

EMBSAY-with-EASTBY and WORLD WAR ONE

Women Before the War

Women, single or married, have always been employed in work of all kinds, including heavy manual labour. But before the war, much of it was hidden from the view of the middle-classes.

It is often assumed that women's war work – and the wearing of trousers - was a new and radical departure from the Edwardian ideal of the dependent “feminine” woman, confined to the “domestic sphere” once she was married.

To some extent, this was true of many middle and upper class women. But the 1911 Census is mis-leading, indicating about ¼ of women of working age were in paid employment, as women's occupations were rarely entered on the returns, on the assumption their incomes were secondary to the household.

It is however, true that the majority (but certainly not all) of unmarried working class women were servants, laundresses, textile mill workers, or seamstresses.



A Wigan Colliery worker, 1869



Dairy maid, 1872

Women During the War .

At first, women were seen mainly not as a work force, but as an aid to recruitment – men were needed as soldiers to defend female honour from the threat of German atrocities, and women were urged to shame their men into doing their patriotic duty.

Women were also initially urged to turn traditional feminine pursuits into support of the war effort – through nursing, knitting, sewing, caring for refugees, widows and orphans.

But by the end of the war 5 million (over 75% of all adult women) were in paid employment.

“My Dear Lady, Go Home and Be Still”

“My dear, you are overwrought, and not seeing things in the right perspective. There are enough nurses to attend to the Army. Amateurs will be neither wanted nor welcomed, either as soldiers or nurses.”

This was the response of a civil servant to Grace Ashley-Smith’s offer of a fleet of female ambulance drivers to the British army

As well as Grace Ashley-Smith, several feisty women offered medical services which were initially rejected by the British government and War Office, despite their professional qualifications, and ready-trained organisations. But these women went ahead anyway.

Dr. Elsie Inglis: Told by a War Office civil servant to “go home and sit still” she did nothing of the kind.

She, and others, simply bypassed the authorities, taking their volunteers and staff straight over the Channel, where their nursing, hospital and ambulance units were welcomed by the French, Belgians, Serbians, and other allied armies.

Such women included the **Duchess of Sutherland**,
Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson and Dr Flora Murray.

Other remarkable women, like **Lady Flora Shaw Lugard**, who founded the Belgian War Refugees Committee, pressed forward with the creation of vital charitable work, often despite stiff resistance from the authorities.

THE ZEPPELIN RAIDS: THE VOW OF VENGEANCE
Drawn for 'The Daily Chronicle' by Frank BrangwynARA



**'DAILY CHRONICLE' READERS ARE
COVERED AGAINST THE RISKS OF
BOMBARDMENT BY ZEPPELIN OR
AEROPLANE**

Image of women as victims of war used as recruitment tool



Image of woman as an allegorical figure (in this case, the personification of Justice) used as recruitment tool

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)



Image of woman as “doing her bit” to support the men at the front (pretty girl dons overalls as she waves her man off to war)

Nursing

Although it took a long time for female doctors to be accepted (especially for treating soldiers), nurses were widely regarded as heroines, with a status almost equal to that of the fighting soldier. There were trained, professional nurses, working alongside volunteers who were initially charged with laundry work, bed-making, cooking, and cleaning. The unpaid volunteers, paying for their own uniforms and accommodation, and expected to speak French, were mostly middle class, especially those serving overseas.

The main organisations providing voluntary nurses were:

Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs)

Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service.

The Territorial Force Nursing Services.

Together these three organisations employed 12,769 professional and 10,816 unskilled nurses, ambulance drivers and stretcher bearers.

Others came from the **Red Cross, St John's Ambulance Brigade, the Friends' Ambulance Unit, and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs).**

2nd Year Advertising, 1918 Advertising, 1918

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ORDER CHRISTMAS 'WAR ILLUSTRATED' TO-DAY (On Sale next Wednesday).

The War Illustrated

2^d
Weekly



Read for Christmas Magazine Post.

THE RED CROSS HEROINE IN THE FIELD OF DANGER

No. 18

Nurses were often presented as idealised figures



A typically sentimental and romanticised painting of a nurse tending a wounded soldier (William Hatherall's "The Last Message")



A nurse provides refreshments to wounded soldiers during their train journey to a convalescent hospital



Nurses at work in the unromantic setting of a military hospital

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)

Munition Workers

An estimated 2 million people worked in the munitions industry – about 700,000 of them were female (known as “munitionettes”).

