



## WOMEN AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The outcry in the press in 1914 regarding women working seems very odd because, of course, many did so already, in the mills, gunpowder works, oakum factories, they gutted fish, they took in washing, were dressmakers, milliners, teachers, nurses, typists. Some had gone to University, become doctors or scientists. It was when women married that their 'place was in the home'. For a man to have a wife who worked was a reflection on his ability to do what was expected of him, namely, to 'be able to keep his family', except, of course, that for many families it was essential for the wife to continue working.

Perversely the first direct and indirect effect of the War was for many women to become unemployed. Large country houses were shut down and were either given to or requisitioned by the Government to become Military Hospitals, so fewer domestic servants were required.

Demand dropped for cloth so mills reduced their staff. The Women's Suffrage Movement, which had stopped their campaigning for the duration, turned their attention to aiding these women and to protecting their interests.

It seems it was the suggestion that women should take over work regarded as 'man's work' that caused the indignation to rise. Here is the gist of a letter from a Mr. H. Williams of Redhill:

### **Surrey Mirror. 26 August 1914**

To the Editor

"Sir, I have read the letter of 'Pro Patria' re able-bodied young men behind the counter who should answer their country's call and their places filled by women. Now, Sir, I beg to differ from your correspondent as to the fitness of women to fill the vacancies in the grocery, provisionary, ironmongery and many other trades. [He suggests the vacancies should be filled by men too old for active service, which seems reasonable but he continues....] These women would be much better employed looking after the homes and comforts of the men who would and should be the bread winners."

He was not the only one to express such sentiments. They were held by those in Government too. Lord Kitchener had his finger pointed at the men, but Sir (as he was then) Douglas Haig had his eye on the women and distributed a leaflet in which he set

out what a woman's duty in wartime should be – i.e. that men would return from the trenches exhausted, in need of warmth and comfort, food and rest and it was a woman's duty to provide for his every need so he would be able to return fully refreshed to fight again.

Whatever the views of women doing men's work when it came to the propaganda used to inspire men to fight it was not the home-loving wife and mother figure of womanhood that was chosen but always the warlike figure or Boadicea or Britannia – all drapes and breastplate, helmet and shield, maybe waving the Sword of Justice. France did it a little differently – hatless, hair flowing, no breast plate but fulsome bosoms, one breast bared.

Because of the shortage of so many records research into women's work is very difficult.

We do have one record we have been able to confirm – that of Dorothy Oakley and Serbia (see Fact Sheet *Dorothy Oakley. VAD in Serbia.*) but there are so many other areas in nursing alone in which women were involved and there could be other village women about whose work we know nothing. It is very frustrating!

**Hospital Ships:** Nurses lost their lives when these ships were torpedoed or hit mines, as did the HMHS *Salta* as it left Le Havre on the 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1917. The victims are buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site at Ste Marie Cemetery and commemorated by name are the nurses, soldiers and merchant seamen whose bodies were not recovered. Le Havre was used by the BEF almost throughout the War and by 1917 had three general and two stationary hospitals and four convalescent depots.

**Maritime Marine Stewardesses.** The names of those lost at sea are on the memorial on Tower Hill, as are those who died when the *Lusitania* was sunk.

Many women drove ambulances and supply lorries while working just behind the Front Line with the YMCA. They also provided refreshment huts for the troops and cared for French refugees. Those who died, for example in a lorry hit by a bomb, are buried in Commonwealth War Graves Commission sites such as Etaples, alongside the military casualties.

**Dr. Louisa Garrett Anderson and Dr. Flora Murray** called at the French embassy in London on the 12<sup>th</sup> August 1914 offering to raise and equip a hospital in France. Presumably in view of the War Office's refusal of Dr Inglis' help they did not even consider contacting the British Government. The French were eager to accept and on 1st September the **Women's Hospital Corps** started work in Paris at the Hotel Claridge. In November 1914 another hospital was opened in Wimereux. This was attached to the Military Hospital in the Grand Hotel and the War Office was slowly beginning to develop some commonsense – it recognised this and women were Army Surgeons for the first time. What is more it was found that due to the shortage of doctors in England, London was in urgent need of a unit so the hospital in France closed and the old workhouse of St Giles, Bloomsbury was taken over and the Women's Hospital of Endell Street was founded. Before it closed in 1919 over 26,000 patients passed through, including many from the Dominions.

