Series: Beyond Commemoration: Community, Collaboration and Legacies of the First World War

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Women and War
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Inside front cover image: Former factory workers brought back to the land in the Radlett Experiment of the Central Committee on Women’s Employment. Here, they are taking a break to eat, accompanied by a dog. © IWM Q 108488

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Contents

Beyond Commemoration: Community, Collaboration and Legacies of the First World War
Ian Grosvenor and Sarah Lloyd 4

About the authors 8

Introduction 10

Home and Family 12

Key Life 1: Alice Wheeldon 12
Chloë Mason

Women in homes and families 19
Maggie Andrews

Plumlines 24
Rachel Sharpe

The Mid-Staffordshire Appeals Tribunal: a window onto everyday life on the Staffordshire home front 27
Karen Hunt

A Woman’s War 30
Michelle Young

Work and Training 32

Key Life 2: Mabel Stobart 32
Natasha Macnab

Women and Work 36
Maggie Andrews

Norland College 42
Maggie Andrews

Beyond the Battlefields: Käthe Buchler’s Photographs of Germany in the Great War 44

Our thanks to the ladies 46
Julie Moore

Beyond the War Memorial 49
Keith Vernon

Devil’s Porridge Museum 51
Judith Hewitt

Politics and Internationalism 54

Key Life 3: Mary Church Terrell: The Fight on Gender, Class and Race 54
Selena Carty

Reflections on Historical Re-enactment 58
Valerie Bossman-Quarshie

Politics and Internationalism 60
Maggie Andrews

Women on a World Stage: Addie Waites Hunton - YMCA, the African American Troops in France, and the Pan African Congress 1919 66
Selena Carty

Swedish Hunger Uprisings 69
Anna Hammerin

The Women who said ‘Yes’! 71
Alison Ronan

Deiseb Heddwch Menywod Cymru i America 74
Partneriaeth Hawlio Heddwch

The Welsh Women’s Peace Petition to America 77
The Peace Petition Partnership

On her their lives depend 80
Frances Nutt

Wor Women on the Home Front & Wor Women and Leisure 83
Elaine Slater

Further Projects 86

Acknowledgements 87
Conflict, Commemoration and Context

In 2014, five First World War Engagement Centres were established by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). At the core of the objectives set by the AHRC was a desire to benefit communities across the UK by enhancing public understanding of the First World War and its role in shaping the world we live in today, and to challenge traditional narratives of the conflict.

This was to be achieved through: supporting community research and promoting research skills among a wide range of people, making them more confident in accessing and interpreting different types of sources and information; working collaboratively to reach new communities and make the commemoration relevant to, and inclusive of, a culturally diverse population; and furthering universities’ commitment to public engagement with research.

The Engagement Centres can best be understood as a unique experiment. Unique in that they involved multi-institutional partnerships and a commitment to funding in excess of the normal research project funding period. These factors enabled academics, citizen historians, community volunteers, heritage practitioners and community enterprises to come together in meaningful and productive relationships. There is extensive evidence that the work of the Engagement Centres has enriched public understanding of the First World War (FWW) and its legacies, and has enhanced the research capacity of diverse communities across the UK. In turn, this has generated confidence in engaging with the complexities associated with the critical study of the past and, in particular, building understanding of the contemporary resonances and issues relating to the conflict in personal, local and global contexts. Over six years, the Centres supported the establishment of new research relationships across higher education institutions and new models of working with civic society mediators. They delivered and enhanced opportunities for early career researchers to experience participatory research and public engagement, and effected institutional change through the promotion of public engagement and the sharing of good practice.1

In 2019, the Voices of War and Peace and Everyday Lives in War Engagement Centres organised the Four Nations Festival of Research and Ideas to mark the end of the commemoration period. This initiative, involving all five Centres, presented research produced during the centenary. It reflected a wide range of the arts and humanities and celebrated the expertise,  

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experience and insights located within communities. The Festival engaged diverse publics in exploring the legacy of the FWW and its relevance for today. It provided opportunities to critically reflect on FWW research collaborations between the academy, community groups, creative practitioners, and the heritage sector; and to explore how existing and new research collaborations between the academy and the cultural, creative and third sectors could be sustained and evolve. In addition, the Festival included a series of Policy Breakfasts which focused on areas relating to effective community engagement: Diversity; Shared Heritage; Heritage, Community and Opportunity; and Gender. These events were attended by major funders, heritage organisations, community enterprises, academics, and politicians. The data generated from these events were translated into a policy statement by the two Centres, in consultation with the other Centre PIs, AHRC officers, and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF): Communities, Commemoration, Collaboration: Shaping Our Futures Through Sharing Our Pasts.

However, the question still remained as to how research legacy can be identified and made accessible and durable beyond the span of a national anniversary or major public investment in community engagement. It was a question that was not foreseen when the FWW Engagement Centres were established in 2014, nor one that was identified by the Centenary Partnership. It only became a pressing question in the aftermath of the FWW centenary as Parliament and other national bodies assessed what has been achieved.

As the House of Commons DCMS Select Committee enquiry into the centenary concluded in 2019:

The centenary commemorations reached new audiences, and enabled the public to be more exposed to hidden or less well-known histories. But this approach could have been more systematic and better embedded in all strands of activity… We are concerned that little attention seems to have been given at the outset to what the legacy of the commemorations would be.²

Beyond Commemoration: Community, Collaboration and Legacies of the First World War emerges from a follow-on funding AHRC project which addressed this concern and aimed to make visible the work of citizen historians involved in commemorative activity between 2014 and 2019.³

Rather than memorialise community research, this project has aimed to keep it in circulation by working with communities to produce a series of four downloadable legacy-themed e-books: Remaking Histories of the Nation; Children and Conflict; Women and War; and War and its Aftermath. The themes represent gaps in historical understanding or poorly represented topics. They were identified through the Centres’ close working relationship with the NLHF across the centenary period, and through the 2019 Festival where they became visible. Each of the books has been delivered by a project team consisting of community activists, academics and independent scholars. The books are uniform in design but different in terms of approach, as each one reflects different experiences within the project team. In producing the books we have drawn on an earlier cross-Centre initiative, the book Beyond the Battlefields: Käthe Buchler’s Photographs of Germany in the Great War (2018). In combining research, new material and community responses, it offered a template for the current publications. This project also drew on the insights and approach offered by the AHRC-funded Connected Communities Foundations Series (2018), edited by Keri Facer and Kathleen Dunleavy, and by Making Histories, Sharing Histories (2020) in which members of this project team translated a commitment to collaboration into practical guidance.⁴

Working through community networks built up over the period of the centenary, the project aimed to reach out to new user communities and audiences. It began and ended during the Covid-19 pandemic. Every conversation and meeting happened online; every image was negotiated in the context of reduced archive services. As a collaborative project addressing some ‘difficult’ histories, it depended wholly on dialogue, conscious participation and transparency, on sustained relationships of trust and on an ethics of care and empathetic listening.

Reflections, Learning and Challenges
This project has documented what was so evident throughout the centenary; that communities have a deep commitment to history and that their own concerns are a powerful tool for shaping research. New questions emerge when different communities engage with the past. Contemporary contexts can give an added urgency to calls for stories to be told, heard, and absorbed into the national narrative. However, emphasis on the military, the dead and memorialisation through commemorative activity between 2014 and 2019.³

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³ The First World War and its Legacy, 2020 and Beyond: Community, Collaboration and Conflict, Arts & Humanities Research Council Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement, Reference: AH/V001329/1
While the team pooled its knowledge of community research during the centenary, trawling the internet for its traces, even three years on, it proved difficult to discover what many projects had done once they were launched. The fragility of community outputs, and particularly of digital materials, makes it difficult to document legacies. Lost projects constitute enduring gaps in knowledge. Identifying those voices and themes that surfaced during the centenary, but which have subsequently disappeared from widely accessible historical narratives, challenges everyone to consider how to create an inclusive, diverse and tangible historical legacy, which can be acknowledged by a broad public.

The unfinished business of the past creates generational burdens, which are historical, such as the violence of Empire and the inequalities of historical neglect. Nevertheless, the process of researching the past can be as important as what is found. It can be an agent of collective redress; it can aid in the repair of personal trauma. The impact of projects – for example, those that explored the enduring legacies of the conflict - can be profound for individuals and organisations. Centenaries and anniversaries create opportunities to understand the complexity of the past and the exclusionary nature of received notions, but then close the window when attention moves on to other events.

Finally, what has emerged in the conversations surrounding the production of the project books is, first, the extent to which place-based narratives and photographic evidence can complicate familiar narratives of the First World War. Visualisation of experience is a powerful trigger of historical imagination, but also requires strategies to recognise and deal with gaps in knowledge: who is named in images, who is not; absent information about context and provenance. Second, where communities and collaborative partners experience successful projects, these energise organisations and stimulate distinctive new research. Of course, there still remain unanswered questions which the project does not address explicitly; for example of the moment, who, in today's world of 'wokeness' and 'cancel culture', are the custodians of historical legacies?

**Remaking Histories of the Nation** A significant achievement of the UK centenary has been the inclusion of men of colour within established narratives of the First World War, alongside the role of Europe’s global empires. Much of this work has been driven by a desire to reflect ethnic diversity in the UK in the 21st century, yet the centenary has itself often reinforced narratives about the nation state, which have in turn prioritised certain forms of knowledge over others. *Remaking Histories of the Nation* builds on community project work to reveal the limits of this approach, the distortions it entails and what an honest history requires in its place.

**Children and Conflict** Considerable emphasis was placed on young people as a key audience during the centenary - the desire to inspire a new generation in order that the conflict’s legacies could be carried forward was central to the commemorative vision. Numerous projects engaged with young people, yet the stories told were in the main those of adults, in projects defined and managed by other adults. Research led by young people about young people was rare, and the community projects captured here give a voice to not only the unheard of the past, but also to those of the present whose power to shape history has traditionally been limited.

**Women and War** During the centenary of the First World War, community historians expanded knowledge of women’s lives, at times departing from familiar, streamlined narratives about women who nursed, worked in munitions, or volunteered for the Land Army. *Women and War* describes some of that research, with the aim of creating a richer and more nuanced account of women’s experiences during the conflict. In the process of compiling the booklet, the reasons why women’s history matters became increasingly prominent: it connects people with their ancestors; it provides a testing ground for present-day experience; it makes visible what is often hidden, unspoken or unnamed.

**War and Its Aftermath** Now that the official UK First World War centenary has concluded, the aftermath of the war, and its international dimensions, are receding from public view. This book draws together community research that addressed the impact of the FWW on survivors and on the generations that followed. It considers how the legacy of the war affected communities, families, and individuals, both in the years immediately after and up to the present day. It also reflects on how the seemingly straightforward act of engaging in community research offers its own legacy for those involved, going beyond just the accumulation of information but setting in motion new questions and debates, inspiring new areas of interest, while also challenging old assumptions.
Key Policy Statement for Makers

Heritage is a major resource for empowering communities. In a rapidly changing, globalised world, heritage can foster a sense of identity, security and belonging. Innovative research and community partnerships can address contested heritage and strengthen human connections across time and place. A collaborative model of heritage has potential to shape new policies and practice, creating more resilient communities for the future.

