listed seventy-three members scattered throughout the country
- ▶ Two were from Wales, one being ‘Miss F. M. Thomas, Ffaldau Infants, Pontycymmer, Glamorgan’. Its raising of the equal pay issue at the 1904 national conference in Portsmouth was met with hostility and derision from the largely male audience

Fannie Thomas – National Federation of Women Teachers

- ▶ The ‘South Wales’ (or ‘Glamorgan’) branch of the NFWT was formed in April 1907 with Fannie at the forefront:
- ▶ ‘Miss F. M. Thomas is the pioneer of the Federation movement in South Wales, founding, with Miss Gelder, the important Glamorgan Association, of which she is president’, recorded Joseph Tate

The Woman Teacher

The Woman Teacher

The Organ of the National Federation of Women Teachers.

Editor: Miss **EMILY PHIPPS**, B.A.

Vol. I. No. 1.
Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1919.

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Helen Gelder – Headteacher at Blaengarw Infant School

- ▶ **Helen Gelder** (1867–1957), a Yorkshire woman, was also a teacher in the Garw Valley – for thirty-seven years headmistress at Blaengarw infants' school, scarcely a mile from Pontycymer. These two women were not only central to developments in south Wales but, it seems, to the very survival of the NFWT in its infancy
- ▶ 'Miss Gelder, headmistress Council School, Blaengarw, has done sterling work for the Federation', wrote Tate. 'She is the founder and secretary of the important Association of Glamorgan . . . she has worked well, sparing neither money nor effort'

Glamorganshire Association NFWT

- ▶ The 'Glamorganshire Association' initially covered a wide area, Among its published aims were several focused on equal pay issues but also others urging separate boys' and girls' departments in all large schools, a lower optional retirement age, a more adequate government pension and the return of more women representatives on all educational bodies
- ▶ The first president of the branch was **Hilda Siderfin**, a Penarth schoolmistress, who was also a member of the NFWT executive from 1910 to 1911, before resigning upon leaving the teaching profession to get married. Fannie Thomas was originally vice-president and Helen Gelder secretary and treasurer

London Conference of Women Teachers, 1907

- ▶ So concerned were the NUT about the growing dissatisfaction among female teachers that a conference of women teachers was convened in London in December 1907, comprising selected delegates from around the country and also male members of the national executive
- ▶ The NFWT had few representatives. Nevertheless, they made their presence felt by forcefully voicing their concerns. One centred on opposition to the tendency of local education authorities (often for reasons of economy) to combine departments or schools under a male head, an issue on which Fannie was able to draw upon her knowledge of Glamorgan and Ffestiniog for supporting evidence

'The Schoolmaster'

- ▶ The Schoolmaster reported 'a drastic amendment from Miss Thomas', who unsuccessfully proposed that: **'Any master taking over a girls' or infants' department previously under the charge of a mistress should be considered guilty of a breach of professional etiquette and be suspended from membership of the Union'**
- ▶ Fannie opposed the combination of departments as a source of injustice to women, but also on grounds of principle: **'A man could not manage girls in the same way that women could, nor could women manage boys as men could'**

Fannie Thomas – Supervisor NWFT

- ▶ By now the federation was paying more attention to local organisation, having initiated a scheme of supervisors allocated to ‘a definite district for visiting associations and stimulating interest’, increasing memberships and helping form new branches being key tasks
- ▶ Fannie Thomas served as a supervisor until at least 1916

Fannie Thomas – President NFWT

- ▶ During Fannie Thomas' term as president (1912–1913) the NFWT developed an itemised programme of 'objects' :
 - To secure equal pay and equal increments for men and women teachers of the same professional status
 - To secure the maintenance of each girls' and infants' department under its own head mistress

Fannie Thomas – President NFWT

- To bring all women teachers into the NUT and secure more women on the NUT executive
 - To secure representation of women on all education authorities and
 - To secure for women teachers the Parliamentary franchise
- ▶ In her inaugural speech on becoming president Fannie said
- ‘They did not wish to capture the National Union of Teachers.....they wished their men folk to recognise their equality and joint rulership’



—“Mail” Photo.