**Women working on the Buses and Trams:** There was an age limit (21 to 35 years) and a very strict medical examination. Those women selected then had the same training course as the men.

The London General Omnibus Company engaged their first conductress in February 1916. In 1919 the women were 'demobbed' at a farewell tea and concert. Most of the men were back. One wonders how the women felt.

As the war progressed women took over so many other activities – swept the roads, worked in the signal boxes on the railway, delivered coal, became window cleaners, painters, drivers, ticket collectors, road sweepers. However, there was one special service – **The Women's Police Service**. This was also unique for it survived after the War and went on to inspire other countries to introduce a similar service. It was established in 1915 when the influx of refugees, and the dislocation in society (concentration of raw recruits in training camps, the undesirable types this attracted, the separation allowance which meant people had more spending power than they had before, the outbreaks of drunkenness and anti-social behaviour, the traumas of the first air raids) resulted in an official decision that a trained, uniformed women's organisation was needed to deal with new problems, so many of which needed a woman's presence. They were trained in drill and ju jitsu. (That was a skill the Suffragettes needed, pre-war!)

Between April 1916 and December 1918, 2,085 applications were received but only 1,044 accepted.

**Government Offices:** After the war it was proposed to open a museum which eventually became the Imperial War Museum when it was felt it should include not only every aspect of Britain's part but that of the Empire too. Our early research was working on the correspondence of the Museum during the immediate post-war years as it tried to collect information for its proposed Women's Section. It included letters to the Government regarding women working for MI5. Unfortunately the Museum then closed to be renovated for the 100 year Commemoration. Certainly it does seem that women worked for MI5 in a clerical capacity but the IWM wanted to know if women were also 'in the field'. There was a spy ring established in Paris in the Rue St Roch, commanded by Major George Bruce who married one of the operatives, Dorothy Done, but whether this was included in the IWM's search or was a separate organisation we did not have time to check.

**Women's Services:** The three services which were very familiar in the Second War were started in the First. In 1916, with the manpower shortage becoming grimmer, on the 10th December Haig announced that in principle he was prepared to accept that women should replace men as clerks and on communication duties (a lieutenant-colonel remarked that more women than men would be needed as they "could not take the strain as well as men").

It was also felt women could act as telegraphists and telephone operators.

In 1917 the **Women's Army Auxiliary Corps** was formed closely followed by the **Woman's Section Royal Flying Corps** and the **Women's Royal Naval Service**.

A very large number of men were released for combative duty. Women took over as follows:

2,969 clerks, 1,322 store workers, 899 sail makers, 680 cooks, 436 drivers, 263 fitters, 153 riggers and 1,681 trades and trainees.

**Munitions Workers:** In 1915 there was 'The Shell Crisis' caused by change of tactics at the Front. Instead of the formerly held opinion that artillery supported infantry, now a heavy and prolonged bombardment preceded an attack, but it does not seem as if any calculations had been made regarding the effect this would have on the supply of shells. This led to a coalition government and a national munitions policy with David Lloyd George as the Minister for Munitions.

During the War between 800,000 and 1,000,000 women worked in the munition or armaments industries. They were Oxy-Acetylene welders, made optical appliances, lenses, surgical and medical necessities, X-ray tubes. They assembled aircraft and guns. For 10 hours a day they made high explosives. Apart from the constant danger they were poisoned by the TNT, their hair and skin turned yellow and their lives were at risk.

At Silvertown a disused part of a factory was brought into use to increase the manufacture of munitions. In January 1917 it was destroyed by an explosion, one of the biggest. 73 women were killed, 400 injured.

About 400 women died from over-exposure to TNT.