Universities have a key role to play in bringing people together to commemorate events of national significance. They are uniquely placed to connect academic and public knowledge of the past, enabling diverse communities to tell their own stories of belonging and contribution. Universities can facilitate processes that develop and share new understandings, that sustain an inclusive, rigorous, rich heritage, and that respond to the challenge of divisive and uncomfortable histories.

First World War Engagement Centres: Broader Lessons Learnt

- Collaborative work around history and heritage encourages people to explore new stories relevant to their own lives and experiences. It opens spaces for alternative voices to be heard, creating multi-layered stories.

- Operating across the UK can bring different stories into focus and enable discussion of contested and uncomfortable pasts. In aiming at a more inclusive heritage, including new shared histories, collaborative research has the potential to challenge received narratives. It can incorporate broader global perspectives.

- A sense of place and the local are critical to many community participatory projects. Place-based institutions can contribute significant expertise. If universities are to fulfil their civic responsibilities and meet the needs of local communities, relationships must be sustained.

Partnerships between universities, cultural organisations and community groups initiate challenging conversations and dialogue. Productive research collaboration requires clear agreed agendas, open exchange and a sense of everyone being an equal stakeholder.

By devolving research funding to a series of multi-institution hubs, it has proved possible to create a structure which facilitates innovation and responsive community engagement. This model promotes wider understanding and appreciation of what can best be characterised as ‘hidden histories’.
About the authors

Ian Grosvenor
Ian Grosvenor was Director of Voices of War and Peace: First World War Engagement Centre funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the University of Birmingham (2014–2020).

Sarah Lloyd
Sarah Lloyd was Director of Everyday Lives in War: First World War Engagement Centre funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the University of Hertfordshire (2014–2020).

Selena Carty
Selena Carty is a Cultural & Ancestral consultant, an Afro Centric genealogist and a global African military historian. She is the founder of BlackPoppyRose and BlackRose of Remembrance. Selena has worked as a consultant with many organisations world-wide to expand the visibility of historical contributions made by the African, ‘Black’, West Indian, Pacific Islanders & Indigenous communities to global wars since the 16th century. With ‘Black’ as an umbrella term to describe so many cultures and identities, she develops documentaries, education packs and more.

Maggie Andrews
Maggie Andrews is Professor Emerita of Cultural History at the University of Worcester. Her publications have explored women, domesticity and the home front in the First and Second World Wars. She was Co-Investigator on the AHRC funded First World War Engagement Centre Voices of War and Peace: The Great War and its Legacy and the historical consultant for the BBC Radio 4 First World War drama, Home Front.

Chloë Mason
Chloë Mason is the great granddaughter of Alice Wheeldon. She grew up in Hertfordshire until the mid-1960s when her family moved to Sydney, Australia. Through the Derby People’s History Group’s campaign to clear Alice’s name, Chloë visited England with her sister Deirdre immediately before and during the First World War centenary. Their application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission for the Wheeldon convictions to be quashed, which required the rigorous collection and analysis of material, took 6 years to prepare. Irrespective of that outcome, this family’s story has become part of the war’s public history.

Rachel Sharpe
Rachel Sharpe was Creative Partnerships Manager for the National Trust in South Worcestershire where she led Croome’s First World War centenary project, Plumlines.
Karen Hunt
Karen Hunt is Professor Emerita of Modern British History at Keele University. Her work on the First World War includes studies of women and the politics of food, gender and everyday life across the home fronts of the world. She was an adviser to the BBC’s World War One at Home project in the West Midlands and, in partnership with Staffordshire Record Office, led the project on the Mid Staffordshire Appeals Tribunal papers.

Michelle Young
Michelle Young was project officer and drama facilitator on the Medals All Round Research Initiative (2015-16), a partnership between the Lyric Theatre Belfast and Living Legacies 1914-18 First World War Engagement Centre at Queen’s University Belfast.

Natasha Macnab
Natasha Macnab has worked in social and historical research for 15 years. She was the project administrator for The First World War and its Legacy, 2020 and Beyond: Conflict, Community and Collaboration.

Julie Moore
Julie Moore is a member of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Hertfordshire. She was a member of the University of Hertfordshire’s Heritage Hub (2010-2020) and the Everyday Lives in War First World War Engagement Centre (2014-2020). In both roles, she has worked to encourage, support and connect those interested in finding more of the story of their communities, and bringing those stories to a wider audience.

Keith Vernon
Keith Vernon is Principal Lecturer in History at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, with a particular interest in the history of higher and technical education, especially in the twentieth century. He works with groups outside of the university whenever he can, so this project was an ideal opportunity to combine his own special interests with a community-based project.

Judith Hewitt
Judith Hewitt was manager of The Devil’s Porridge Museum until 2021.

Valerie Bossman-Quarshie
Valerie Bossman-Quarshie is a devoted mother, and an educator of two decades, teaching early-years primary and currently secondary schooling. She read English Language and History at London Metropolitan University and undertook further studies in Families, Children and Young People at City, University of London. She is a strong community and social justice activist, taking part in anti-racist, national health, education, and environmental campaigns. A regular columnist and speaker on trade union and political platforms, she is a recently elected Labour Party Council representative for the Islington South and Finsbury Borough of the Bunhill Ward.

Anna Hammerin
Anna Hammerin is an independent researcher, focusing on bringing to life previously untold stories and historical accounts of her native Sweden in the late 19th century/early 20th century. As the Coordinator of the AHRC-funded Everyday Lives in War WW1 Engagement Centre (2014-2020), hosted by the University of Hertfordshire, Anna was responsible for coordinating and delivering the project-team’s work through a series of community-engaging events, exhibitions, and outreach activities. The overall aim of the project was to challenge the traditional WW1 narrative by providing advice and financial support to academic and community collaborative projects for the purpose of unearthing hidden home-front stories and identifying diversity and gender gaps in the historical accounts.

Alison Ronan
Alison Ronan is a feminist historian with a background in youth and community work and conflict resolution. Her PhD (2010) focused on uncovering the stories of anti-war women in Manchester and the NW during WW1. Since then she has been involved in numerous community-led, archive-based projects reclaiming NW women’s activism in the early 20th century. She is a regular speaker at conferences and local history groups and at the moment is working with European colleagues on a book about Revolutionary women.

The Peace Petition Partnership
The Peace Petition Partnership brings together a group of voluntary and professional organisations in Wales, to celebrate the remarkable 1923 Women of Wales for a World Without War Appeal. It’s coordinated by Academi Heddwch which works to extend Wales’ strong tradition of peace-making and peace-promotion and to place peace firmly on Wales’ national agenda, as well as on the international stage.

Partneriaeth Hawlio Heddwch
Mae’r Partneriaeth Hawlio Heddwch yn tynnu ynghyd grŵp o gyrrf gwirfoddol a phroffesiynol yng Nghymru i ddathlu Apêl Heddwch Merched Cymru, 1923. Caiff ei gydlynu gan Academi Heddwch sy’n gweithio i ymestyn traddodiad hir Cymru o hybu heddwch, ac i sicrhau bod heddwch yn gadarn ar yr agenda genedlaethol yng Nghymru yn ogystal ag ar y llwyfan rhingwladol.

Frances Nutt
Frances Nutt is Artistic Director of Tandem Theatre, which delivers bespoke programmes and participatory arts projects for adults and young people who are vulnerable, socially excluded and marginalised. It works to improve emotional health and wellbeing, engage participants with informal education and enhance knowledge and appreciation of the arts.

Elaine Slater
Elaine Slater is Chief Executive Officer of Tyneside Women’s Health. Established in 1985, TWH provides women-led support to women and girls to improve their mental health and emotional wellbeing.
During the centenary of the First World War, community historians expanded our understanding of women’s lives, at times departing from familiar, streamlined narratives that focused on those women who nursed, worked in munitions, or volunteered for the Land Army. This booklet describes some of that research, with the aim of creating a richer and more nuanced account of women’s experiences during the conflict.

Those projects that we could still find – and it is striking how many have left only a faint trace three years on – suggested the overarching themes of this booklet: Home and Family; Work and Training; Politics and Internationalism. For each of these themes, Maggie Andrews sets the scene in an essay that draws out the experiences of ordinary, as well as exceptional women, and provides a context for the projects we feature.
In selecting projects and inviting their creators to contribute an account of what they did, we looked for one or more of the following elements:

- New knowledge, new research questions, new sources of evidence;
- How an apparently familiar theme can generate new knowledge about a particular place or local context;
- How women’s history is remembered and forgotten;
- Knowledge expressed through new media;
- How women’s history can create opportunities because of what participants take from the process of making it.

As we worked with contributors, the process of doing women’s history became increasingly prominent: it connects people with their ancestors; it provides a testing ground for present-day experience; it makes visible what is often hidden beneath glossy images. Crucially, it gives a name to the unnamed. ‘Women’s history matters’ therefore became our fourth theme and readers will find it addressed across the booklet.

We also feature three ‘key lives’, criss-crossing the globe, to highlight the complexity of ‘family’ and the centrality of class and race in shaping historical experience during a period when the role of women in society was itself the subject of intense discussion. In their distinctive ways, all three lives exemplify the international networks that are sometimes forgotten when a global conflict is framed and remembered as a national story. The legacies of the past run through the present and are a call to future action.

Ours is not, and could never be, a complete account of women’s experiences in the period. Our aim is to valorize the work already done by community historians, to inspire future research, and to suggest approaches for exploring women’s lives. We aim to show why these histories matter and how they generate movement, energy and connection.

‘Without the Family, there is no history. The stories and memories of those closest to us allow us to discover other narratives and empower many of our choices each day. So many families have forged their way through fire to become what they are today; we carry their names in our hearts and minds. The connectivity of all communities remains integral to humanity and change.’

Selena Carty, Black Poppy Rose
Alice Wheeldon’s is the history of a woman, of a family, of a neighbourhood, and of a wider network of people, who sought to make the world a better place through women’s rights, pacifism and then opposition to conscription. All these strands intersect in the events that led to her conviction and imprisonment in 1917, and in the consequences of the trial, which scattered the Wheeldon family across the globe. Chloë Mason, Alice Wheeldon’s great granddaughter, takes up the story.

Alice Marshall was born in Derby in 1866. She died in 1919.

In 1886, she married William Augustus Wheeldon with whom she had four children. In 1894, the family moved back to Derby. In 1901, with the inheritance from her father, William Marshall, Alice took over an established business, as a ‘wardrobe dealer’. She supported her family through buying and selling high-quality second-hand clothes and she rented the small semi-detached house where they lived. Family letters relate the daily work of mending clothes and putting food on the table, as well as the news from the neighbourhood where Alice was a ‘well-known sympathiser with the suffragists’.

Leaving school herself at the age of 12, ‘Mrs Wheeldon was always determined to give her children the best education she could’. The many records (books, letters, paintings, newspaper articles, archives) show that her children worked, participated in public speaking, engaged in word games and jokes, rambling in the Derby Dales, enjoyed learning and cats, rode bicycles and retained a commitment to justice. Alice and all four children were awarded (and kept) medals for first aid and life-saving. This close-knit family were honest and humorous rapporteurs of their world.

Nellie, her eldest daughter, worked in a co-operative health food shop and wrote as a co-operative educator. William, her son, attended Nottingham University and became a schoolteacher. Daughters Hettie and Winnie trained as school teachers in London, and taught in Derbyshire. After her marriage to Alf Mason, Winnie taught in Southampton, where Alf was a lecturer in chemistry.

