

January 1914 ...

Men wielded influence in the town, but what of the women? Well they had very little say, and a meeting of suffragettes held in the Paget Hall this month tried to address this, but they had a long way to go ...

58 year-old Hannah Prior ran a grocer's shop in Town Street ... now I say "grocer's shop", it was more a small cottage that her mother turned into a shop some years ago, and last month, just before Christmas, Hannah received a visit from Inspector Mobbs, the head of Brandon's police. He wanted to send some of her baking powder off for testing and refused Hannah's offer of a pre-packaged box of the stuff and instead wanted the loose powder she kept in a drawer. She weighed out ½lb and Mobbs sent it to Norwich for analysis. The result was bad news for Hannah and she was summoned to attend the Brandon Magistrates Court for selling baking powder below the legal quality standard.

The Chairman of the court was Lieutenant-Colonel Basil Spragge, a typical 'old guard' military type, who had a distinguished military career behind him. He had received the D.S.O. from the King and had also been a bodyguard to His Majesty, and twenty years ago came to settle in North Court, Brandon, with his new wife who had been half his age when they married. Now he oversaw justice in the town.

Poor Hannah was too nervous to appear and she instructed a Norwich solicitor to speak on her behalf. Spragge suggested her non-appearance smacked of a lack of respect for the Court, however he did allow the case to continue in her absence. Inspector Mobbs opened the proceedings and told the court the Norwich analyst had stated there was only a quarter of the carbonic acid that should have been in the baking powder. The solicitor countered this by suggesting there was no legal standard regarding levels of carbonic acid in baking powder so how can anyone say it was below quality, and Inspector Mobbs should have informed Hannah that he was going to send the sample off for testing. Spragge put this question to Mobbs, and Mobbs replied, "I told her when I went into the shop I was an Inspector under the Food and Drugs Act, and I told her two or three times it would be sent to the analyst at Norwich, and just before I left I said the public analyst." Spragge pursued the point, "You are perfectly certain you used the words PUBLIC ANALYST?" Mobbs replied, "Yes, sir."

The solicitor pressed home his argument that there was no legally defined standard to base this case on and Spragge admitted the offence was not a very serious one, but public officers had to be respected. Hannah was fined 10 shillings. It seemed not all women were prepared to be heard.