In 1917, the crisis year, there were Cabinet Papers regarding the Statutory Rules. A schedule of wages shows the rates of pay for 'girls', the age range from under 15 to 18 year olds, for a working week of 48 hours to 54 hours. A supplementary heading refers to the work these children and teenagers are doing as being that 'customarily done by men of 18 years and over'. The thought of children from under 15 working in such an environment is horrific.

Dated November 1915 there are rules about the Enlistment of men employed in munition -

"Any man badged or starred cannot be enlisted but can be attested for the Reserve on condition that they return to civil employment. They will receive the khaki armband and will not be called up for service unless at some future time the Ministry of Munitions decides that they are more urgently needed in the army than for munitions work."

Locally we had a munitions factory at Horley, **The No.35 Munitions Store**, making shells, and an ordnance works, **Monotype** at Salford.

Now we have to insert the experiences of a man into this Fact Sheet. It has not been possible to find a local woman's record and a rich source of information for a local man was almost overlooked – it is in a diary which is lodged at the West Sussex Archives at Chichester and it was assumed it had no connection with our area. However, on reading it we found the following information (and that regarding his working conditions applied to women too).

He was **Benjamin Potter**, born in Marsh Green about 1887. In 1911 he lived at 2 Stanley Cottages, Moor Lane, Dormansland, and worked in the kitchen garden at Ford

Manor. In 1915 he was married, had a daughter and lived between East Grinstead and Turners Hill.

He had two brothers who had enlisted in the Royal (West Surrey) Regiment but he failed the medical examination as he was deaf. He tried on several occasions to get the decision reversed, arguing he was experienced with handling horses and would be useful in a suitable regiment. Finally he was recommended to work in a munitions factory.

He signed on at Salford to work the night shift from 6 p.m to 8 a.m. with two 30 minutes breaks, cycling 10 miles to and from the factory 6 days a week, later increased to a full seven days.

At the beginning he was working on milling machines but was then promoted to working on the benches as a fitter, which meant precision work, fitting to half a thousandth of an inch, making parts for the Vickers and Lewis machine guns. All the parts were made in the factory, from moulded casts to final sand blasting, and were sent to Vickers for testing and assembly.

He found a house 3 miles from his work, was now a father of two children and his wages had risen from five pence halfpenny (2.3p) an hour to seven pence (2.9p) an hour. After a few months they were increased again to eight pence halfpenny (3.5p).

An Extraction from the diary, edited by Brian Buss, can be reserved at Lingfield Library: *Working Night Shift at the Monotype* published by the Horley Local History Society. It is an interesting read, giving considerably more detail than is contained here.

One interesting point, however, is a Cabinet paper regarding eye problems and munition workers. It was concerned mainly with eye protection, with the correct shields and employers' responsibility in supplying them and employees in always using them. Benjamin Potter, however, mentions a different problem. Because of the vital necessity for accuracy the factory was lit with mercurial lighting and apparently working for such a long shift in such light during the night, then emerging into daylight, particularly into sunlight, not only made the eyes water but caused excruciating pain.

There was also another problem. The building was huge, the 'near daylight' lighting threw no shadows. The whole roof and sides were glass. The works were not shut down unless German planes or Zeppelins were within 10 miles but the workers were concerned that the place was a beacon.

There were lighter moments. An article in the Surrey Mirror, Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1915, describes a Christmas party which took place at the Council School. The evening had been divided into two sections, the first a musical programme, both vocal and instrumental, then after refreshments there were games and dancing.

**No.35 Munition Store, Horley:** No records have been found of a worker at this site. It was a depot of one of the 15 National Filling Factories established in 1915, (following the Shell Crisis) and presumably controlled by the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich. Its main activity was filling 18lb shell cases with shrapnel bullets. As with

the Monotype, a detailed history can be reserved at Lingfield Library. It is also by Brian Buss of the Horley Local History Society – *No.35 Munitions Store, Horley, Surrey, in World War One.*

**Women Police in Munition Works:** In 1916 the Ministry of Munitions formally arranged a special force of women police, in a distinctive uniform. They performed the usual police duties but had the extra responsibilities at munition works. They had to search women to ensure they were not using hairpins, for example, or anything that could be dangerous. During an air raid they had to clear the main building and the various sheds, and the magazine. Then, together with the fire brigade, they had to mount guard over the magazine, not the healthiest of places to be in an air raid.