Alice and her children were socialists, pacifists and anti-war campaigners. They were vocal in their opposition to the continuing and pointless carnage of the First World War. William Wheeldon became a conscientious objector with the

1 This and the following quotation, which reported an interview with William Augustus Wheeldon, come from Aberdeen Journal, 2 February 1917.
introduction of conscription in 1916 and was imprisoned. As the war ground on, political opposition was increasingly regarded as a threat to national security and even pro-German, with government agencies trawling for signs of dangerous activity. At the time of Alice’s arrest in January 1917, the Derby house contained suffrage and progressive newspapers.

The ‘plot’ to murder Lloyd George & Henderson

In 1917, during WWI, Alice Wheeldon and her daughter Winnie Mason and son-in-law Alf Mason, our grandparents, were imprisoned for conspiracy to murder David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, and Arthur Henderson, Chairman of the Labour Party. Hettie Wheeldon was acquitted. Leave to appeal the convictions was refused. They had been set-up by two undercover agents. The family argued that the murder plan was fabricated. In the words of the Manchester Guardian during the trial, it was a fantasy, ‘a story so strange that it seems hardly to relate to the world of reality’.²

What happened?

Alice’s youngest daughter, Winnie, had married Alf Mason in 1915 and had moved to Southampton; there they supported Will Wheeldon, Alice’s son, a conscientious objector (CO) due to appear again before a military tribunal.

On Boxing Day 1916, Alice Wheeldon was at home in Derby with her husband and daughters, Nellie and Hettie. Alexander MacDonald, a CO who was a family friend, was also staying in their household. That night, a man, ‘Alex Gordon’, came to the door, posing as a CO needing shelter. Over the next days, during their conversation, Alice told him her worries about her CO son. ‘Alex Gordon’ told her of an emigration route to the USA, possible for use by COs. He raised his own problem of freeing his friends from a detention camp guarded by dogs.

Alice entered into an agreement with ‘Alex Gordon’. He was to help her get her ‘three boys’ to America, and in return Alice was to obtain poison for him to use on the dogs at the detention camp. At Alice’s request, Winnie and Alf sent strychnine, and curare - in case the dogs were out-of-reach.

Two days later, ‘Alex Gordon’ introduced his friend, Herbert Booth, another undercover agent, and wrote the letter of introduction for the emigration scheme, and Alice gave the poison to Gordon (on 4 January 1917).

In front of press cameras, the family were arrested at the end of January 1917 – instant ‘tabloid villains’. ‘Alex Gordon’ was not produced in court, only Herbert Booth. The trial was widely publicised and used as propaganda to continue the war to the bitter end, and to demonise the peace movement. Alice Wheeldon, Winnie and Alf Mason were convicted. In prison, Alice went on hunger strike protesting her innocence; she was released on licence and died in 1919.

A Miscarriage of Justice:

The family argued that they had been set up by two undercover agents and that the murder plot was fabricated. Leave to appeal was refused at the time, and until the creation of the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) in 1995, there was no recourse to further appeal or review even as evidence emerged of the unfairness of the trial.

Alice’s great-granddaughters, Chloë and Deirdre Mason, over several years secured documentary evidence and on 19 November 2019 Chloë Mason lodged an application to the CCRC for the convictions of Alice Wheeldon, Winnie Mason, and Alf Mason to be quashed.

The main ground of this application concerns the role of the undercover government agent, William Rickard, known to the Defendants only as ‘Alex Gordon’.

He was not called as a witness at the trial, having been kept out of the way in February and March 1917. After the application to appeal was rejected, he was sent to South Africa with his wife. Furthermore, he was a man of mental instability and serious criminal history. Those facts were never disclosed to the Defence. It was the Defendants’ case at trial in March 1917 that ‘Alex Gordon’ had persuaded Alice Wheeldon to procure poison for the purpose of killing internment camp guard dogs, and the notion that the poison was to be used to kill the Prime Minister and a member of the Cabinet was a contention of the Prosecution. The application to the CCRC contends that his absence was deliberately contrived, to prevent the Defendants from properly developing their explanation regarding the poison, and that his history was knowingly concealed, to prevent his character, or the credibility of his superior and the key prosecution witness, being properly scrutinised.

Additional grounds of appeal include the prosecution’s use of ‘bad character’ evidence against Alice, alleging that her suffrage activity involved arson and a failed ‘poison nail in the boot plot against Lloyd George’.

The CCRC application consists of more than 170 pages of referenced argument, supported by copies of hundreds of original documents. These documents include records from newly opened government and institutional archives, letters written in custody, family papers, photographs, digitised newspapers, and historical research.

While the case is now over 100 years old, key government records central to the grounds of appeal were suppressed after the trial and released intermittently only from 1947. At the time of writing, November 2021, a decision on the application is awaited.

‘Lodging this application is an important milestone on the path towards a successful appeal. We have combined a wealth of evidence unavailable to the Defendants at the time to argue that the trial was unfair and the convictions should be quashed.’

Chloë Mason, on lodging the application at the Criminal Cases Review Commission on 19 November 2019.
Popular memory of Alice had survived in Derby families. It reached wider audiences through contact with historians and through dramatisations of Alice’s life in the 1980s and 1990s.

Incredulity about the case was growing when Angela Truby’s new play Alice was staged in 2011. The Derby People’s History Group (DPHG) now began a campaign to clear Alice’s name, connecting local people and inviting Chloë and Deirdre, Alice’s descendants in Australia.

At a Derby forum in 2012, with historian Nicholas Hiley and Betty Keeling, local family friend of the Wheeldons, Deirdre explained that their parents had maintained a cone of silence about the criminal convictions. This was only broken by their father Peter Mason when, shortly before his death, he sat them both down to watch The Plot to Kill Lloyd George, a video of the 1983 BBC drama documentary. He’d also kept a leaflet by Hettie Wheeldon about the use of undercover agents and papers revealing the identity of ‘Alex Gordon’.

The approaching centenary of the First World War accelerated interest in the Wheeldon family and the case. DPHG hosted talks by professional historians at grassroots history and arts festivals. Alongside media attention, the story attracted a new generation of theatre-makers, artists, and songwriters. They took inspiration from Alice’s life, finding in her conscientious objection to war and conscription an alternative perspective on the conflict and its commemoration.

Through researching their family history and collating the numerous sources, Deirdre and Chloë Mason realised that Alice’s story had been re-told every decade since the blaze of publicity in 1917. Chloë has put together a list, which confirms their hunch that this re-telling went alongside increasing doubt about the safety of the trial. Putting a small selection of evidence from that bigger story into a timeline and sharing some points in the family’s own history, it is possible to track how Alice Wheeldon’s name has resurfaced and is remembered today.

Further resources
https://alicewheeldon.org/
1910s: Reference to the case in histories of political spying and working-class politics. 1935: Derby Telegraph reviews Francis Pearson’s memoirs under the headline ‘Were the Wheeldons guilty?’ Pearson, an undercover MI5 agent and senior barrister’s clerk, was ‘unable to endorse the verdict of the jury’ while holding no sympathy for the defendants.

1917: Bertrand Russell, Sylvia Pankhurst and the Workers’ Suffrage Federation speak out in support of the Wheeldons.


1917: Bertrand Russell, Sylvia Pankhurst and the Workers’ Suffrage Federation speak out in support of the Wheeldons.

1919: Derby Mercury reports death of Alice Wheeldon.


1926: F.E. Smith, who as Attorney General led the Wheeldon prosecution, includes the case in his Famous Trials.

1930s: Reference to the case in histories of political spying and working-class politics. 1935: Derby Telegraph reviews Francis Pearson’s memoirs under the headline ‘Were the Wheeldons guilty?’ Pearson, an undercover MI5 agent and senior barrister’s clerk, was ‘unable to endorse the verdict of the jury’ while holding no sympathy for the defendants.

1937: Deaths of Alf Mason and ‘Alex Gordon’/William Rickard; Peter Mason’s family moves to Australia.

1940s: Ministerial papers relevant to the undercover investigation of the Wheeldon household deposited in Oxford’s Bodleian Library – 30 years before the Home Office released the same documents to The National Archives.

1963: Partial trial transcript available in the National Archives. Nicholas Hiley locates Graham Lyons, who had bought a complete transcript at auction in 1970 and arranges for a copy to be deposited in Cambridge University Library.

1965: Sydney Morning Herald article on the ‘foiled plot’, retelling the story, taking a disparaging, mocking tone toward the Defendants, treating the whole matter as a big joke: ‘Deirdre, then aged 19, came across it and recalled how she asked our mother whether this was about our family and our mother was uncharacteristically dismissive. She removed the newspaper. Generally, our parents were particularly open in discussing current affairs and public matters, so withholding any published material from us was inexplicable at the time’. 1964: Ministerial papers relevant to the undercover investigation of the Wheeldon household deposited in Oxford’s Bodleian Library – 30 years before the Home Office released the same documents to The National Archives.

1979: Evening Standard publishes article likening Alice to ‘Lady Haw Haw’, 27 June; clipping discovered later among Peter Mason’s papers.

1958: Case included in D.N. Pritt, Spies and Informers in the Witness Box.

1965: Sydney Morning Herald article on the ‘foiled plot’, retelling the story, taking a disparaging, mocking tone toward the Defendants, treating the whole matter as a big joke: ‘Deirdre, then aged 19, came across it and recalled how she asked our mother whether this was about our family and our mother was uncharacteristically dismissive. She removed the newspaper. Generally, our parents were particularly open in discussing current affairs and public matters, so withholding any published material from us was inexplicable at the time’. 1964: Ministerial papers relevant to the undercover investigation of the Wheeldon household deposited in Oxford’s Bodleian Library – 30 years before the Home Office released the same documents to The National Archives.

1963: Deaths of Alf Mason and ‘Alex Gordon’/William Rickard; Peter Mason’s family moves to Australia.

1926: F.E. Smith, who as Attorney General led the Wheeldon prosecution, includes the case in his Famous Trials.
1983: BBC TV screens drama documentary *The Plot to Kill Lloyd George*, prompting Derby Evening Telegraph to retell the story and publish Wheeldon letters.

1986: Sheila Rowbotham publishes *Friends of Alice Wheeldon*, including a play, which is performed in Rotherham. Rowbotham first came across the case in Challenor’s 1977 book, *Origins of British Bolshevism*.

1987: Prior to his death, Peter Mason shows Deirdre & Chloë the BBC video; leaves papers, letters and notes.

1989: Bernard Porter’s *Plots and Paranoia. A history of political espionage in Britain 1790-1988*, tells the story and acknowledges the work of Bunyan and Hiley.

1993: Deirdre Mason and partner Jenni Neary look for Will Wheeldon in Moscow. In 2011 they travel to San Francisco looking for traces of Nellie Wheeldon, who left England following the trial and became an organiser for the laundresses’ trade union.

1997: The family receives confirmation that Will Wheeldon had been executed in the Soviet Union in 1937.

1997: National press reports release of relevant Home Office files in November 1997, advancing the previous release date from 2042.