National Federation of Women Teachers.

The annual conference of the National Federation of Women Teachers, which is one of the organisations connected with the National Union of Teachers, was held in the Albion Hall, Baker-street, Hull, on Saturday. Miss I. Thomas was elected president. Reading from left to right, Miss Bale (Cardiff), Mrs Riley (wife of Dr Riley, secretary of the Hull Education Committee), Miss Dix (vice-president), Miss G. E. Johnson (ex-president), Miss F. M. Thomas (president).

Fannie Thomas, first right (president)

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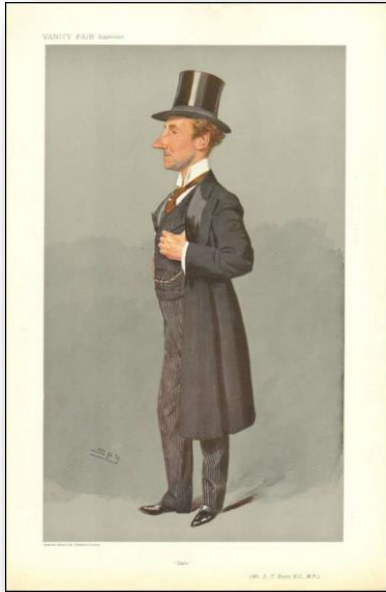
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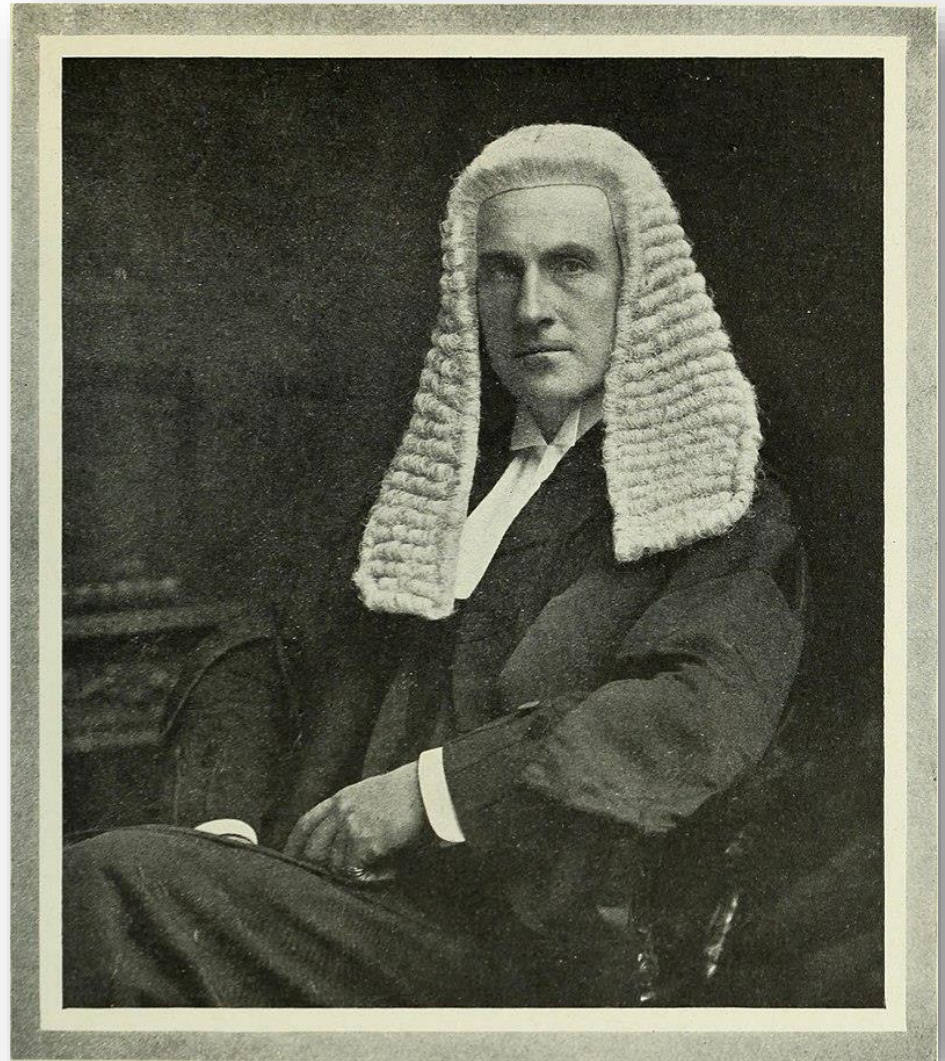
Fannie – Women's Suffrage

