

**VOTES FOR WOMEN:
TRACING THE STRUGGLE IN BIRMINGHAM**

Votes for Women: Tracing the Struggle in Birmingham

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Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections

General Sources

Written by Dr Andy Green, 2009.

www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp

Early women's Histories in the archive

Reports of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society

[LF 76.12]

Birmingham Branch of the National Council of Women

[MS 841]

Women Workers Union Reports

[L41.2]

Elizabeth Cadbury Papers

[MS 466]

The Female Society for Birmingham for the Relief of British Negro Slaves

[IIR: 62]

Birmingham Association for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child

[MS 603]

The Records of the Birmingham Settlement

[MS 162]

Records of Anstey College and the Anstey Association

[MS 2569]



'Suffragettes at Aston Parliament', *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, 17 October 1908.

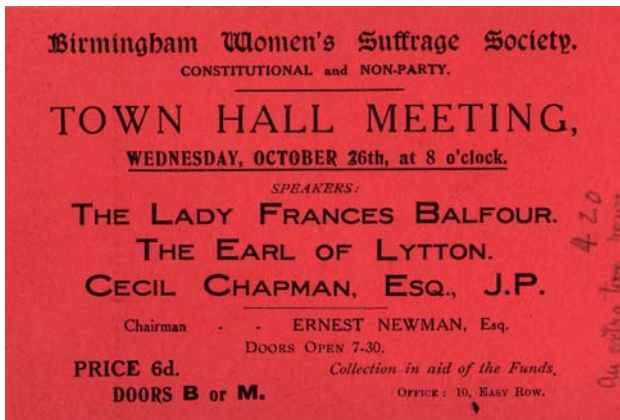
Introduction: Votes for Women in Birmingham

The women of Birmingham and the rest of Britain only won the right to vote through a long and difficult campaign for social equality. 'The Representation of the People Bill' (1918) allowed women over the age of thirty the chance to participate in national elections. Only when the 'Equal Franchise Act' (1928) was introduced did all women finally have the right to take part in the parliamentary voting system as equal citizens.

For centuries, a sexist opposition to women's involvement in public life tried to keep women firmly out of politics. Biological arguments that women were inferior to men were underlined by sentimental portrayals of women as the rightful 'guardians of the home'. While women from all classes, backgrounds and political opinions continued to work, challenge and support society, their rights were denied by a 'patriarchal' or 'male centred' British Empire in which men sought to control and dominate politics.

Demanding social change, national and local 'suffrage' groups emerged in the late 19th century, aiming to bring about a fairer political system and to raise awareness concerning social barriers facing women. This guide provides information on Birmingham based suffrage groups, illustrated through the city's archival materials.

Key Debate:
for how many years have women in Birmingham had the right to vote?



Suffrage Society Ticket. [MS 841B/514]



Birmingham Weekly Mercury, 17 October 1908.

The Rise of Women's Suffrage Societies

In 1867, the National Society for Women's Suffrage was formed to promote women's rights through 'constitutional' and peaceful tactics. Later, this organisation would become called the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies or NUWSS. The publication of *The Subjection of Women* (1869) marked an important impetus to the growth of Britain's suffrage movement.

"The legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement"

'The Subjection of Women', 1869.

The Englishwoman's Review (1868) declared that the 'Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society' was formed on 21st April. According to the brief article, "the secretary of the London Suffrage Society... urged Mrs. William Taylor, of Birmingham and Miss Johnson to take up the matter. It began with a very small committee, but there are now forty ladies and gentlemen... the movement continues to acquire strength"

The Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society

Many Birmingham suffragists were from educated and influential 'non-conformist' backgrounds. For instance, Eliza Sturge, secretary from 1871, was niece of the Quaker Joseph Sturge, a famous local antislavery campaigner. In 1873, she also became the first woman elected to the Birmingham School Board. Another pioneering family member, Dr Mary Sturge, was also a suffrage supporter. Further archival research might reveal other suffragists engaging in local educational and welfare concerns.