1983-6: The daughter of ‘Alex Gordon’ contacts the BBC and meets with their adviser Nicholas Hiley. Hiley publishes articles on the history of British intelligence (1985-86) and the role of agent ‘Alex Gordon’.

1997: The family receives confirmation that Will Wheeldon had been executed in the Soviet Union in 1937.


2015: 2nd edition of Rowbotham’s *Friends of Alice Wheeldon. Exhibition in Friends House, London*, on the Friends’ War Victims’ Relief Committee, which returned to Buzuluk, Russia in 1921 and included Will Wheeldon after his release from prison as a Conscientious Objector.


2018: The people of Derby recognise Alice Wheeldon with a ‘Star’ on the Walk of Fame.

2007-2018: Artist Emily Johns designs “Alice was a Prophet” for the Peace News poster and poetry project. As part of *The World is my Country* exhibition, it tours to 44 venues in the UK and Germany to celebrate the people and movements that opposed the First World War.


2011 ‘Free Alice’: With help from relatives, Hiley, and friends, Chloë begins collating material to prepare the application to the CCRC. David Crigman QC, Andrew Smith QC and Ben Williams, barristers at St Philips Chambers, Birmingham, assist with and advise pro bono.

2012: Derby People’s History Group (DPHG) – ‘Free Alice’ demonstration outside Derby Theatre. DPHG contact Chloë Mason via Nicholas Hiley; they meet in September 2011.


2012: Derby City Council, with Derby Civic Society and the Derby People’s History Group, install a blue plaque at Alice’s shop, 12 Peartree Road. For many Derby people this was the first they had heard of Alice Wheeldon, her daughters Hettie and Winnie, and Winnie’s husband Alfred Mason.

2013: Derby City Council names its large community meeting room after Alice; Moirai trio perform their musical *The World is my Country* exhibition, it tours to 44 venues in the UK and Germany to celebrate the people and movements that opposed the First World War.

2013: BBC Woman’s Hour radio interview with Angela Truby, who wrote the play *Alice*, and Nicholas Hiley, historian.

2013: Coverage on BBC Hour radio interview with Angela Truby, who wrote the play *Alice*, and Nicholas Hiley, historian.

2014-18: Chloë Mason performs his song *Alice Annie Wheeldon* (streamed on Spotify etc).

2015: 2nd edition of Rowbotham’s *Friends of Alice Wheeldon. Exhibition in Friends House, London*, on the Friends’ War Victims’ Relief Committee, which returned to Buzuluk, Russia in 1921 and included Will Wheeldon after his release from prison as a Conscientious Objector.


2018: The people of Derby recognise Alice Wheeldon with a ‘Star’ on the Walk of Fame.

2019: Derby Council names its large community meeting room after Alice; Moirai trio perform their musical *Framed: The Alice Wheeldon Story* in Derby and London and release CD. Chloë lodges CCRC application.
Alice Wheeldon to Lydia Robinson from Holloway Prison, 5 March 1917, the day before the trial. Alice’s own political education is evident here in her evocation of Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man: Part the Second, 1792 (‘the world is my country’), and of Ebenezer Elliott’s popular poem ‘The People’s Anthem’, 1848 (‘God! save the people’). Reproduced by kind permission of Betty Keeling and Liz James, Lydia’s relatives.
The lives of women in Britain during the First World War were infinitely varied, shaped by factors such as: age, class, ethnicity, marital status, race, and where they lived, for there were many different home fronts, just as there were many different battle fronts, during the conflict.

The majority of women’s lives before, during and after the war were rooted in the family and the home. As housewives, daughters, sisters or domestic servants, they undertook the lion’s share of the domestic and emotional labour needed to run and manage homes, often doing so alongside full-time or part-time, casual or piece-work. Work that might, like the chain makers of Cradley Heath or knitters on the Isle of Arran, or the many women who took in washing, be carried out in the home.

Homes and families were symbolically at the centre of the national war effort, they were seen as the heart of the nation. Recruitment posters suggested war was being fought to protect them, particularly after civilians were killed when coastal towns, such as Whitby and Scarborough, were shelled by German boats on 16 December 1914. In the years that followed, bombing raids defined women and children as targets of war, rather than a group shielded from its impact. Approximately 1500 civilians died on the home front during the conflict, but the threat of Zeppelins, and then bombers, the blackout regulations, air raid sirens and the images of buildings reduced to rubble, created anxiety and fear in the lives of many women.

What home and family meant, how they functioned and provided support, was stretched and reworked as the war progressed. Then, as now, homes contained a multitude of different combinations of individuals living together, multi-generational families, couples, siblings and their relatives, lodgers, domestic servants, and the co-habiting unable to

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Home and Family

Roles and responsibilities in domestic homes were disrupted, disturbed and reassigned during the conflict; women took on new tasks in households, businesses, family farms and smallholdings. John, writing home after he joined up in the winter of 1915, expressed his concern that his pregnant wife on her own had to undertake, what was once a shared task - dealing with the killing of the family pig, prior to Christmas.

Although one woman, with a violent husband, admitted she would not be sorry if he were killed - ‘But I suppose he’ll be spared, and others as’d be missed’ll be taken, for that’s the way of things’ - others were more traumatised by worrying about and waiting for men in the services. Elizabeth Mundy from Llanelli walked into the sea, drowning her two-year-old son and seeking to drown herself; depressed by her husband’s prolonged absence fighting in France. The diaries of Rosamond Stephen, an English lay missionary in St Matthew’s Parish, Belfast, also detail women’s suffering, including one who had cut her throat, distraught with worry about her sons in the trenches. The emotional upset, created when husbands, brothers, fathers, sons and sweethearts enlisted in the forces, was further exacerbated for many women by the financial and practical difficulties they experienced.

Separation allowances were paid to wives for both themselves and their children, born since they married. This was extended in 1916 to those euphemistically referred to as ‘unmarried wives’. War Widows’ pensions were given if husbands died on active service. However, the infrastructure did not initially exist to process any of these payments speedily or efficiently. Delays in payments cascaded problems for housewives with precarious finances, who lived from week to week, into debt. They suffered the loss of their home and even the ignominy of having to resort to the workhouse. Local newspapers carried heart-rending stories of women in difficulties. Sylvia Pankhurst, living and working in the East End of London, was inundated by requests for assistance from women struggling to make ends meet. Mrs Caroline Peel quoted in Joyce Marlow, Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: unmarried motherhood in twentieth-century England (Oxford, 2012), p. 208.


2 Extracts here from Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service, ref: 705.1076 BA 9733: transcripts of letters written by a private soldier to his wife.
4 Letters and images in the private collection of Sean Brown by whose kind permission this extract is reproduced.
9 Seán Damer, State, Local State and Local Struggle: The Clydebank Rent Strike of the 1920’s (Glasgow, 1985).
10 The diaries of Rosamond Stephen, an English lay missionary in St Matthew’s Parish, Belfast, also detail women’s suffering, including one who had cut her throat, distraught with worry about her sons in the trenches. The emotional upset, created when husbands, brothers, fathers, sons and sweethearts enlisted in the forces, was further exacerbated for many women by the financial and practical difficulties they experienced.
11 Mobility within Britain, and migration between various parts of the Empire, meant family members were often separated; family networks stretched across continents before the conflict. Husbands and sons enlisting in the armed forces exaggerated this phenomenon.
12 E.S. Pankhurst, World War 1 at Home, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01yx52t accessed 10 June 2018.
The loss of a son’s or husband’s wages created hardship. The pension widows received was very modest and, as Janis Lomas has pointed out, they were expected to move into cheaper, smaller accommodation after their husbands’ death; something not easily achieved when their home consisted of only one or two rented rooms. A letter from a woman whose mother was widowed in 1915 recalled that, left with ‘six children and none of them old enough to carry on the business my Father had saved up for’, her mother ended up working ‘in the Royal Marine Barracks doing men’s washing, as the war pension was very low at the time.’ Thus, although the First World War in the popular imagination is often seen as an impetus to greater freedom and may have been liberating for some individual women, many more women were preoccupied with mundane, but perhaps equally heroic, struggles to maintain their homes and families on limited budgets.

At the outbreak of war, Britain was far from self-sufficient in food. Nearly 80% of the country’s grain was imported from the USA, whilst two thirds of the sugar consumed came from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the first few days of the war, there was panic buying and hoarding. Escalating prices and shortages followed, felt most acutely by urban housewives who did not have recourse to hedgerows, gardens or even poaching to supplement the family diets. Housewives were seen to have an important role to play in alleviating the food crisis; government posters told them ‘the Key to Victory’ was in the housewife’s cupboard. Their choice of food for the family for supper became an issue of national importance. Newspapers, magazines, books, exhibitions and women’s organisations were full of economical recipes and advice on how to stretch food supplies and avoid waste. Most of which were time-consuming, arduous, and occasionally bizarre, included the use of potatoes in bread, cakes and dumplings to replace flour. The suggestion housewives instruct their families to masticate their food more thoroughly, so they would eat less, slipped into an attempt to control some of the most personal elements of everyday family life.

By 1915, previously common foods, such as eggs and sugar, were scarce or prohibitively expensive. Charitable donations from Canada, of sacks of potatoes to be distributed to the poorest families or canning machines to help prevent fruit going to waste, provided a little assistance. As did another Canadian import, the Women’s Institute Movement, set up in 1915 to support rural housewives in the production, preparation and preservation of food. As naval warfare intensified in 1916, the food crisis escalated, and queuing for food was added to women’s other domestic tasks. Newspapers carried reports of hundreds of housewives spending up to six hours queuing for a tub of margarine in both Worcester and Lichfield in 1917. Little credence should be given to the suggestion at the time that ‘some women liked standing in queues’ or to the commentator in Stoke-on-Trent, who claimed ‘people in the food queues were food hogs who were going from one shop to another.’

Cajoling and encouraging housewives to be thrifty, something most housewives had to do in war and peace, was supplemented by compulsion and coercion. Bread, the staple food of the working classes, was a particular focus for attention. On 29 May 1917, a proclamation from King George V was read out in all churches, emphasising the importance of food to the nation’s war effort and exhorting housewives to ‘Reduce the consumption of bread in their respective families by at least one-fourth.’ Legislation governed the ingredients of bread and prevented it from being sold until it was several hours old, so that it could be sliced more thinly and eaten more slowly. Newspapers and War Savings Committees reminded housewives that, for example, a Bromley householder was fined £5 for wasting bread, and two ‘bread wasters’ in Bristol were also fined £50 and £25 respectively. Finally, the rationing of meat, fats and sugar was introduced in January 1918. Queues began to reduce, and after a visit to Birmingham, an aristocratic resident of Hagley Hall, Worcestershire, noted in her diary that ‘Everyone looks very thin as if a good leg of mutton would do them good. Great shortages of cheese and fats of all kinds’.

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6 War Widows’ Archive, Staffordshire University Research Collections, Box 1.
10 Worcestershire Archives and Archaeological Service, ref. 899:1500 BA 14526: Hagley Hall Scrapbook Autumn 1917 WAAS.
Furthermore, the direct payment of money to women, albeit on their husbands’ behalf, created anxiety, stretching and challenging Victorian and Edwardian ideas of domesticity. As Sylvia Pankhurst noted, ‘The notion that the women were entitled to separation allowance as a right, not as a charitable act of grace, was something those supposed to support women seemed to struggle to get to grips with’. Many women discovered their reliance on the government for separation allowances or pensions was accompanied by increased public concern with, and scrutiny of, their private domestic lives. Pedersen suggests that the supposedly supportive and friendly visitors of The Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Families Association (SSFA), an organisation with 900 branches by 1915, frequently spied over into ‘surveillance, acting as a morality police to soldiers’ wives, with the potential to distribute and withhold supplementary benefits according to their judgment of recipients’ ‘good behaviour’.