**Women's Land Army:** 1917 was a dreadful year. All the combatant counties were war weary. The Germans were turning against the Kaiser, French morale was worse, with mutiny spreading through her army. Food was short, exacerbated by the failed harvests of 1916 across the Northern Hemisphere. There was talk of a negotiated settlement but the opportunity was lost.

We had another problem – we were running out of population. We could not send more men to the Front and at the same time have enough people here to service them. There were not enough men for ship building, mining, steel works and farming. Desperate attempts were made to find manpower from somewhere. Men who had been classed as unfit were recalled and reassessed. The very controversial idea of introducing conscription in Ireland was considered. Many Irishmen were already in the Services but the situation was too tense to formalise their enlistment. Enlisting women in the Armed Services meant more men were available but this was merely stirring things around a bit as women took over as despatch riders, drivers, mechanics and so on.

The most pressing problem was getting in the 1917 harvest. This was so crucial that soldiers on leave had to work in the fields, as did convalescent men waiting to be boarded before returning to the trenches. Even with the need for reinforcements men with farming backgrounds were repatriated. Children were taken out of school (not, probably, with any regret on their part).

Not only crops but fruit and vegetables had to be harvested, particularly potatoes which had almost failed completely in 1916.

It was at this stage that the Women's Land Army was formed. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, under the Board of Trade, organised the various county Instruction and Hostel Sub-Committees, responsible for recruitment, training and housing. There was also help from the W.I.s and the Girls' Friendly Society.

Initially about 23,000 women joined but they faced a great deal of prejudice, not only from farmers but also, if they were 'townies', from villagers generally who regarded such women as 'too delicate'.

During 1916 the Women's National Land Corps was formed of ladies from the villages, all of whom knew each other. Now there was a deep concern – 'What type of girl will we get?'

We are fortunate to have in the Surrey History Centre Archives an example of the Handbook which was given to each new member of the WLA and also the Minute Book of the Surrey Branch of the Instruction & Hostel Sub-Committee from which we learn that one of the training hostels they had such difficulty in establishing was here in Lingfield – the **de Clermont Training Hostel** at Newchapel.

Here are the rules which it was said should be operated at the Hostels – “To be observed by Pupils in Training under the Women’s War Agricultural Committee – acting for the Board of Agriculture.

The Pupils must immediately on arrival report themselves to the Principal.

The Pupils must obey the Rules of the Hostel and keep strictly to the hours.

Pupils are expected to make their own beds and keep their rooms neat and they must not use their bedrooms during the day.

Pupils must be punctual at meals. No meal will be provided out of hours.

When work is finished all farm boots must be changed in the Common Room before taking tea.

The use of improper language, rowdy behaviour, or inattention to Rules, will be considered sufficient reason for expulsion.

Pupils must be punctual for starting work on the Farm and must keep to the hours in accordance with the timetable.

Pupils must wear the uniform provided when at work and no jewellery must be worn.

Out of working hours Pupils may wear civilian clothes but if so must not include any portion of their uniform.

All Pupils must attend some place of worship on Sunday mornings unless prevented by their Farm Duties.

No leave of absence is granted without permission of the Principal, at the written request of the Parents or Guardians.

Pupils must carry out any form of practical or manual work that may be demanded at such time and places as may be required.

Pupils must take notes at lectures and keep a record of the work done. These Notes must be in legible form and properly arranged and must be handed in for inspection when required.

All pupils must be reported on at the end of their course as to their attendance, conduct, diligence and capacity.

Pupils having any complaint to make should do so through the Forewoman or direct to the Principal.

Time Table – Hours:

Rise – 6 a.m. Breakfast – 6.45 a.m. Dinner – 12.15 p.m. Tea – 6 p.m.

Bed time – Summer – 9.30 p.m. Winter – 9 p.m.

During the Summer Session Pupils are not allowed out after 9 p.m. and during Winter after 8 p.m.

Hours at the Institute – 7.30 a.m. to 12 noon and 1 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.