Elizabeth Crawford, a leading historian of the local women's movements, has also shown that many suffragists lived in the wealthier, middle class areas of Edgbaston. From their own houses, members of the society often raised petitions or established fundraising meetings. Reaching out across the city, they held public debates and distributed leaflets. They also formed international connections with women's movement's in other countries.

But despite their groundbreaking work, the success of the 'peaceful' tactics used by local and national suffragists remained open to question. The political system continued to refuse any real consideration of the women's vote. In the early 20th century, harder attitudes towards campaigning emerged, led by the creation of the Women's Social and Political Union.

Objects:

"to obtain the Parliamentary vote for women on the same terms as it is, or may be granted to men"

Methods:

"the promotion of the claims of women to the Parliamentary vote by united action in Parliament and by all Constitutional methods of agitation in the country"

Key Debate:

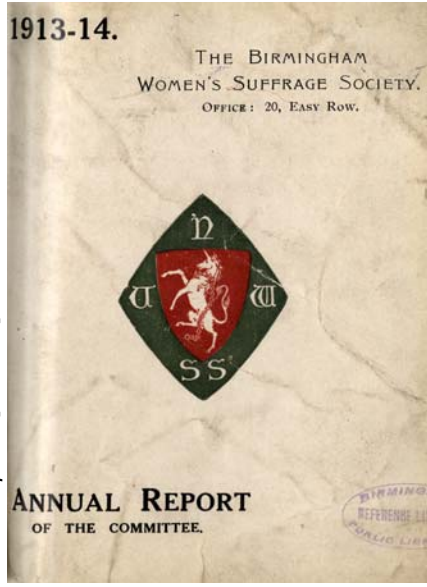
would the arguments of the BWSS have appealed to working class women in Birmingham?

Trade unionist, based in Bournville. [Large portraits]



Julia Varley (1871-1952)

Printed reports. [LF 76.12]



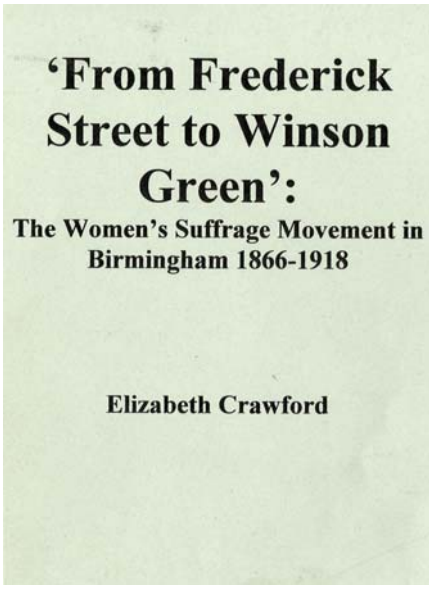
Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society

Suffragist. [B'ham Portraits]



Dr Mary Sturge (1862-1925)

Pamphlet by Elizabeth Crawford. [LP 76.12]



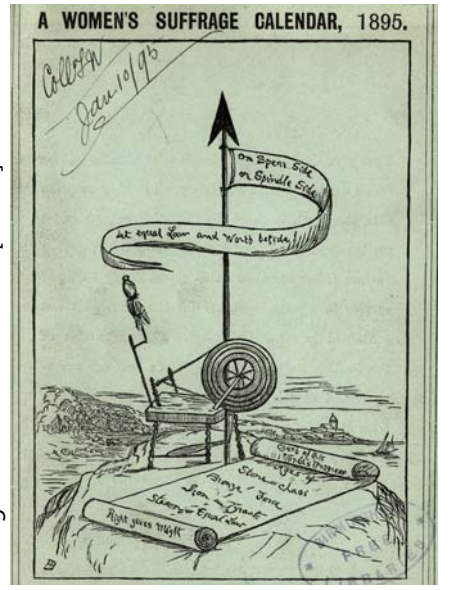
Suffrage Movement in Birmingham

President, B'ham Women's Suffrage Society. [B'ham Portraits]



Catherine Osler (1854-1924)

Suffrage educational materials. [B324.3]