Not all munitions workers filled shells or worked in dangerous conditions. The term included anyone who produced military supplies – anything from processing flax and hemp for sacks, to making packing boxes, tents, bullets, ball bearings, tanks, boots, food, seaplanes, gas masks and uniforms.



Munition workers included, among others, those who baked army biscuits

Dangers of Munitions Work

It is well-known that the munitionettes who filled the shells were doing dangerous work - 400 of them (about 0.53% of the 75,000 who worked in the manufacture of ammunition, shells and small arms) were killed by explosives and toxic chemicals. Considering the state of industrial health and safety in pre-war Britain, the fatalities might have been expected to be even higher.

Despite the relatively small number of women affected, and the temporary nature of the problem, the yellow skin of the munitions “canaries” who filled the shells, is perhaps the best known fact about munitions workers.

New-found freedoms:

But they were all volunteers, and most were grateful for the escape from traditional employment as domestic servants, enjoying higher wages, shorter hours, companionship of other women, and increased free time.

Hostels provided for workers at large factories provided new freedoms to live independently, and make new friends from a wider social circle, and enjoy more leave than ever before.



Filling shells in a munitions factory

Munitionettes' Wages:

When the average live-in servants' wage was 2/6d plus board (plus maybe a ½ day off per week), the government recommended a weekly wage of £1 for factory workers. By April 1918 average wages in (government-run) shell factories were £4 4s 6d per week for men and £2 2s 4d for women.

This was only half of the average male wage, but double that of a domestic servant - enough to support a family (a significant proportion were in fact married women, or maintaining parents and siblings in the absence of a male breadwinner).

Ambiguous Attitudes:

Despite widespread praise for their work and contribution to the war effort on the one hand, the munitionettes were also often accused of earning excessive wages, which they “unpatriotically” spent on “friggeries” such as new clothes. They were also accused of slack or even immoral behaviour, because of their tendency to go out at night, unchaperoned, to cinemas, theatres and pubs.



Munitionettes manufacturing parts for shells

Women's Land Army

Women had always been seasonal workers in arable farming or expected to work all year round tending animals for their farmer fathers and husbands. It was the extension of this work to include a wider variety of hard labour tasks, as well as the employment of mainly middle class and urban-dwelling women, which made the "Women's Land Army" such an object of interest.

Founded in March 1916, the **Women's Land Service Corps** attracted 260,000 women to work as agricultural labourers, earning 20s per week. They formed about 1/3rd of the female work force on the land.

Initially they were recruited for seasonal work, but the conscription of male labourers from 1916 made the women farm workers essential all year round.

They were disbanded in May 1919.

(Extra men were also drafted in, including POWs, conscientious objectors, and convalescing wounded soldiers.)

There was also a sub-section, **The Women's Forestry Corps**, ensuring a supply of cut timber for paper, the army and industry.



Women's Forestry Corps



Land girls at the All England Girls' Farming Competition, 1917



Land girl on a Surrey farm, 1917

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)

The Uniformed Services

Early Responses:

As with munitions girls, the first women to wear military-style uniforms (The Women's Volunteer Reserve and the Women's Legion), were regarded with ambiguity.

On the one hand their uniforms, drill parades and marching were visible signs of patriotic, selfless and disciplined commitment to the war effort.

On the other, it was often regarded, not only as un-feminine, but also as an insult to the lads in khaki whose lives were being sacrificed on the battlefield. They often met with hostility and were accused of "playing at soldiers".

As organisations working independently outside government or War Office control, they were also often regarded with suspicion.

The Women's Legion (founded by Lady Londonderry) provided cooks, canteen staff and gardeners at army camps and depots. From 1916 they also included motor drivers. They were paid 35s per week.

Women's Volunteer Reserve (founded September 1914 as the Women's Emergency Corps) supported the military with despatch riders, telegraphists, and signallers. Volunteers bought their own uniforms, and were taught first aid, car mechanics and canteen cooking.

