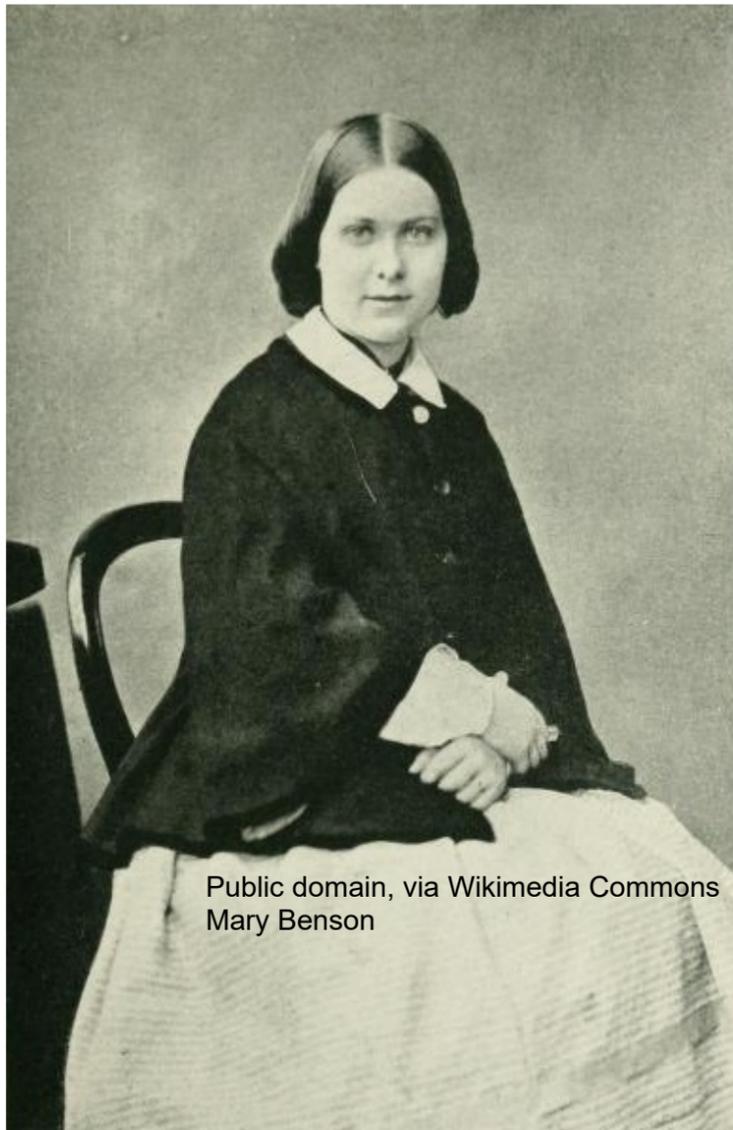


Mary Benson, 1841-1918

Frances Stenlake, November 2020

Mary Benson, as the widow of Edward Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, was as much solicited as was any titled lady to lend her name to suffragist organisations and causes. With her companion, Lucy Tait, daughter of her husband's predecessor as Archbishop of Canterbury, she came to live at Tremans, Horsted Keynes, in 1899. In 1902 she was invited by Marie Corbett to speak on women's suffrage at a Conference of the Sussex Union of Women's Liberal Associations at Horsted Keynes.



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Mary Benson

Sending apologies, she said that had she been able to attend, she would have spoken on this subject as both she and the late Archbishop had the cause greatly at heart.

The following year she was reported to be 'taking up the claims of her sex' regarding the proposed National Church Council. She objected to the decision to limit to men the right of voting for lay representatives to sit on this, and urged 'those who wished for a fair and representative franchise to do all in their power to bring home to churchpeople at large the gravity of the question'.

When the Conservative Women's Franchise Association (CWFA) was formed in 1909, Mary Benson joined ladies of the nobility, including Eleanor Cecil, as one of its Vice-Presidents. In 1911 she and Lucy Tait attended the meeting of the Horsted Keynes branch of the Central Sussex Women's Suffrage Society addressed by Lady Betty Balfour, a fellow Vice-President of the CWFA. Again with Lady Eleanor Cecil, Mary Benson agreed to be named as one of a list of eminent patrons of two exhibitions staged in Haywards Heath by Central Sussex Suffragists: of Sweated Industries in 1912 and of Women's Handicrafts in 1913. In April 1913 she and both Lord and Lady Robert Cecil became Vice-Presidents of the newly-formed North Sussex branch of the CWFA.

The value of Mary Benson's identification with the suffrage cause reflected her social status: the news from Horsted Keynes in the *Mid Sussex Times* of 24 February 1914 was that Mrs Benson and Miss Tait had dined at Lambeth Palace that Monday evening with the King and Queen.