Pupils are expected to work 9 and a half hours a day exclusive of Meal Times.

N.B. Overtime will be paid at the District Rate.

It is not clear if such strictness was generally observed but there had been discipline problems in some areas. However, the WLA remained a civilian organisation and it was

felt that too much control could lead to problems. Where problems were experienced once the girls were allocated to farms the local Women's Institute offered support.

The forms of training required by the Board of Trade expanded – motor tractor driving, thatching, forage for the military, forestry.

**The Handbook.** Unfortunately the Handbook at the Surrey History Centre was in too delicate a state to be photocopied, but it is a reflection on the attitudes and expectations of the times. Here are some examples of its contents:

Every recruit promises to behave quietly, respect the uniform and make it respected, secure 8 hours rest each night and avoid communication with any sort of German prisoner (some Hostels would only place girls with farms which had no such prisoners).

There were instructions to avoid entering the bar of a public house, not to smoke in public, never wear the uniform without an overall, not to be out too late at night and not to walk with hands in the pockets of breeches.

“The Government has provided a sensible uniform and expects you to treat it with respect. It looks better without jewellery or frills. You are doing a man's work so you are dressed rather like a man but you should take care to behave like an English girl who expects chivalry and respect from everyone she meets. Make them also admire your pluck and patriotism and make them also admire your frankness and enthusiasm to show them that the English girl who is working for her country on the land is the best sort of girl”

Minimum wages were 22/- per week (£1.10p) with free rail travel if making an approved move to another district.

An armband was given after 240 hours work on the land. A stripe every 6 months, a badge after 2 months, four stripes could be exchanged for a diamond to be sewn on the armband.

Advice is given re travelling – “If a train is missed and you are not being met consult the Station Master, never a stranger, unless in the uniform of the Women's Patrol or Women Police, or the khaki uniform with a green cross or wearing the red, white and blue and yellow badge of the National Vigilance Society. Men of the National Guard wear a red armband. If stranded by night go to the nearest YMCA.

**Uniform:** A six-month recruit was issued with 1 pair boots, 1 pair leggings, 2 overalls, 1 pair clogs, 1 pair breeches, 1 hat.

Those going to a Motor Tractor Training Centre would, on arrival, also receive 1 Mackintosh coat, trousers, 2 pair bib-trousers, 3 dungaree coats, 1 motor cap, 1 pair gloves.

There were instructions for cleaning boots and keeping oneself as clean as possible when working.



Here is an extract from a poem written by Rose Macaulay in answer to that:

SPREADING MANURE

There are forty steaming heaps in the One Tree Field,  
Laying in four rows of ten,  
They must all be spread out ere the earth will yield  
As it should (And it won't even then)

Drive the great fork in, fling it out wide,  
Jerk it with the shoulder throw.  
The stuff must lie even, two feet on each side.  
Not in patches, but level – so!

When the heap is thrown you must go all round  
And flatten it out with the spade,  
It must lie quite close and trim till the ground  
Is like bread spread with marmalade.

The north wind stabs and cuts our breath,  
The soaked clay numbs our feet,  
We are palsied like people gripped by death  
In the beating of the frozen sleet.

(There is more but that gives the gist. The poem does confirm the winter conditions mentioned below)

**The Women's National Land Service Corps** supplied seasonal workers for the flax harvests of 1917 and 1918, a small contingent of 200 at first but in December 1917 the British Flax Growers Association asked them to provide 2000 flax pullers for the next harvest, accommodating them in fixed camps. Flax was valuable both for its seed and its fibre. 18000 tons were needed for aeroplane cloth. It was also used for machine gun belts, breech covers for guns, nosebags for horses, canvas covers for transport wagons and hospital cars, army boots, saddlery, harnesses and tents.

Returning to the question of the WLA uniform as the war progressed women's clothing became more sensible. At the beginning women performed their tasks hampered by long skirts and sometimes large hats. Gradually trousers became acceptable for women dealing with horses, working on the land generally, dispatch riders and so on. There were nurses at the hospitals at Amara and Basra in Mesopotamia. The temperature could rise to 42C in the shade. The Enquiry in 1917 criticised the inadequacy of vitally necessary fans in the two buildings – did the nurses still wear their high necked, long sleeved, long skirted uniforms in that temperature?