Middle-class observers, such as Canon E. A. Burroughs, accused soldiers’ wives of drinking excessively, thanks to ‘heedlessly liberal separation allowances’; he went on to say that, in his view, ‘eighteen shillings a week and no husband were heaven to women who, once industrious and poor, were now wealthy and idle’. Likewise, Hughes and Meek argue that: ‘by 1915, the views of charity and parish officials on soldiers’ wives squandering separation allowances and neglecting their children through drunkenness were pervading the Scottish media’. In Ireland, concerns about women’s drinking reached fever pitch, whether it occurred in public houses, or illicitly, as ‘shebeening’, in homes. A judge suggested that the ‘husband had been in hourly danger of losing his life for his country while his wife at home was drinking his very blood’. The condemnation and surveillance of women in receipt of separation allowances brought varied responses in different parts of Britain. Soldiers’ wives were banned from pubs in Cardiff for a time; Cupar, in Fife, attempted to introduce a curfew to prevent women leaving their homes after ten in the evening.

As Braybon and Summerfield wrote, working-class women without men in this period were: ‘held in need of moral education and guardianship, like servants, they needed “watching”’. In no area was this more acute than infant education and guardianship, like servants, they needed evening curfew to prevent women leaving their homes after ten in the evening.

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As Braybon and Summerfield wrote, working-class women without men in this period were: ‘held in need of moral education and guardianship, like servants, they needed “watching”’. In no area was this more acute than infant welfare. As Anna Davin has pointed out, the poor state of children’s health and welfare can be gauged from the press report of the Stirling Observer regarded, as the Stirling Observer noted, ‘a war emergency measure that cannot wait’ (5 May 1917).

Women from across the political spectrum, pro, anti or militant suffrage women, pacifist and imperialistic women, could coalesce around attempts not only to preserve infant life but also to improve the health of children. Some were motivated by eugenic ideologies, the desire to produce fit young men to replace those lost in combat, and to take up roles ruling Britain’s expanding Empire. Baby shows and infant and maternal welfare clinics sprang up across the country where, DeGroot suggests, ‘middle class women dispensed advice formulated by middle class men to working class mothers’. This is a little harsh. The plethora of activities loosely grouped as infant welfare was varied, although almost universally blighted by middle-class women who lacked understanding of the everyday lives of working-class mothers. Their determination to visit them at home added sidestepping such busy-bodies to working class housewives’ other domestic tasks.

In the first week of July 1917, a cacophony of events, including an exhibition in Westminster Central Hall attended by over 20,000 people, took place under the umbrella of National Baby Week. In Preston, toddlers aged between 18 months and three years participated in a ‘crawling competition’; the local press noted, ‘the majority of the infants...appeared to view the proceedings as somewhat alarming’ and had to be induced to ‘get a move on’ with toys and ‘brightly coloured balls’. Pram parades were rather more commonplace, as were baby shows. An indication of links between war and infant welfare can be gauged from the press report of the Stirling baby show, entered by 225 infants. They were judged in five classes according to age, with attention apparently given to many points which may be summed up in the Military Medical Board’s formula Class A – fit for general service.

Whilst National Baby Week was run by volunteers, the shift from volunteerism to compulsion, from ad hoc arrangements to conformity that Adrian Gregory has identified as fundamental to the First World War, can be seen in the
response of the trained midwives in Stoke-on-Trent, to the ‘ladies’ who descended on working class mothers, the day after they gave birth. They were described as ‘armed to the tongue with lectures, pamphlets and even scales’. Midwives requested visits of these ‘zealous often autocratic meddlesome ladies, might be postponed until the tenth day’ after the birth. Working-class women were also on the receiving end of criticism of their alleged laziness and lack of cleanliness by professionals, as one poor mother who found herself in the magistrates court in Worcestershire discovered. Maud Hewlett had six children, her husband had been injured at the front and transferred to the Military Foot Police. She explained she ‘had spent pounds at the chemists in trying to cure the scabies’ her children had. Two officials – the School Attendance Officer and the Assistant Medical Officer – considered her domestic skills to be wanting and she was found guilty of wilfully neglecting two of her children and fined. The magistrates felt that, as Maud received separation allowance, she must have more money coming into the house than before the war, and told her that, in future, she must pay more attention to the cleanliness of her house and her children.
The Plumlines exhibition was a collection of real-life stories expressed through 188 one-hundred-word poems, written by people from across Worcestershire about a female relative’s life during the First World War. It was on display at Croome Court (National Trust) from 19th November 2016 until 19th March 2019.

The inspiration for Plumlines came from a little-known story of how a woman before her time, the inspiring American heiress Viscountess Deerhurst, helped the 9th Earl of Coventry see the many ways in which women could provide crucial support to the men at the front line.

It was Virginia’s (Viscountess Deerhurst) commitment and strength that ensured that Lord Coventry supported the formation of Pershore’s first ever Women’s Institute (WI), encouraging 100 women to meet. The WI’s jam making skills, using the Pershore plum, helped the war effort at home and on the battlefields, where it was sent to help keep up the calorie intake of the troops.

Rachel Sharpe (Creative Partnerships Manager) and Kiki Claxton (Creative Programme Coordinator) led the team, with lead artist Su Blackwell and poets Brenda Read-Brown and Heather Wastie, supported by a volunteer steering group. Focusing on a socially engaged process, the project began with poetry workshops in schools, with writers’ groups, community, and history groups. Participants were invited to research a female relative from the First World War, bringing her story to life through a one-hundred-word poem.

Su Blackwell was commissioned to create an immersive artwork to feature the poems in a room on the first floor of Croome Court. She transformed them into 188 saplings using...
paper, each sculpture containing a participant’s unique poem, fixed on a Pershore plum stone. The saplings formed the central part of the installation, alongside a book containing all 188 poems and a table with jam jars and utensils. Displayed across three walls was a poignant poem written by Brenda and Heather which told the story of Viscountess Deerhurst, a creative device to put her history at the heart of the Court.

The story of Croome has often been told through the lives of its male owners and their male relatives. In recent years, the National Lottery Heritage-funded ‘Croome Redefined’ project has worked to tell lesser-known stories, ones that resonate with the life experiences of diverse audiences, including under-served communities. The challenge of the FWW centenary was to find a suitable story in keeping with this approach. Maggie Andrews’s suggestion of jam-making and the history of the WI inspired the initial idea.

The story of Viscountess Deerhurst was familiar among some of Croome’s volunteers, but unlike stories about the Earls of Coventry was not one that was readily recalled. This project put a female family member at the centre of the story, and through using participative creative processes, the team aimed to inspire contributors and visitors to explore their own family histories. A major theme for the process was finding a platform to encourage audiences to explore and recall the stories of women in their families, and question ‘if’ and ‘how’ we hand these stories down for future generations.

Through this project, the team discovered that focusing on the history of jam offered more varied ways of connecting with the past than through an idealised identification with aristocratic privilege. The team were interested in utilising a socially engaged practice to understand how to unearth and share stories, whilst creating a platform for people to leave their DNA at heritage sites, through an active process as opposed to passive visitor experience.

The exhibition was formally opened by Dame Carol Ann Duffy (Poet Laureate), who performed some of her works for participants and visitors. The programme for the launch day included music from the Oriel Singers, food tasting, and talks from Worcester University Professor Maggie Andrews and her students, focused on the history of jam in WW1.

When the exhibition was deinstalled, the saplings, book of poems and other materials were gifted to The Hive at Worcester, where it is now part of Croome’s extensive archive. The poems, saplings, and documented ways of working are stored safely for the future.

For Croome, the Plumlines project changed the way the team worked, securing co-production as a central tool for creative exploration, and paving the way for bigger creative innovation projects focused on lesser-known histories, co-created with and for diverse audiences.

Further resources
https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/croome/features/croome-plumlines-exhibition

Maggie Andrews and Jenni Waugh, How the Pershore Plum Won the Great War (Stroud, 2016)
I. Setting the scene.

It’s time to tell the story of those women whose obituaries said nothing more than daughter, mother, wife; of how life changed for everyone, faced with a war that must be won; of how an Earl and Viscountess took up a movement just begun, and made the county understand that women wouldn’t just make jam but fill men’s footsteps, work the land, and keep the nation fed; and how England’s women followed where the WI had led.

Some women reached the sky by building aircraft; here, they climbed high ladders to pick fruit. Some women brought black jewels from the coalmines; here, onions were their opals, wheat their gold. Some women sang through thunder in the factories—canaries, yellowed by the TNT; here, the cows were soothed by women singing, skins reddened by the sun, the wind, the rain. These women didn’t face the fear of gunfire, the everlasting fireworks of the shells, the knowledge of the ninepins all around them; but did what women through the years have done—they made a life that they could call their own, and waited for their men folk to come home.

They fought their quiet battles for the future, when they would vote and work on equal terms—continue on the path they had begun, when war to end all wars was finally done. But most of them would spend their whole lives waiting, like the Viscountess, for titles they had earned, for rewards that they had worked so very hard for, hoping that men would at last learn and accept the change in each and every life. But still, their obituaries only mentioned daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, wife.

VIII. A connection between the exhibition and the lives of their own female relatives.

Can you see the women working with their hands, busy with their fingers, smooth or wrinkled, poor or grand? Women gathering fields of hay before the autumn comes. Doing jobs that were always done by husbands and by sons, leaving unfinished sewing for days with artillery shells or making wings for flying machines? These are stories we seldom tell of nurses dressed like angels, or wearing the clothes of a man, loyal hard-working women doing the best they can. Alice and Rosie and Dora, Edie and Jessie and Dot. Women using many skills they didn’t know they’d got. You’ll find them in an album, a scrap book or a box, a suitcase in a dusty loft. So go on, pick the locks. On doors you’ve never opened, the clues are there to find. Let’s celebrate the stories of Worcestershire’s womankind.
A discovery in Staffordshire Record Office made the national news in August 2014. The find was a full set of papers from one of the tribunals that adjudicated on the cases of men who sought exemption from military service after conscription was introduced in Britain in 1916.
However, these papers should not have been there: all but two sets of the extensive paperwork that supported the tribunal system had been ordered to be destroyed at the end of the war. This archive had survived amongst the papers of Eustace Joy, Clerk to Staffordshire County Council from 1907 to 1933, and one of the military representatives that advised local tribunals about the Army’s requirements and brought appeals on behalf of them to the local Appeals Tribunal. So, a fascinating missing piece in the story of the First World War, but not at first glance a promising source for women’s history, particularly of everyday life.