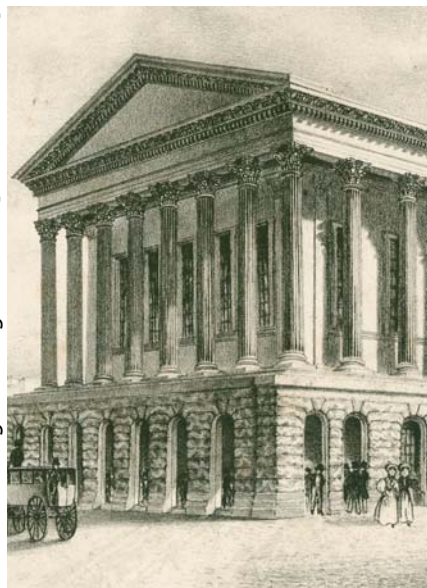
Women's Suffrage Calendars

Supporter for women's suffrage. [B'ham Portraits]



Elizabeth Cadbury (1858-1951)

Scene of 'suffrage' meetings & demos. [WK/Town Hall 18]



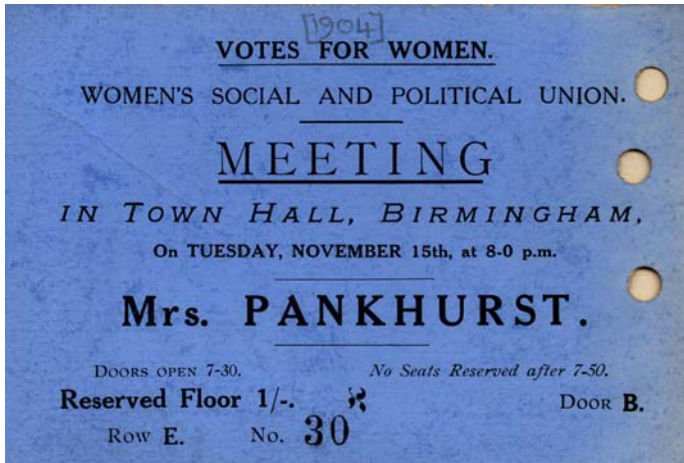
Birmingham Town Hall

Suffragist supporter. [MS 2569]



Rhoda Anstey (1865-1936)

Key Debate:
how could you find out what other social campaigns these women were involved with in Birmingham ?



WSPU ticket. [Birmingham Scrapbook Vol 9 299155 p353]



Fire Service Press cuttings. [MS 1303/224-226]

Birmingham and the Women's Social and Political Union

The WSPU was formed by the famous Pankhurst sisters in Manchester in 1903. Followers were known as 'suffragettes', instead of 'suffragists'. Their tactics were reinforced with an urgent emphasis on the idea that women should now take the struggle for the vote directly into their own hands: "deeds not words!"

By 1907 Birmingham had a branch headquarters of the WSPU in Edgbaston. On 17th September 1909, the city became a flash point when suffragettes climbed on the roof of Bingley Hall on

Broad Street, where the Prime Minister Asquith was giving a speech. Unfortunately, there is no official archive collection left by the Birmingham WSPU organisation. Instead, other sources need to be used to chart the impact of their tactics in the city. For instance, the press cuttings of the Birmingham Fire Service (1912-15) show arsons attributed to Birmingham's WSPU. During this period of militancy, local women started setting fire to empty buildings, daubing painted protests, damaging letter boxes and attacking works of art.

"Do they think they will compel 'mere man' to give them what they want by behaving like a lot of ruffians and doing wanton and wilful damage to property?"

Moor Pool News, 13/3/1913. [LF 60.7]

"...I attack this work of art deliberately as a protest against the government's criminal injustice in denying women the vote, and also against the government's injustice in imprisoning, forcibly feeding, and drugging suffragist militants..."

Bertha Ryland, who was arrested for attacking a painting in Birmingham Art Gallery on 8th June 1914.

Elizabeth Crawford, 'From Frederick Street to Winson Green.'