**Food Supplies:** According to Cabinet Papers in 1916 there had been a general crop failure hence the concern for the 1917 harvest. However, according to the Surrey War Committee the weather in 1917 had not co-operated, with snow until nearly Easter, ploughing was done hurriedly to catch up, there was drought in May and too much rain and strong wind in August.

Lloyd George, as Prime Minister, appointed Rowland Prothero as President of the Board of Agriculture. In 1917 there were various steps he took. One was the putting more grass to the plough, but expert ploughmen were required. He made two suggestions – have men come here from Denmark or arranging the repatriation of ploughmen from the Western Front. He also suggested we should save flour by reducing wheat in bread and using rice, maize, barley or oats instead. He also introduced rationing.

However, other Cabinet papers may shed a different light on our problems. Were we going bankrupt? In a Paper dated December 1917 there are comments about bacon and lard being available from the United States but “for the want of money they went elsewhere”. For the same reason there was concern that the surplus of wheat and maize from Argentina would also be diverted.

Sir Robert Chalmers said the Treasury had every sympathy with the Food Controller but the dollars available had already been pooled and were being distributed by Austin Chamberlain who presided over the American Board. Mr Wintour, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Food, said it appeared that dollars were not only being allocated to essential Ministries such as munitions but also for unessential things. Perhaps he had in mind the tractors from the USA, the purchase of which would take business away from British firms as well as use some of those precious dollars or did we not have enough money for everything that was essential?

**War Poetry:** A more unusual subject in connection with women, in fact virtually totally ignored. This one is included because Helen Mackay was a remarkable woman. She was a pioneering paediatrician, the first woman to become a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, also a woman of letters and had published volumes of essays and verse. On the 1st November, 1915, she was working at a London Hospital and the poem describes a scene she witnessed. It is, arguably, the best anti-war poem written. We can all share that awful feeling of wanting the train to leave to end the agony of parting but at the same time wanting it not to leave so the parting is delayed, knowing too, that its going could signal the end.

#### TRAIN

Will the train never start?  
God, make the train start.

She cannot bear it, keeping up so long  
And he, he no more tries to laugh at her.  
He is going.

She holds his two hands now.  
Now, she has touch of him and sight of him  
And then he will be gone.  
He will be gone.

They are so young.  
She stands under the window of his carriage,  
And he stands in the window.

They hold each other's hands  
Across the window ledge.  
And look and look,  
And know that they may never look again.

The great clock of the station –  
How strange it is.  
Terrible that the minutes go.  
Terrible that the minutes never go.

They had walked the platform for so long,  
Up and down and up and down  
The platform, in the rainy morning.  
Up and down and up and down

The guard came by calling  
“Take your places, take your places”

She stands under the window of his carriage,  
And he stands in the window.

God, make the train start!  
Before they cannot bear it,  
Make the train start!

God, make the train start!  
The three children, there  
In black, with the old nurse,  
Standing together and looking, and looking  
Up at their father in the carriage window,  
They are so forlorn and silent.

The little girl will not cry,  
But her chin trembles.  
She throws back her head,  
With its stiff little braid  
And will not cry.  
Her father leans down  
Out over the ledge of the window,  
And kisses her, and kisses her.  
She must be like her mother,  
And it must be the mother who is dead.

The nurse lifts up the smallest boy,  
And his father kisses him,  
Leaning through the carriage window.

The big boy stands very straight,  
And looks at his father,  
And looks, and never takes his eyes from him,  
And knows that he may never look again.

Will the train never start?  
God, make the train start!

The father reaches his hand down from the window  
And grips the boy's hand  
And does not speak at all.

Will the train never start?  
He lets the boy's hand go.  
Will the train never start?

He takes the boy's chin in his hand,  
Leaning out through the window,  
And lifts the face that is so young, to his.  
They look and look  
And know that they may never look again.

Will the train never start?  
God, make the train start.

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Sources:

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