Yet the completed forms for each case heard by this Appeals Tribunal (one of three in Staffordshire), together with supporting correspondence, were actually very revealing, particularly when the lives and experiences detailed there were contextualised through a close reading of local newspapers and other sources, such as school log books, the census, and even diaries and letters. This was because of the grounds for exemption that individual conscripted men could use as they sought exemption temporarily or permanently from military service. Medical incapacity or conscientious objection to war, as well as undertaking work of national importance, are well-known reasons that might spare a man from the Army. However, the grounds pursued most often were that the loss of an individual might result in economic hardship to the business that employed him, or domestic hardship to his family or household. These hardships to the local community might outweigh the Army’s need for this particular man. It was in claiming these grounds for exemption that men revealed much about themselves, and the effect the war was having on them, their families and businesses. Each case is an individual story of a man, his family, his workplace and his neighbourhood. So although none of these tribunal cases were about a woman, many of them concerned women kin, employers, customers, co-workers and possible substitute labour, as well as neighbours and fellow members of their local community. By widening research to contextualise tribunal stories, particularly to the extensive and informative local press, it is possible to track how local communities experienced these unpredictable and challenging times. It became clear that how they dealt with the stresses of everyday life could make the difference, not just to their individual survival, but also to that of their community, county and ultimately country. This gives us a different perspective on the First World War.

This project challenged many of the easy assumptions about the war, including those about women. The home front did not just consist of women, and in many areas of paid work the persistence of the sexual division of labour was all too apparent. Women continued to have the principal responsibility to put meals on the table, faced with finding ways to deal with food shortages and a rocketing cost-of-living. Tribunal cases reveal that many coped by maintaining multi-generational households or establishing new ones in order to share limited resources. Many conscripted men not only were the sole or most significant economic support to a wife and to children, but also to parents too old or too frail to work. In the absence of the principal breadwinner, it was women who juggled a range of incomes (wages, separation allowances, pensions and even the poor law) to sustain the household. They then had to deal with food shortages and the resulting queues, as well as rapidly rising prices for food and fuel. The tribunal cases show that the local ecology of shops and markets was significantly disrupted by labour shortages in the production and retail of food, which were unpredictable and uneven in their effects. Housewives navigated these challenges, while coping with anxiety about husbands and sons who were already at the front, and those who might be taken at any moment when temporary exemptions were not renewed, or the criteria for conscription widened. Similar experiences of women are also threaded through the cases of conscientious objectors, or those whose case focused principally on their health or their occupation. Women’s capacity for paid work was debated by the all male members of the tribunal, by employers and often by the conscripts themselves. Tribunals, charged with balancing the requirements of the military with those of the local economy, revealed long-standing assumptions about women’s capacity to run their husbands’ businesses, take over jobs vacated by men, or step up to work created by the wartime economy. The evidence presented to tribunals also confirmed that in most cases, women’s pay was low and insufficient to support dependants. Even the fabled high wages of women munition workers were often not a living wage, or equal to the wages commanded by male munition workers.

The stories of businesses, as well as individuals, can be reconstructed from tribunal cases. These, too, reveal much about women’s everyday lives during the war: the changes and continuities as the war brought new challenges from month to
month. The book that came out of this project brings many of these stories to life, sharing the voices that reflect the diverse experiences of those who constituted the Staffordshire home front. One of these stories is of a long-standing Leek firm of bakers and confectioners that managed to survive the war.

In mid-1916, the bakery supplied twelve shops in Leek and a further six in the country. They also had a shop that sold cakes, as well as bread, and they had a tea-room too. The family firm was led, at least nominally, by Jane Maskery, who, at the outbreak of the war, was a seventy-one year old widow. It was she who made the applications on behalf of her workers when they were called up. By the time she appealed for her van man, George Astles, a visual representation of the effect of the war on her workforce was submitted to the tribunal [see above]. Maskery’s did attempt to recruit women for the bakehouse, but Jane told the tribunal that ‘it is impossible to replace them’ – the men in the bakehouse. She argued that in her experience, women could not substitute for bakers (they could not make sponge cakes or work the machine for pies), and as a result the few remaining bakers had to work excessively long hours. Maskery’s did employ women, including several of Jane’s daughters, but this was in the shop and tea room, and not in what was understood to be the more skilled and better paid work of baking. This was a common experience throughout the war, despite the enormous demands of sustaining the home front, in which maintaining a supply of bread to the population as a whole, while also feeding the armed services, was a real challenge. Jane underlined this in her case to keep Astles working on the home front. His work was essential because of ‘the importance of the food supply’.

Jane Maskery made clear to the tribunal that she was too old to be the day-to-day manager of the business. Her son did this. So she is not an example of the women who took over businesses while their husbands were in the army, or indeed when widowed. There are a few examples of women taking over their husbands’ businesses in the tribunal papers, but they are rare. Nevertheless, Jane Maskery’s experience (in as much as we can reach it through these sources) reveals much about a particular business, a set of men and women who worked for it, or who depended on those who did, as well as something of those who depended on Maskery’s bread, or the cheer that came from a trip to their tea room. The home front encompassed all of this.

This project dug deep into a lucky find of a full set of Appeal Tribunal papers while carefully contextualising them with other apparently unpromising sources. Together, as the project aspired to do, they open a window onto everyday life on a particular home front. This was one of the many attempts during the Great War commemorations to revisit and reconfigure the stories we tell ourselves. The Great War does look different when we foreground everyday experiences on the home front.

Further resources
https://staffsappeals1918.wordpress.com/category/daily-life-on-the-home-front/

Karen Hunt, Staffordshire’s War (Stroud, 2017).
A Woman’s War

These community-led projects were part of The Medals All Round Research Initiative (MARRI), which aimed to measure how drama-based interventions could negotiate challenging and challenged narratives of the past. MARRI was supported by the Living Legacies 1914-18 First World War Engagement Centre at Queen’s University Belfast and by the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. The project involved a diverse range of community groups from across Northern Ireland, and included people from Protestant and Catholic communities, from both urban and rural areas, and involved young adults with special educational needs and prisoners/ex-offenders.

The name of the initiative was taken from a play called Medal in the Drawer written by academic and playwright, Dr Brenda Winter Palmer. The play relayed the war journey of the writer’s Great Uncle, Willie Kerr, and was written not only as a personal memorial, but also to commemorate the involvement of thousands of Catholic men who joined the British Army to fight for King and country in the midst of a Home Rule crisis in Ireland.

A performance of the play, which was a mixture of historical detail gathered from academic sources and personal stories taken from archives, diaries and family stories, became the starting point for each community group involved in the project. Groups were then encouraged to investigate previously hidden and untold family or local stories using drama techniques. They were supported in the creative process by a drama facilitator, and the resulting stage and screen productions were performed at the Lyric Theatre in February 2015.

Among a wide variety of ventures which explored the impact of the First World War and the war’s continuing legacy in Northern Ireland, a number of community groups investigated their own local connections to WW1 using drama and performance techniques.

Film excerpts from A Woman’s War, courtesy of the Tonagh Women’s Group.
In much of the community work undertaken in the MARRI project, the experience of women on the home front was explored. Tonagh Women’s Group took this theme in their production of a short film titled *A Woman’s War*.

The starting point for the group’s research came from their initial conversations about their own ancestors who fought on the front line. These discussions then developed into questions about the lives of the women who were left at home. The group decided to delve more into the lives of their grandmothers, many of whom took on the work and jobs previously done by their husbands and sons.

The group were drawn to the project through their love of the theatre. Trips to the Lyric in Belfast had always been part of the group’s social excursions, but they were apprehensive about performing live, and so they decided early on in the process to present their stories through the medium of film. This method also suited the group who, as busy wives and mothers themselves, were unsure about the commitment to a demanding rehearsal schedule in the run-up to the final presentation.

Through a period of research and with additional support from their local museum, the group discovered how women filled a number of manufacturing and agricultural positions throughout the duration of the war. The importance of food production due to shortages at this time became a particular focus for the group, and through connecting with their own families’ rural backgrounds, the group uncovered stories of how their ancestors worked in many areas of farming. The storyline for the resulting film centred on an original poem written by one group member. This was narrated over scenes, depicting the wide variety of important roles taken on by women, demonstrating the physical hardships experienced by women who were also suffering anxiety and despair over their loved ones fighting on the front. Describing their research as ‘an education and an emotional journey’, the Tonagh women were determined to show how their ancestors became ‘the heroes of home’ through scenes which depicted their personal battles on the home front where, for women, ‘their trenches are factories, the fields their posts’.

Filming took place at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra, where a collection of reconstructed buildings, including houses, shops and a school, recreate small town and rural life in Northern Ireland from 100 years ago. The group spent some time sourcing costumes which they said helped to give them the confidence to perform, and they worked in collaboration with a local film-maker throughout the process.

Within the context of Northern Ireland’s commemorations of the centenary of the First World War, the MARRI project provided a space for previously hidden histories to be uncovered and brought into the public forum. This focus on individual life stories, along with the use of drama and creative methods, allowed participants to engage, activate and interact with historical memory in a way which commemorated the past and their connections to it. For the Tonagh Women’s Group, their involvement with the MARRI project prompted them to investigate the stories of other women who lived through this period. They went on to publish a book called *Inspirational Women of the Rising and Us*, and have also been planning another research and film project that focuses on the end of the war, and how the lives of women changed when the men returned from the front.

**Further Resources:** *A Woman’s War*  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5kR4xTrZpA

We did a project in 2015 about the First World War and we looked at the war with regards to our ancestors, our relations and their role in the First World War. We all found people who’d been involved or died in the war and then we thought, ‘Well, what about the women at home? And what about saying goodbye to your husband or your son or your brother?’ So we decided this time... it was the turn of the lady.
Mabel St Clair Stobart (1862-1954) is revered in Serbia for her work setting up and running all-women medical units in the Balkan War of 1912 and in Serbia during the First World War.
For her remarkable achievements, she is still taught about in schools in Serbia. Despite those achievements, though surely on a par with those of Florence Nightingale, she is an obscure figure in England.

**Early Life**

She was born into a wealthy family in 1862, the daughter of timber merchant Sir Samuel Bagster Boulton and his wife Sophia. In 1884, she married St Clair Kelburn Mulholand Stobart and they had two sons.

**The Women’s Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps and The Balkan War**

After a brief and futile venture with her husband into farming in the Transvaal she returned to England, but was shortly to be widowed when her husband died at sea on his own return journey to England. Now, she became involved in the suffragette movement, arguing in *The Flaming Sword in Serbia and Elsewhere* that ‘influence without power is a chimera’. At that time, gaining the vote was paramount for women in Britain, and Stobart believed women could gain suffrage by partaking in their country’s national defence, ‘in which preservation, not destruction of life, is the objective’ and that ‘the co-operation of women in warfare is essential for the future abolition of war’.36

In 1910, she established the Women’s Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps (WSWCC) to support the armed forces with field and base hospitals to be used in the event of war, ‘its purpose to demonstrate that women could exhibit the same level of strategic prowess, courage, and toughness as men’.37 Stobart’s mission was twofold: whilst determined to show women’s ability on any battlefield, she wished also to show the futility of men’s obsession with war by demonstrating women’s dedication to peace through their humanitarianism. The intense training programme was held at Stobart’s Studland Bay home in Dorset and was based on the methods of the Royal Army Medical Corps, including skills in first aid, hygiene, sanitation, anatomy and physiology.