- ▶ The emergence of women's suffrage as the principal demand of feminist teachers by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century reflected developments in the country at large
- ▶ Women's suffrage first made a significant impact in the Garw valley in autumn 1906 when campaigners descended upon the Mid Glamorgan constituency in order to oppose the sitting Liberal candidate, the strongly anti-suffragist Samuel Evans, who was seeking re-election following acceptance of a minor government office, as was then the legal requirement

Sir Samuel Evans – Barrister, Judge and Liberal Politician



"Sam", caricature
by Spy in Vanity
Fair in 1908



Fannie – Women's Suffrage

- ▶ The Independent Women's Social and Political (WSPU) leader Emmeline Pankhurst spoke at Pontycymer and elsewhere, while several of Evans's meetings descended into chaos as a result of interruptions by her suffragette supporters
- ▶ It was this by-election which first brought Fannie Thomas into close contact with prominent activists. The following April, on her return from an educational tour of the United States, she invited Adela Pankhurst, Emmeline's youngest daughter, to lecture in Pontycymer on behalf of the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)

Pankhurst Family



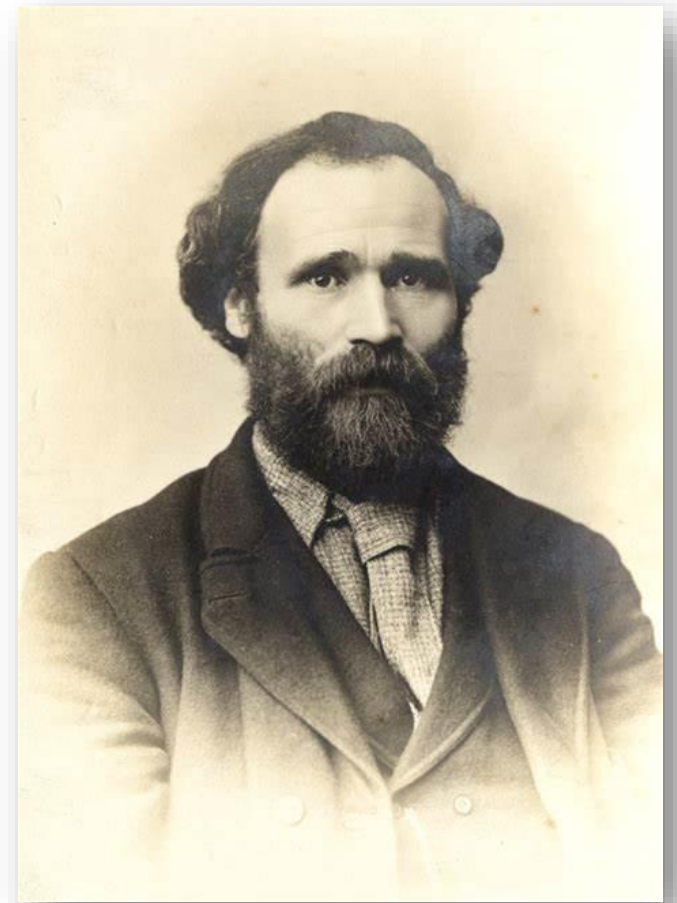
Emmeline (right) and Adela Pankhurst

Labour Movement Pioneers

- ▶ Over the following years a stream of 'celebrity' visitors came – as Fannie's guests – to address meetings in Pontycymer, including not only suffragettes but pioneers of the labour movement like **Keir Hardie, George Lansbury and Ethel Snowden** and feminist educationalists like **Elizabeth Phillips Hughes**, all reflecting her social conscience and growing political commitment on several fronts