Arrested suffragette women in Birmingham often underwent severe social punishments for their actions. When imprisoned, many women went on hunger strikes as an act of political protest and were 'force fed'. In 1913, those women who had become too weak to continue were first released, then brought back to jail when healthier, under what became known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act'. 'Force feeding' was routinely undertaken at Winson Green prison. Creating a political scandal, this situation served to expose state injustice. Earlier campaigners had risked their reputations; now many women were risking their lives. Birmingham was at the forefront.

WSPU leaders never officially incited 'physical violence'. But it was clear that extreme acts drew attention to the cause which many politicians still wanted to completely ignore. Condemned by the press and also by many 'peaceful' women campaigners, the WSPU claimed that it was actually the government that continued to be the 'real' aggressor towards women. Only when WWI broke out did the suffragettes agree to stop their action. The political prisoners still in jail were freed and many Birmingham women now began working on production lines for the war effort. Did women's efforts in the war do more to gain the vote than the WSPU? Or were the suffragette's actions the key factor?

Key Debate:
what is the legacy of the WSPU for us today?

28th September 1909.

officials. The administration of the food has been done with every consideration. I should like to ask if we may exercise together when our nine days are over.

ELLEN BARNWELL complained as follows:- I complain of being put in the Second Division and treated as a common criminal and of the Government authorising the Medical Officer to give food ~~for~~ by force. I protest against it. I have no complaints against any officer of the Prison but simply against the illegality of the treatment I have received. I have been treated kindly since I have been here. I ought to have been put in the First Division.

HILDA EVELYN BURKETT complained as follows:- I complain that I have not been treated properly since I have been here. I have been forced to take food against my will. I protest against it. I have been told that it is illegal to have a nasal pipe used. I complain of being wrapped in blankets with hands tied down and forced to take food. No more force was used than necessary. Kindness was used.

~~After~~ Each of the prisoners was informed that their complaints should be forwarded to the Home Secretary.

After all the complaints had been heard and the prisoners withdrawn the Chairman on behalf of the Committee expressed the opinion that the Doctors had acted in a most humane manner and that the prisoners had been shown every consideration and that the Doctors should be commended.

J. Austen-Smith
CHAIRMAN

6th October 1909.

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Winson Green Visiting Committee, 1909. [PS/B/4/5/1/3]

You can read Mary Leigh's account of being force fed in Birmingham in 'Shoulder to Shoulder' (1975).
[AQ 324.3 SHO]

Questioning the Evidence of Suffragette History in Birmingham

"I complain that I have not been treated properly since I have been here. I have been forced to take food against my will. I protest against it... I complain of being wrapped in blankets with hands tied down and forced to take food. No more force was used than necessary"

Hilda E. Burkett (see left).

This piece of archival evidence on Suffragette history can be found in the Visiting Committee book for Winson Green, 1909. This volume contains statements of complaint made by six women being force fed at the time: Laura Ainsworth, Mabel Capper, Mary Edwards, Hilda Evelyn Burkett, Ellen Barnwell, and Charlotte Marsh. Their statements give us a vital insight into how the women were treated.

The entries also raise many important questions: were the statements taken accurately? How did their treatment by prison guards compare with the images of 'torture' used in the WSPU paper *Votes For Women*, or the descriptions published in *Shoulder to Shoulder* (1975)? And is Hilda Burkett (left) the same woman drawn at the Aston Parliament meeting (see page 1)?

Key Debate:
what do you think the document above tells us about the attitude of Suffragettes towards their imprisonment?

Key Information on Suffragette Movements in Birmingham

Other Women's Campaign Groups:

Conservative Primrose League
The Women's Liberal Association
Women's Liberal Unionist Association
The Women's Freedom League
Church League for Women's Suffrage
The United Suffragists
Men's League for Women's Suffrage
Friend's League for Women's Suffrage

Some Key Figures in Birmingham:

Catherine Osler, Eliza Sturge,
Dorothy Evans, Gertrude Francis,
Gladys Hazell, Gladice Keevil,
Lilias Mitchell, Mary Johnson,
Kathleen Nicholson, Bertha Ryland.