The WSWCC had their first foray into the field when war broke out between the combined forces on the one side of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro, against the Ottoman Empire in 1912. Here, Stobart led a Women’s Convoy Corps to the front line. She was met with resistance from the chairman of Britain’s Red Cross, Sir Frederick Treves, who believed a female presence on any battlefield was not advisable. Stobart wished also to show the futility of men’s obsession with war by demonstrating women’s dedication to peace through their humanitarianism. The intense training programme was held at Stobart’s Studland Bay home in Dorset and was based on the methods of the Royal Army Medical Corps, including skills in first aid, hygiene, sanitation, anatomy and physiology.

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**The First World War and Serbia**

At the outbreak of the First World War, whilst in Hasselt, Belgium, trying to set up a hospital, Stobart and her companions were arrested by the Germans as spies and sentenced to be shot, but escaped their fate when little evidence was brought against them. This flirtation with death did not deter Stobart and she accepted an invitation from the Belgian Red Cross to set up a hospital in Antwerp with the St. John’s Ambulance. During the German bombardment, Stobart’s medical corps lost most of their medical material and soon left Belgium. With help from the Women’s Imperial Service League, the St. John’s Ambulance in conjunction with the British Red Cross, and friends and sympathisers, Stobart was able to raise funds to purchase new equipment, and after an invitation from the French Red Cross in 1915, set up a new hospital in Cherbourg.

After four months of working in Cherbourg, Stobart read about an epidemic of typhus and relapsing fever that had broken out in Serbia. Already overwhelmed by the brutality of the Austro-Hungarians during the First World War, the typhus outbreak infected 150,000 members of the army and prisoners of war, taking the lives of 30,000. Doctors in particular were affected, with 126 out of 350 catching the disease and 36 percent dying.38 Concerned about the bureaucracy that she knew she would inevitably face once again, Stobart, at first, was hesitant in making enquiries about helping in Serbia. However, after being invited by the Serbian Relief Fund based in London to run a hospital unit, Stobart and a team, including 7 female doctors39, 18 trained nurses, cooks, interpreters and orderlies, set sail.

Males were to be brought along this time in the roles of orderlies and chauffeurs, as Stobart felt that, in light of the success of previous female-led missions, the suffrage movement would not be hindered by claims of success due to male presence. Staff and patients would be placed in an abandoned racecourse in Kragujevac, 90 miles south of Belgrade, and would be billeted in 60 made-to-order tents in order to avoid using existing buildings, which would inevitably be carrying lice and be infected with disease. It was decided by the head of the army medical service that the tented hospital would be used for the war-wounded rather than becoming another typhus centre, though with huge numbers infected, it was inevitable that typhus patients would attend. In addition, due to the severe shortage of doctors, Stobart established a roadside dispensary, treating 12,000 locals in the first few weeks. Following this success, Stobart extended her ambit to a 30 mile radius of Kragujevac to establish several more dispensaries.

During their time in Kragujevac, Stobart came to realise that the picture most Westerners had of Serbs as belligerent and turbulent was wrong. The Serb, said Stobart, loved ‘with all the enthusiasm of a poetic nature, his family, his home, his hectares of land, and his country’.

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37 Christine E. Halliett, ‘Nurse Writers of the Great War’, *Nursing History and Humanities* (Manchester, 2016).
39 Mrs. King-May Atkinson, M.B., Ch.B., Miss Beatrice Coxon, D.R.C.P.S.R., Miss Helen B. Hanson, M.D., B.S., D.P.H., Miss Mabel Eliza King-May, M.B., Ch.B., Miss Edith Maude Marsden, M.B., Ch.B., Miss Catherine Payne, M.B., Miss Isobel Tate, M.D., N.U.I.
Stobart was surprised by the way the Serb men accepted the women doctors, whom they viewed as gentler, but just as capable as their male equivalents.

Retreat from Serbia

By September 1915, Germans, Austrians and Bulgarians were amassing on the border with Serbia, with fighting expected imminently. Stobart was asked to ready her unit to become a flying field hospital and to command the column – to be in charge of Serbian officers, as well as her own British corps. She was given the title Major by the Serbian Army, believed to be the first time a woman was bestowed this rank. The hospital was to be known as The First Serbian-English Field Hospital, with Commandant Madame Stobart attached to the Sumadija Division. By October, due to the opposing forces’ strategic, synchronised advance, the Serbian government and army began their withdrawal to Albania. Stobart, commanding her column, began a treacherous retreat, making their way through the mountains of Montenegro and Albania to the coast. She eventually made her way to the coast to await rescue from the allies to take her back to Britain. During the three month evacuation, Mabel documented the retreat through a series of photographs and a diary. The diary, now held in the Imperial War Museum, formed the basis for The Flaming Sword in Serbia and Elsewhere, the book she was to release the following year.

The end of the war saw Stobart return to her Studland Bay home. After the barbarism of the war she had diarised, and a number of personal losses, and maybe also as a way to channel her feminism, she became heavily involved in spiritualism, founding the Spiritualist Community of which she was chair. She stayed in Studland Bay, Dorset, dying in 1954 at the age of 92.

Celebrating Mabel

Trying to rectify Stobart’s relatively unknown status in the UK, in 2014 Dorset County Museum opened an exhibition titled ‘Mabel Stobart: A Dorset Woman at War’ to celebrate her work and that of her team of volunteers. The exhibition included the collection of 30 black and white photographs taken by Stobart, which she used on an invited tour in the US at the end of her mission to Serbia. For Peter Down, then Chair of Dorset County Museum (2014), the exhibition was ‘just one way in which the lives of remarkable people like Mabel Stobart can be rediscovered by a new generation’.

Further, to solidify and celebrate Mabel’s expedition to the Balkans, an exhibition titled ‘Stobart Hospital - Kragujevac 1915’ by Tatjana Janković was opened in the Gallery of the Public Library ‘Vuk Karadžić’, Kragujevac, Southern Serbia in November 2018. Following this, the exhibition opened in several cities including Belgrade, Leskovac, Banja Luka, Sremksa Mitrovica and Bijeljina. The book Stobart Hospital, containing testimonies of mission members Mabel Dearmer, Monica Stanley and Olive Aldridge, was also launched. Using Mabel Dearmer’s gravestone in the City Graveyard of Kragujevac as a starting point, it led Tatjana ‘to Mrs. Stobart and [the] huge story about her mission’ (personal correspondence between author and Jankovic). Another pacifist with a fascinating background, Dearmer had been a dramatist, children’s author and illustrator before volunteering her efforts as a hospital orderly to Stobart. In 1915, she sadly succumbed to typhoid and was buried with a Serbian ceremony in the city. Every year on February 14th, in collaboration with the Red Cross Kragujevac, the City of Kragujevac holds a commemoration in the City Hall and in the City Graveyard to remember Elizabeth Ross, Mabel Dearmer and Lorna Ferris (all buried in Kragujevac). The British Ambassador and others, including the Canadian and Australian Ambassadors, attend this celebration of the lives of these three women.

Further resources


Christine E. Hallett, ‘Nurse Writers of the Great War’, Nursing History and Humanities (Manchester, 2016).


19.6.14 A wonderful women's role depicted in this exhibition. Women were the healers.

23.6.14 Well presented, clear and informative.

23.6.14 A very impressive exhibition, most informative and vividly illustrated with photographs that convey some of the horrors of war. Mabel Stobart was my great aunt (my grandmother Geraldine Stobart was St. Clair Stobart's sister). I feel humbled by her courage and determination and also inspired by her example of what women can achieve.

24.6.14 An excellent exhibition of my great, great aunt. Many thanks to all concerned with its production. Dianne Griffin

26.6.14 Quite remarkable.

27.6.14 What a truly remarkable and inspiring woman. Great display. P. Villa

27.6.14 Fascinating story of an admirable strong women. Thank you.
Maggie Andrews

Women and Work

Ministry of Labour poster for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps reading: ‘Women urgently wanted for the WAAC. Work at home and abroad with the Forces’. © IWM Q 68242.
Mrs Fawcett, leader of the largest women’s suffrage organisation, argued in 1920 that: ‘The war revolutionised the industrial position of women. It found them serfs and left them free.’

Individuals may have found liberating and exciting new opportunities in the world of work in wartime, but research undertaken by numerous historians suggests that, for most women, the conflict affirmed or tweaked already existing patterns of work, rather than bringing about long-term change. According to official figures, 3.3 million women were employed in 1914 (23.6% of total work force). This number rose to 4.9m women employed in 1918 (37.7 %). The conflict certainly made women’s work, and debates about the suitability of some work for women, more visible. However, by the 1920s, women’s participation in the labour force had returned to pre-war levels and many workplaces and industries operated a marriage-bar, preventing women who were teachers, nurses and industrial workers from employment in the inter-war years, if they were married.

Initially, the conflict had a detrimental impact on many industries where women traditionally worked. Prioritising the war effort, a disapproval of indulgence and the encouragement of restraint created a crisis in the garment and luxury trades. Propaganda posters announcing: ‘To dress extravagantly in war time is worse than bad form it is unpatriotic’ led to tailoresses and milliners being laid off. Wartime economies in both middle class and gentry homes also meant many servants were laid off, and others were not replaced if they left. During the four years of the conflict, the number of domestic servants in Britain dropped from 1,658,000 to 1,250,000, but domestic service still continued to employ more women than any other sector throughout the war. As women’s unemployment grew, the Queen’s Work for Women Fund organised workshops in autumn 1914 to provide retraining and work for unemployed women. By the following spring, the Fund was also assisting women to emigrate to New South Wales, Australia, giving the émigrés an outfit and a grant of £2 to cover their costs. It worked with the British Women’s Emigration Association to encourage unemployed widows and domestic servants in particular to find a new life abroad.

Over ten thousand members of the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service also left Britain, travelling to France, India, East Africa, Italy, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Salonika and Russia to nurse the wounded. They were professionally trained women who undertook tough, challenging work that required knowledge, skill and commitment. They were integral to the war effort, and yet it is often the middle-class Voluntary Aid Detachment (VADs) whose work is remembered. Not least because of Vera Brittain’s literary autobiography, Testament of Youth (1933). Nursing was an established area of women’s work, but the approximately 500 women who were trained doctors in 1914 were still something of a novelty. They often struggled to find work and were regarded with suspicion. Their services were expected to be utilised primarily on the home front in wartime. However, the work of a number of them in the Scottish Women’s Hospitals, and women like Mabel Ramsey, who became Chief Medical Officer of the No. 2 Anglo-French Hospital at Chateau Tourlaville in Cherbourg, helped to shift ideas about the suitability of medicine as a career for women.