Labour Movement Pioneers

Elizabeth Phillips
Hughes



Kier Hardie

Labour Movement Pioneers



George Lansbury and Ethel Snowden

Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ Fannie Thomas made her first public speech on women's suffrage in January 1909, sporting the purple, green and white colours of the WSPU, as one of the main protagonists at the Pontycymer Debating Society
- ▶ In time, she became a confident, forceful and amusing platform speaker, able enough to address some of the large London demonstrations

Muriel Matters

- ▶ Locally, she took every opportunity to promote the cause. Thus, it was Fannie who induced the Australian suffragette, **Muriel Matters**, to convene the first suffrage meeting ever held in her home town of Cowbridge, in August 1909
- ▶ At the time Muriel Matters was one of the principal speakers of the Women's Freedom League (WFL), founded in late 1907 following a split in the WSPU, largely over the Pankhursts' dictatorial style of leadership

Muriel Matters



Fannie Thomas – Meeting Place

- ▶ Another by-election in Mid Glamorgan in March 1910 provided an opportunity for women's suffrage advocates of all shades to hold meetings, question politicians and distribute literature
- ▶ 'Miss F. M. Thomas has kindly placed her house in Pontycymmer at our disposal', reported one Women's Freedom League representative, while the WSPU (through Emmeline Pankhurst, Emily Davison and others) and the National Union Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) were also active in the same locality

Women's Freedom League

- ▶ In terms of methods of protest, the WFL pursued a militant but non-violent path
- ▶ Its strategy centred on civil disobedience, adopting tactics such as boycott of the 1911 census
- ▶ Supporters were encouraged to either openly resist the census by refusing to fill in the schedule or evade by staying away from their homes for the night

Fannie Thomas – 1911 Census

- ▶ Boycotting the census, however, was no straightforward matter for individuals. Evaders were liable to prosecution and for teachers this could mean dismissal
- ▶ Thus, Fannie Thomas filled in her census return but in the ‘Infirmity Column’ – where the head of the household was expected to note whether a person was ‘deaf, dumb, blind, lunatic, imbecile or feeble-minded’ – she wrote the word ‘unenfranchised’ for the four women residing in the household

Fannie Thomas – 1911 Census

- ▶ Her NFWT ally in the Garw valley, **Helen Gelder**, was more forthright, commenting thus in the same column:
- ▶ ‘No vote. I am intelligent enough to fill up this census form – but I cannot make a X on a Ballot paper’

Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ As well as being a member of the WFL, Fannie Thomas subscribed and made donations to the WSPU
- ▶ ‘Miss F. Thomas, Pontycymer, gets rid of 2 dozen copies [of The Suffragette newspaper] every week’, reported the literature secretary of the Cardiff branch in late 1913. ‘Will other members follow her splendid example?’

Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ She also spoke in support of the organisation on a number of occasions, vehemently defending its policy of wide-ranging attacks on property
- ▶ Chairing a meeting in Pontycymer in November 1912, for example, she began by welcoming the opportunity ‘to publicly state her views on the woman’s question’ and then, as reported by the local newspaper, ‘openly advocated militancy, declaring that the end justified the means
- ▶ She admired the pluck of the militant women and felt that she was not fit to wipe their boots. She herself had not the pluck to break windows, for fear of losing her post


Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ Tearing the Liberal Government to rags’, continued the report, ‘the speaker declared that women would not obey laws which they had no voice in framing’
- ▶ She also regularly propounded another stock suffragette contention, as expressed thus in Porthcawl: ‘The militant tactics of the last two or three years had done more to bring the cause of women’s suffrage to a successful issue than all the 50 years’ strenuous striving along peaceful lines that preceded it’

Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ A society much in sympathy with the WSPU was a specifically Welsh one
- ▶ The Forward Cymric Suffrage Union (FCSU), founded in July 1912 in the wake of the ‘Women’s Coronation Procession’ in London when all the suffrage societies came together in a spectacular display
- ▶ In part, this demonstration drew on the theme of national identity within the British Empire and thereby inspired a Welsh contingent wearing traditional dress and carrying red dragons on poles

Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ Formed initially as the Cymric Suffrage Union and led by London suffragists, the organisation sought to appeal to Welshwomen in other parts of England and in Wales itself
 - ▶ Fannie Thomas had marched in the procession and enthusiastically supported the initiative
 - ▶ Within a few months she had set up a branch at Pontycymer with herself as secretary, which went on to hold local public meetings and conduct propaganda
- 

Women's Coronation Procession London, 17 June 1911

Fannie Thomas
second right

South Wales Daily News, 19
June 1911



Suffragette defaced pennies



George V penny

Edward VII penny

Votes for Women

Fannie Thomas – Suffrage Supporter

- ▶ The outbreak of the war in August 1914 dramatically altered the political climate, the issue of votes for women now inevitably relegated to the periphery, though some organisations remained determined to ‘keep the flag flying’
- ▶ In particular, WFL speakers carried on touring the country. Thus, **Nina Boyle** addressed two meetings in Pontycymer in February 1915 – both chaired by Fannie Thomas – where she defended the League’s continued political agitation, while also ‘doing whatever was possible to do to help the country in its extremity’, such as alleviating the hardship faced by women and children and providing hospital care for wounded soldiers

Nina Boyle



Fannie Thomas – Fund Raiser

- ▶ In line with the latter objective, Fannie was prominent in community action during the war years, organising fund-raising school concerts and acting as secretary for local committees concerned with infants' welfare and providing 'comforts' for troops at the front

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Fannie Thomas – Campaigner

- ▶ Fannie Thomas herself is a good example of the kind of activist who was prepared to support several suffrage societies in an effort to do all she could to advance the campaign
- ▶ She also sought to do so through any other available channel, which in her case specifically meant her trade union and Labour Party connections
- ▶ It was as an elected representative of the latter which was to be the focus of much of the next twenty years of her life

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ Relatively small numbers of women had served on public bodies since the 1870s but the Representation of the People Act of 1918 opened up greater possibilities by extending the local government franchise to include women on the same terms as men – aged 21 and over
- ▶ Fannie Thomas was a strong advocate of women taking part in public affairs **‘in order to get into touch with people and make their views and influence felt’**

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ She herself first sought local office in November 1914, standing for the Pontycymer ward of the Bridgend and Cowbridge Board of Guardians in November 1914
- ▶ She did so with the support of prominent local trade unionists and members of the Labour Party but was unsuccessful, losing in a straight contest with another female candidate

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ It is unclear when exactly she became involved in party politics but she was certainly reading newspapers such as the **Labour Leader, Clarion and Woman Worker** by 1906
- ▶ In all likelihood, she was a member of the Garw Independent Labour Party (ILP) by the time the socialist writer and lecturer **Isabella Ford** of Leeds spoke to this organisation on women's suffrage at Pontycymer in June of that year

Isabella Ford



Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ In 1912, she and other local activists displayed their own fervour for the cause by supporting the Labour politician, George Lansbury, whose vehemence for women's suffrage had led to a clash with his own party and resignation of his parliamentary seat in order to fight a by-election as an independent socialist specifically on this issue – he subsequently lost
- ▶ 'Hearty thanks to Pontycymer ILP members', declared the WSPU newspaper, 'for arranging public meeting on Nov. 22nd. Miss F. Thomas presided, and Lansbury resolution was passed without a dissentient'

