

The toffee hammer and the suffragettes

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A toffee hammer is a very small hammer, designed for one job: breaking sheets or slabs of hard toffee, such as bonfire toffee, into pieces small enough to eat. In the early 20th century it was put to a very different use.

A sweet shop tool

Hard toffee used to be sold in slabs. Sweet shops broke it up with a little hammer and sold it by the quarter, and families bought whole sheets to break up at home. Toffee makers still sell slab toffee with its own tiny hammer, and toffee hammers turn up as a novelty in gift packs. See [slab toffee and the toffee hammer](#).

Votes for women

The suffragettes were campaigning for women's right to vote in Britain in the early 1900s. The most militant were members of the Women's Social and Political Union, the WSPU. They turned to direct action: heckling politicians, trying to storm Parliament, chaining themselves to railings and smashing windows.

Why a toffee hammer?

Suffragettes, and in particular members of the WSPU, used toffee hammers to break windows as a form of protest in their campaign.

1912: the window smashing campaign

1912 was a turning point. The suffragettes moved to more militant tactics and began an organised campaign of breaking windows. One WSPU member from the Croydon branch, Hazel Inglis, was imprisoned in 1912 for breaking the windows of the Post Office in Lower Regent Street with a hammer. The tactics divided the movement: some leading figures spoke out against the window smashing, arguing that it would lose support for the cause, and were expelled from the WSPU. From 1910 to 1914 the campaign escalated further, to arson and bombings.

A small object with a big story

Women in Britain won the vote in stages: the Representation of the People Act 1918 gave the vote to women over 30 who met a property qualification, and the Equal Franchise Act 1928 gave all women the vote at 21, the same as men. The toffee hammer went back to the sweet shop. But it remains one of the stranger objects in British history: a sweet maker's tool that ended up as a symbol of the campaign for women's votes.

If you want to use one for its proper purpose, a slab of [treacle toffee](#) on Bonfire Night is the traditional place to start.

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