Some Key Places in Birmingham:

90 Wheeley's Road, Edgbaston
(Mary Johnson, Secretary, BWSS)

17 Frederick Street, Edgbaston
(Eliza Sturge, Secretary, BWSS)

3 Speedwell Road, Edgbaston
(Eliza Ashford, Treasurer, BWSS)

44 Wheeley's Road, Edgbaston
(Catherine Osler, BWSS)

14 Ethel Street, Birmingham
(Gladice Keevil, WSPU Office)

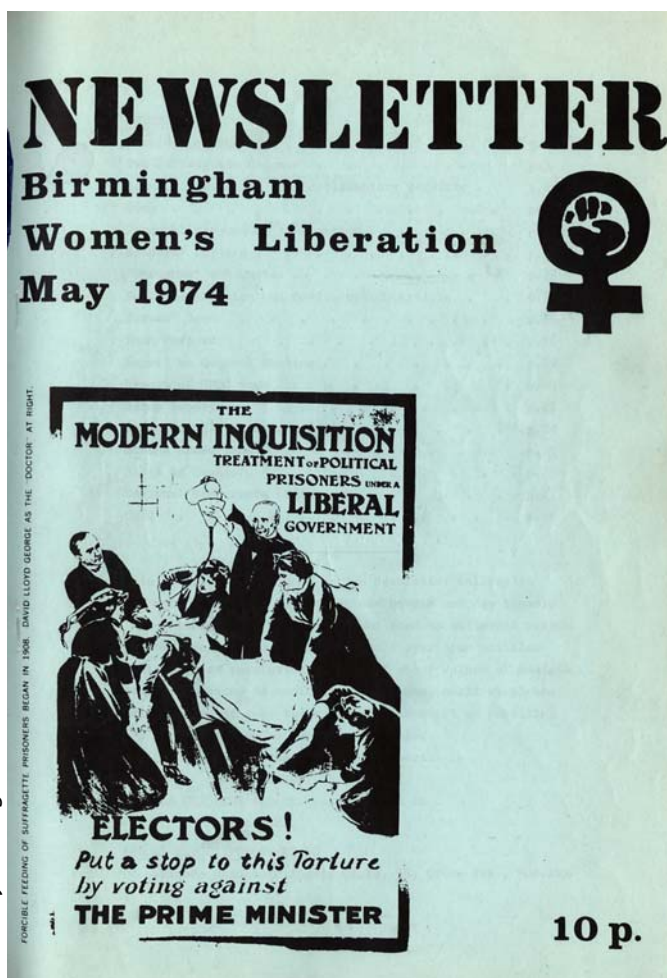
33 Paradise Street, Birmingham
(Dorothy Evans, WSPU Office)

97 John Bright Street, Birmingham
(WSPU Office)

Key Debate:

how could you find out more about men's organisations that also supported women's rights?

Leaflet by Birmingham Women's Liberation Movement. [LF 22.7]



Leaflet highlighting links between women's struggles in the city.

Key Dates for Birmingham activists:

1868 Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society

1903 'WSPU' established by the Pankhursts

1907 Birmingham's 'WSPU' established

1909 Suffragette demonstration against Prime minister at Bingley Hall

1910 'Black Friday': police use violent force against suffragettes in London

1913- Militant action campaign period

1914 Campaign suspended for WWI

1918 Three former campaigners now stand as local MP's: Corbett Ashby, Christabel Pankhurst, Mary MacArthur

Votes for Women: Tracing the Struggle in Birmingham

Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections

Notes and Advice on Researching the Women's Movement in Birmingham

Finding research materials on radical women's campaign groups can be difficult. Birmingham Archives and Heritage has a strong collection of materials for the 'constitutional' Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society; but, as stated earlier in this guide, there are currently no existing records for the more militant WSPU in Birmingham. For this reason, there is still a huge amount we need to learn concerning the struggle for women's rights in this city. Your own research approaches could include: finding new evidence in unexpected archival collections; connecting existing resources in new ways; exploring local family connections; looking at local areas where many women workers were based, such as 'Bournville'; researching national collections/libraries which may more shed light on local events (for instance, using the WSPU publication 'Votes for Women'); examining links with later organisations, such as the 'Birmingham Branch of the National Council For Women' or the 'Birmingham Women's Liberation Movement'. The work done by Elizabeth Crawford and Michelle Shoebridge currently remain the vital starting points for anyone who would like to learn more details on Birmingham's earlier involvement in the search for women's rights.

Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections used for this guide:

Michelle Shoebridge, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Birmingham and District* [LF 22.7]
Elizabeth Crawford, *From Edgbaston to Winson Green* [LP 76.12]
Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, Reference Guide [324.6230941 CRA]
Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder*, 1975 [AQ 324.3 SHO]
Lyn Macdonald, *The Suffragettes*, 1977 [LF 22.7]
Women's Suffrage Calendars [B324.3]
Norma Campbell, *The Suffragettes in Birmingham* [LP 76.12]
Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society Reports (1868-1902, 1902-14, 1914-20) [L76.12]
The National Council of Women, Leaflets, Programs, etc. (Birmingham Branch) [LF 22.7]
Records of Anstey College and The Anstey Association [MS 2569]
The Elizabeth Cadbury Papers [MS 466]
Birmingham Women's Liberation Newsletter (Sept 1973-77) [LF 22.7]
The National Society for Women's Suffrage Reports [B324.3]
See also following reports of: The National Union of Women's Suffrage Society [B324.3]
The Women Worker (11 bound volumes of reports from 1891-1924) [L41.2]
The Englishwoman's Review, 1868 [B070.48347]
The Graphic (see: vol. 80 July-Sept 1909) [BF052]
The Queen (Magazine publication. See vols. 133 & 134, 1913) [BF052]
The Moor Pool News, 1913 [LF 60.7]
Birmingham Fire Brigade - Records of Fires attributed to Suffragettes [MS 1303/186-190]
Birmingham Fire Brigade - Presscuttings re. Suffragettes [MS 1303/224-226]
Minutes of Winson Green Visiting Committee [PS/B/4/5/1/3]
Birmingham Women [BCOL 22.7 GRE]
Birmingham Scrap Book. (WSPU ticket - see vol. 9 p353) [Wall Seq; 299155]
Miscellaneous Newscuttings, 1860-1918 [LF 71.061; 537528]
Birmingham Portraits Collection
The Birmingham Newspaper Collections

Votes for Women: Tracing the Struggle in Birmingham

General Sources

Secondary Reading:

Note- these sources are a selection chosen from Birmingham Central Library.

Jill Liddington, *Rebel Girls, Their Fight For the Vote*, 2006 [324.6230941 LID]

Melanie Phillips, *The Ascent of Women*, 2003 [324.6230941 PHI]

Martin Pugh, *The Pankhursts*, 2001 [324.6230941 PAN]

Joyce Marlow, *Votes For Women. The Virago Book of the Suffragettes*, 2001 [324.6230941 MAR]

Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866-1928*, 1998 [324.6230941 SMI]

Barbara Castle, *Sylvia and Christabel Pankhurst*, 1987 [A324.30942 PAN]

Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy*, 1986 [A324.30942]

Women in the Suffragette Movement, 1981 [A324.3 MOR]

Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres, The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain*, 1978 [A324.30942]

Caroline Morrell, *Black Friday, Violence Against Women in the Suffragette Movement* [A324.2 MOR]

Christabel Pankhurst, *Unshackled*, 1959 [A324.3]

E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffrage Movement*, 1931 [A324.3]

Emmeline Pankhurst, *My Own Story*, 1914 [A324.3 PAN]

Other Institutions with Relevant Collections:

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

The Women's Library

The British Library

The Pankhurst Centre

Websites - Museums - Libraries - Institutions:

www.sylviapankhurst.com - information resource on Pankhurst

www.suffragette.org.uk - celebration of the suffragette movement in London

www.bbc.co.uk - contains pages on the suffragette movement

www.parliament.uk - contains pages on the suffragette movement

www.wolverhamptonhistory.org.uk/politics/women/suffragettes - local resource.

www.hull.ac.uk/women-of-conviction/index.html - online materials on women's history

www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/struggle/suffrage1/suffragists.html - The British Library

www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk/publications.htm (see essay under 'occasional papers')

www.local-history.co.uk/bh

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