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ At the general election immediately following the armistice, Fannie was a prominent supporter of the successful Labour candidate, **Vernon Hartshorn**, in the newly-created Ogmores constituency
- ▶ She herself had already been adopted as one of the party's official candidates for the local urban district council (UDC), which she successfully contested in April 1919, when she also had the backing of the NFWT, its president-elect, Agnes Dawson, coming to the Garw valley to campaign on her behalf

Vernon Hartshorn



Agnes Dawson



Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ As a teacher living and working in a rapidly industrialised mining valley, where the principal communities of Pontycymer and Blaengarw consisted of rows of terraced cottages which had been hurriedly built to accommodate the huge influx of workers from the 1880s, Fannie had long expressed deep concern about the home conditions of her pupils

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ In her inaugural address as president of the NFWT, she had spoken of ‘the demoralising effects of one or two roomed houses and the undesirable tendencies inherited from several generations’ and insisted that the teaching of domestic science to girls could play an important role in educating future mothers in parental responsibility and ‘in what a home might be’

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ Now, in putting herself forward for public office, she made a direct appeal to working-class women, advocating their involvement in local government-led social reform
- ▶ Her election address focussed heavily on the all-important and urgent matter of Housing

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ She was portraying the ideal of the miner's wife but the features and amenities she listed did reflect the demands of the advisory Women's Housing Sub-Committee which had been set up by the government in 1918 and included representatives of organisations such as the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Women's Labour League

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ While she also advocated improved refuse collection, with rubbish deposited or burnt at an out-of-town council amenity site and ‘converted into a useful and profitable asset’
- ▶ Finally, she urged the creation of not just one, but two, recreation grounds in Pontycymer – one at either end of the town. ‘My public life and work in the past is well-known to you’, she concluded, ‘and I promise, that if elected, I will spare neither time nor effort to faithfully represent you on the Council’. She proved as good as her word

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ When she topped the poll (of seven candidates) in the Pontycymer ward in April 1919 Fannie Thomas became not only the first woman to serve on the Ogmore and Garw UDC but also the first elected Labour woman councillor in Wales
- ▶ ‘There were some surprises in the local elections’, reported the *Glamorgan Gazette*, ‘the most outstanding being the clear-cut victory of Miss F. M. Thomas

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ ‘Here’s to our first lady Councillor! The ladies turned out in force . . . Miss Thomas is one of the pioneers in the women’s movement, and the result of the poll is an indication of this new force in public affairs’

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ She was to be returned at the next five triennial elections, retiring in 1937, having served for eighteen years and been ‘Madame Chairman’ during the year 1928–9, the first woman to hold that position on the council (and the first Labour woman to be elected chair of a council in Wales)

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ Fannie was a committed and conscientious representative, assiduous in her attendance at full council, committee and sub-committee meetings
- ▶ Over the years she sat on all the council's various committees but her principal involvement was with the 'Maternity and Child Welfare' (CWC) and the 'Hospital' (HC) ones

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ The majority of women who were involved in the labour movement in Wales in the inter-war years did so through the party's women's sections, which developed rapidly from 1918
- ▶ Fannie Thomas had some involvement here, supporting the campaigns and social activities of the Ogmore Vale Women's Section and being active in the East Glamorgan Labour Women's Advisory Council as a periodic speaker and as a committee member from 1930 until 1932

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ But above all – at a time when women were rarely elected to public office – she made her mark as a diligent, efficient and long-serving councillor, for much of the time combining this role with her full-time teaching responsibilities

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ Most significantly, she concentrated on improving maternity and child welfare services and indeed when a new clinic was opened in Pontycymer in July 1939, some two years after Fannie's retirement, she was chosen to open it (and presented with a replica silver key) in recognition of her major contribution in this sphere
- ▶ In her speech, she reflected on the tremendous advances in maternity and child welfare provision in the district during the past twenty years. **In 1919, she said, 'they had one nurse at the most for the valley, now they have a number'**