Women's Defence Relief Corps (founded September 1914)

The Civil Section of the Corps aimed to substitute women for men in employment in order to free men for military service, and the 'Semi-Military' or "good-citizen section" recruited women for non-combatant roles, trained in drill, marching, signalling, scouting, and the defensive use of firearms in case of invasion. Each member of this section was exhorted to defend not only herself, but also 'those dear to her'.

After the introduction of conscription in 1916, as men were transferred from non-combatant roles within the armed services, the government and War Office was forced to employ women to take their place - as clerks, drivers, laundresses, cleaners, messengers, canteen staff, telephonists, and motor mechanics. Now, the woman in uniform became a popular image of patriotism, praised in the newspapers for their contribution to the war effort.

The Women's Forage Corps, founded in 1915, and under army command, 8,000 women grew and harvested food for horses, and looked after the stables at army camps and depots.

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), enrolling members from March 1917, suffered from unfounded but widespread rumours of low moral standards (a symptom of the fear surrounding women in "masculine" dress and living away from home). Vindicated by an official board of enquiry in March 1918, their reputation was saved by royal patronage. Thus they became Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC). By November 1918 over 57,000 women had joined.



Members of the Women's Legion, 1916

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)



**EVERY FIT WOMAN
CAN RELEASE A FIT MAN
JOIN THE
WOMEN'S ARMY
AUXILIARY CORPS
TO-DAY**

FOR WORK WITH THE FORCES EITHER AT HOME OR ABROAD

FOR ALL INFORMATION & ADVICE WRITE TO OR APPLY AT
NEAREST EMPLOYMENT EXCHANGE
THE ADDRESS CAN BE OBTAINED WITHIN

The Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), was established November 1917. By the end of the war there were 5,492 WRNS.

The Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) was set up in April 1918, by which time women's war effort was more greatly appreciated. They met with general approval from the public and the press.

The WAACs, WRNs and WRAFs were all dismissed from service in 1919.



A WAAC looking after army messenger dogs

*WAACs on drill
parade, 1917*



Other Female War Workers

An estimated 1.6 million women joined the workforce between 1914 and 1918.

Not all of them were in the iconic roles of nurses, munitions workers, land girls, or uniformed auxiliaries. There was an extraordinary variety of previously male-dominated jobs that women took on – far too many to mention all them here.

They included window cleaners, taxi drivers, firefighters, boot makers, chimney sweeps, undertakers, mechanics, milk delivery women, postal workers, bus drivers and conductors, administrators, police women, and bank clerks – all of them breaking new ground in female employment.

500,000 took over men's clerical jobs in private offices

100,000 worked in transport including 68,000 on the railways.

247,000 women entered government jobs as clerks, and civil servants, manual labourers in dockyards, and non-munitions factories.



Female firefighters, March 1916



Railway porters, Marylebone railway station, 1915



Women road workers, spraying tar in London, 1918



Tram driver

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)

Voluntary Work

The importance of charitable organisations, often run by women, is often underestimated.

Many were run by upper and middle class women, already experienced in organising philanthropic work before the war. Now they turned their efforts to people disadvantaged by war; those who were to a large extent ignored by the government – soldiers' dependants, widows, orphans, refugees, the unemployed, and disabled veterans. Without these women the needs of the vulnerable for food, housing, clothing and medical aid would have gone unmet.

These amazing and tireless women pestered the authorities relentlessly, organised nationwide as well as local networks of hundreds and thousands of volunteers, raised enormous sums of money for their causes, worked long hours, and refused to be ignored by the government or War Office.



Volunteers offer refreshments at a free buffet for soldiers

The Domestic Servant “Problem”

The shortage

It is estimated that between 100,000 and 400,000 women left domestic service during the war.

The reluctance of working single women to return to domestic service caused an outcry in many national and local newspapers. But few were willing to go back to the low-paid, cloistered, subordinate life downstairs, with all the accompanying restrictions on their social life. Nevertheless, the Labour Exchanges usually only offered them employment as servants, and even withdrew unemployment benefit to those who refused such posts.

In Embsay, the vicar’s wife, Mrs. Brown, placed numerous advertisements in the local newspapers for a cook-general. By March 1918 she was desperate, repeatedly stating that even “*a girl willing to learn*” would be acceptable.