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ With the opening of the clinic (with its modern equipment and facilities), ‘nearly all her life’s ambitions had been realised’, she extravagantly stated, ‘and all her proposals on her first election address had come to pass, except for the erection of a refuse destructor

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ On stepping down from the council in April 1937, one of Fannie's colleagues had remarked that **'she had always been most active and generous in all social movements and ready to help those in distress'**
- ▶ In her response, she inevitably highlighted her contribution to the advance of general public health services over the years and her (dogged but unsuccessful) attempts to secure a refuse destructor

Fannie Thomas – Councillor

- ▶ Ever defiant, her parting words were: ‘I am very sorry to leave you, but I can say that I have never done anything in this Council that I have been sorry for’. She was always ‘fearless in her convictions’
- ▶ After retiring from teaching in May 1931, Fannie moved between homes in Pontycymer and Porthcawl, some fifteen miles away, before settling in the latter in 1934

Fannie Thomas – Obituary

- ▶ She died at her home in Porthcawl on 15th July 1952 aged 84, as a result of a brain haemorrhage and heart failure
- ▶ Neither of the two local newspapers recorded her passing and her death went seemingly unnoticed in the Garw Valley where she had once been such a significant figure for almost four decades
- ▶ There were short obituaries in the Western Mail, Porthcawl Guardian and Porthcawl Advertiser. No reference was made in the NUWT Annual Report (which commonly mentioned the deaths of former officials) nor in its organ, the Woman Teacher, nor in the minutes of the Ogmore and Garw Urban District Council, nor in the Labour Woman

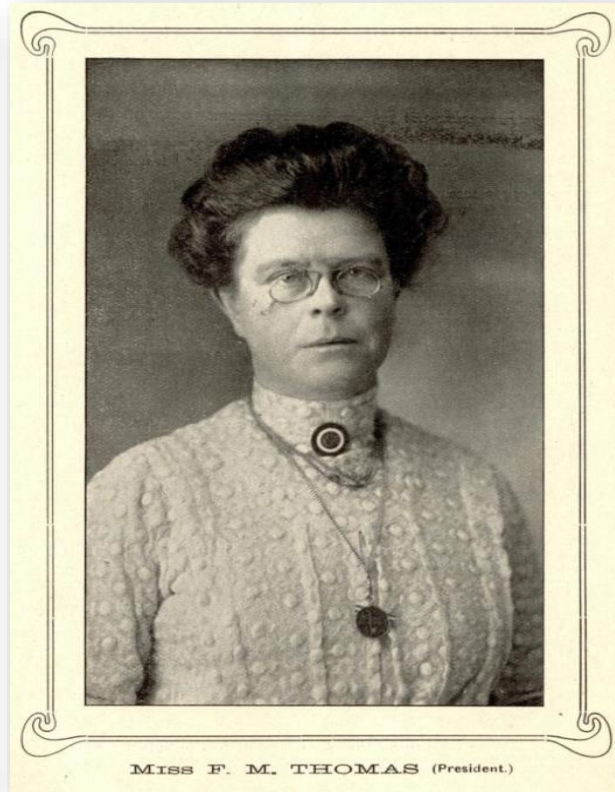
Fannie Thomas – Obituary

- ▶ Like so many local pioneer feminists, she had deserved greater recognition, her many years of dedicated campaigning and public office now apparently long forgotten
- ▶ It fell to a much later Garw Valley teacher and councillor, Vernon Chilcott, to provide an authentic testimonial in his 1994 autobiographical memoir

Fannie Thomas – Testimony

- ▶ **“Miss Thomas was a torch-bearer for her sex in the days when you needed courage to do so. She was a woman before her time, intent on blazing the trail for women’s rights and opportunities”**

MISS FRANCES (Fannie) THOMAS



1868 to 1952

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- ▶ With grateful thanks to Ryland Wallace for the use of his research