The Women of Embsay

Employment at Brooksbank

While some local women, like Agnes Raw and Mrs Susannah Turner, went to work in the munitions factories in the towns, some “strong girls” were employed on “*Government work and work of national importance*” at Brooksbank Tannery (which took over the old tobacco mill in late 1917), the initial call for strong youths having failed to find enough workers.

The Ladies’ Committee

A War Distress Committee was established in Embsay in 1914. The Ladies’ Committee was tasked mainly with knitting, fund-raising, and the welfare of the Belgian refugee family. Amongst the most active of the women were **Miss Heron**, who, with her fluent French, acted as “matron” for the refugees, and **Miss Christabel Snowdon**, an enthusiastic fund-raiser. We know the name of only one local woman who donned a uniform - **Gertrude Watson** volunteered to work in the Pantry Section of the Red Cross. However, women were still not represented on the Parish Council or Church vestry....

Changing Attitudes

Although it must be remembered that experiences of individual women varied enormously, and to generalise is futile. But the War had certainly changed many women’s own perceptions about themselves.

Many had enjoyed unprecedented levels of independence, going out into public places unchaperoned, living away from home, meeting an extended social circle of colleagues from varied backgrounds, rising to the challenge of learning new skills and gaining confidence in one’s own abilities, getting used to earning a living wage - It was a revelation to many of their own unfulfilled potential.

But for others, being able to return to being housewives and mothers seemed a great relief after four years of struggling to combine full-time war work with family life, shortages of food, fuel and clothes, and the emotional stress of worry and loss as their men were captured, wounded or killed in action.

Entrenched Attitudes

The contribution of women was regarded by many as a temporary stopgap – they were substitutes for absent men, and the introduction of conscription made this imperative. Only then, did the government give serious consideration to such issues as providing day care for working mothers.

Trade Unions proved highly resistant to “Substitution” of men with women – and insisted on the practice of “Dilution” – dividing skilled jobs into several semi- or un-skilled jobs for the women – thus protecting the interests and pay levels of the men when they returned to take back their old jobs.

The attitudes towards working and uniformed women reveals general unease together with admiration. Genuine appreciation of their patriotism and dedication to war work, conflicted with concerns over declining moral standards and de-feminisation. For the most part, women were expected to aim for married life and the “domestic sphere” once the war was over.



Second-Lieut. Mabel Smells Powder (No novelty)

“There you are, Bert: I told you we’d ‘ave ‘em ‘ere before we’d finished.”
This cartoon by Bruce Bairnsfather, in The Bystander magazine, 1918, shows that perceptions of women still had a long way to go.

Jane Lunnon, Embsay-with-Eastby Historical Research Group (2018)

Return to the Domestic Sphere

The war was barely over when the Daily Mirror newspaper launched a beauty competition for women war workers, and received hundreds of entries. “A quartette of the loveliest” won free holidays to France.

The return of women to the “domestic sphere” became a major theme in social commentary and newspapers throughout the 1920s and ‘30s. It was made abundantly clear that women were expected to give way to the returning heroes who needed employment and wanted the comfort of “a well-run home”.

Indeed, by 1921 there were 2% fewer women in paid employment than there had been in 1911.

And it was not until the next war came along that respectable women could wear trousers again without disapproval.

Some of the entries in the Daily Mirror “Women war workers’ beauty competition”, December 1918:



(Above) Has been making shells at a Midland munition factory; Has “done her bit” during war time in several different ways.



(Above) Has been working at an Army Service Corps establishment as a motor driver; A bonnie VAD worker in a Northern Scottish hospital; A decidedly ornamental member of the WRNS.

The Long-Term Legacy

The genie was certainly out of the bottle.

Women had experienced being able to go out in public unchaperoned, had met new challenges, and earned income over which they had total control.

This, the first war in which the Home Front was as much part of the war effort as the battlefield, gave women an indisputable claim to full citizenship, the vote and seats in Parliament. They had achieved a major leap forward within the evolutionary process of changing women's status in Britain.

In 1939, women were able pick up where they had left off in 1918; to go, unopposed, straight into World War II as industrial and agricultural workers, doctors, police officers, auxiliary workers for the armed forces, mechanics and administrators – reinforcing appreciation of their full capabilities and potential.

It is perhaps ironic, that as historians pay much more attention to the part women played in the war effort, the important contribution of millions of older & “unfit” **men left behind on the home front** is still virtually completely ignored.