In Britain, manufacturers who adjusted their workshops and machinery to produce items for the war created new working opportunities for women. For example, Bradford carpet factories began to manufacture army blankets and military uniforms. Likewise, precision techniques used by Birmingham’s pen makers were adapted and diversified into making surgical instruments, cartridge cases and clips, whilst in Scotland, the requisition of the Aberdeen herring fleet meant that women skilled in gutting and packing fish moved to the jute works of Dundee. However, many employers remained reluctant to employ women, preferring to use older men, young lads between 12 and 18, or migrant labour from Ireland and Portugal. On 17 July 1915, Mrs Pankhurst, with funding from the Minister of Munitions, Lloyd George, organised a Right to Serve March for women; it was the increasingly severe labour shortages, following the introduction of conscription for men in January 1916, that was responsible for the grudging acceptance of women in new areas of the workforce.48

The Worcestershire Council’s Employment sub-committee wrote to the local paper, drawing attention to the large number of women clerks out-of-work, and suggesting that employers who had lost men to the army should consider temporarily filling their places with female clerks.49 They had limited success, although the number of women in the civil service rose from 33,000 in 1911 to 102,000 by 1921.50 There was resistance to women becoming tram conductors in Walsall in May 1915, but the following year, the first female clippie was employed on a London tram, and by the end of the conflict London Transport companies had 18,000 women working for them.51 Despite an initial reluctance, the Great Western Railway Company also began to hire female ticket collectors, dining car attendants, and cleaning gangs to wash the soot off the engines.52 In many instances, women, like these railway workers, undertook domestic tasks in the workplace with the understanding that such arrangements were temporary for the duration of the conflict only.

Those manufacturers that relied upon government contracts -- producing all manner of items, from army blankets, mercury thermometers and bronzed field glasses to horses’ nosebags, soldiers’ uniforms and boots, and munitions -- were pressured to employ more women. Nevertheless, by 1916, although 1.25 million people were employed in these government-controlled workshops across the country, only one fifth of them were women.53 Munitions became the most iconic area of women’s work; as the Labour Gazette, noted in March 1915, ‘in the production of shells and fuses, there are numerous operations of a nature that can be, and are already in some shops, suitably performed by female labour’.54 The expansion of already-existing factories, such as the Woolwich Arsenal, and investment in new ones that reached maximum production in 1917, provided work for many women. The largest of these was the purpose-built cordite factory H.M. Factory, Gretna, Scotland, which employed approximately 12,000 women in a total workforce of 30,000.55

Some oral histories, newspapers and propaganda have portrayed the munitions worker as Tommy’s sister, who was described in 1916 as, like Tommy in the trenches “‘living” in the last moment, now joking, teasing, laughing, wriggling, and then fuming and flaming and weeping over her troubles as if the world were coming to an end’’.54 The work directly supported men on the front, but evidence from the period suggests women were motivated primarily by the need to earn a living. The struggle to survive led them to undertake physically exhausting work in unhealthy conditions. There were endless rumours that munitionettes earned ‘high wages’, and rather strange assertions by many middle class commentators that this would lead to excessive alcohol

47 Worcester Herald, 12 January 1915.  
50 Sandra Gittins, Our Girls; Their Work for the War (London, 1916).  
51 Anne Spurgeon, ‘Mortality or Morality? Keeping Workers Safe in the First World War’ in Andrews and Lomas (eds.) The Home Front in Britain, pp. 57-72.  
52 London Gazette, March 1915.  
54 Hall Caine, Our Girls, Their Work for the War (London, 1916).
consumption, swearing and an abandonment of sexual morality.\(^{55}\) The moral welfare of these apparently well-paid munitionettes gave rise to a range of opportunities for middle-class women to undertake voluntary and paid work as welfare assistants, inspectors and indeed some of the first women police officers, whose roles included supervising the behaviour of young industrial workers.

The social reformer, Margaret Llewellyn Davies, however, after visiting Midlands factories in 1917, pointed out that ‘For their 73 and half hours a week (including Sunday to dinner time) the average wage of women is 15-16s’ (75p-80p). Historians, such as Cathy Hunt, have pointed out that munitions workers were not as well paid as the myth suggests, and indeed many joined trade unions and resorted to industrial action to improve their wages and conditions of work.\(^{56}\) Years later, George Ginn, who had worked at White and Poppe’s Fuse Factory in Coventry, recalled the sight of munitions workers who had been turned yellow by the chemicals used in some workshops:

> I don’t think they cared a hang whether they looked yellow or green as long as they got the money – that was all they were interested in. But the majority of them in the loading were all on this TNT, all went yellow. Quite yellow they were. It was the toxic base of TNT, or Tri-Nitro-Toluene, that so affected the workers.\(^{57}\)

Yellowing from contact with TNT gave munitions workers the label ‘canary girls’, but it was their response to the greater danger from explosions that earned them praise for courage. Coventry women workers were, according to the local newspapers, amongst those who received medals for bravery when there was a fire and explosion in the White and Poppe filling factory. Throughout the conflict, approximately 1400 women died working in munitions. However, as Anne Spurgeon has pointed out, munitions were a focus of so much attention from factory inspectors and government control that, by the end of the war, munitions’ safety record compared favourably with other work seen as natural for women - such as employment in industrial laundries.\(^{58}\)

For example, Anne Richardson was off work for 14 weeks after an accident in a laundry in Tamworth in 1916.\(^{59}\) The case of Ivy May Bayliss (16) who died in Evesham hospital after her hair was caught in farm machinery, which could not be stopped, is a reminder that workplace injuries were not confined to munitions and that even the production of food carried its dangers in a world with few health and safety regulations.\(^{60}\)

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54 Spurgeon, ‘Mortality or Morality?’
57 Tamworth Herald, 7 October 1916.
50 Gloucester Echo, 25 November 1918.
The young land girl doing her bit for the war-effort in sunny green fields nurturing plants and animals, remains another iconic image of women’s war work, but local studies, for example by Thomas George in Wales, suggest a much more complex picture of women’s agricultural war work.61 In December 1915, Mr Allsebrook from the Board of Agriculture noted that ‘Female labour has been introduced in all branches of farming work’ but the supply was ‘altogether inadequate to meet the demand’.62 The Land Army was introduced in 1917 but the numbers were small. It was the local rural married women who were considered to be an unharnessed resource, who could and needed to be persuaded to undertake more work on farms. Some commentators suggested married women’s unwillingness to undertake agricultural work was because they had become too independent as a result of the separation allowances they received.63 Others drew attention to women’s lack of appropriate clothing to undertake agricultural work in winter and suggested the provision of stout boots and clogs.64

In summer harvest time, help came from a plethora of seasonal workers, made up of travellers, migrant labourers, school children, university students, youth groups and middle-class young women from urban areas. One of a number of young women, students from Birmingham University who spent their summer holidays working in the Evesham Vale, rising at dawn and sleeping in a barn, recalled:

Looking back on six weeks of war-work at Elmley Castle our memories seem to be bounded - and blurred-by vistas and vistas of green. What? you ask. Green peas! For we picked peas of all varieties and peas in all directions - in Elmley itself, at Fladbury, Cropthorne, Wick, and Evesham.... We occasionally got variations from pea-picking, gathering raspberries, blackcurrants, broad and kidney beans.65

The students and itinerant workers that they worked with were paid piece rates. They serve as a reminder of the range of women’s war-work which does not appear in official figures. Many women, like the knitters in Aran, the glove makers in Worcestershire, or the chain-makers of Cradley Heath, undertook piece-work in their homes. Others engaged in voluntary or unpaid work, or were employed in, but not necessarily paid by, their husband’s businesses. In these latter two areas, war brought some subtle but significant changes.

The work of the wives of farmers, publicans, retailers and shop owners was often subsumed into that of their husbands. In wartime, women’s contribution to some family businesses was sometimes foregrounded, particularly when conscription was introduced in 1916. Thus, in lists of family businesses in Stourbridge directories between 1914 and 1917, a number of women appear as running family businesses for the first time. Mrs Bates becomes a music dealer; Mrs Bill a flour dealer; Mrs Howles a Grocer; Mrs Parkes is in charge of the butcher’s; and Mrs Preece is by 1917 a boot and shoe dealer.66 Once conscription for men was introduced in 1916, military tribunals frequently discussed what work had to be undertaken by men and which women could do. A Dumfries grocer, Mr Henderson, argued unsuccessfully that neither his elderly father nor his sister could run the business without him in 1917.67 A Motherwell briquette seller and removal contractor was equally unsuccessful when arguing that his wife, who had been seriously ill for 18 months, could not run his business.68 Karen Hunt has argued, on the basis of her work on Staffordshire, that ‘there were many examples where it suited tribunals to press reluctant husbands to turn to their wives to take over their businesses’.69 In Worcestershire, there was no patience for the suggestion that only men could climb ladders to pick fruit on taller trees, or prune or spray trees to prevent various pests from damaging the crops.70

Some of the military tribunals, the Queen Mary’s Work for Women Fund, many hospitals, and the multitude of charities, such as the YMCA and SSFA, and wartime administration and committees – including Food Control Committees, and Women’s War Agricultural Committees – all relied upon the services of women to help the government in seeking to cajole, encourage or legislate to control people’s everyday lives. Volunteers administered, managed, coordinated, fund-raised, chaired meetings and spoke in public. They re-worked, re-negotiated, or at least stretched ideas of what were appropriate feminine concerns and behaviour. Just as importantly, they developed their own self-confidence. Perhaps it was these women, rather than the munitionettes or the agricultural workers, that the war set free.

61 Thomas George, ‘Female Agricultural Workers in Wales in the First World War’ in Andrews and Lomas (eds.) The Home Front in Britain, pp. 92-107.
62 Worcester Daily Times, 8 December 1915.
64 Birmingham Daily Post, 21 June 1915.
66 Diana Russell, archival work carried out in preparation for PhD study at the University of Worcester.
67 Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser, 7 February 1917.
68 Motherwell Times, 27 April 1917.
70 Maggie Andrews and Jenni Waugh, How the Pershore Plum Won the Great War (Stroud, 2016).
Emily Ward recognised the need for early years care to be centred around the child, both structured and nurturing. By the outbreak of the First World War, Norland trained nannies, attired in their distinctive uniforms and badges which marked them out as skilled professionals, worked in royal and aristocratic nurseries throughout Europe and across the world. They cared for their small charges and taught them nursery rhymes, parlour games and to speak English.71

Emily Ward founded the Norland Institute in London in 1892, thereby creating the profession of nursery nursing and establishing a training model for the future based upon both practical placements and formal learning.

First World War centenary activities stimulated members of staff, from what is now Norland College in Bath, to dig into storerooms where cupboards contained boxes of papers, leaflets, records of their first trainees and copies of the Norland Quarterly, a newsletter sent to all Norland trained nannies. They discovered Emily Ward’s notebook revealing details of the early years of the organisation, whilst other materials disclosed that the First World War turned some nannies’ lives upside down.72

Many undertook difficult journeys home from foreign countries; others chose to continue working abroad as nannies, caring for refugees or even with the Scottish Women’s Hospital in Serbia. Norland nannies contributed to the war effort by welcoming young Belgian refugees into the Norland Nursery, undertaking welfare work in munitions factories and helping to fund and staff crèches in Bethnal Green and Acton, where little ones were cared for whilst their mothers worked in war industries. The new employment opportunities during the conflict had reduced the number of trainee nannies, but armistice brought a rise in applications from young women keen to take up Norland training. They sought a career in early years care, in an era when there was an increasing conviction that all children could and should benefit from stimulating pre-school care. For example, reformers Margaret and Rachel McMillan had established the first open air nursery at Deptford in 1914 to provide a safe, nurturing environment for the disadvantaged children of the area.73

In 2018, research by Christopher Jones, the Library Manager, on the impact of the armistice on Norlanders, was presented at the Voices of the Home Fronts: Reflections and Legacies of the First World War conference. These included Kathleen Churchill Wanstall (1886-1967), who trained in 1904 and worked for Princess William of Stolberg from 1911-1917. The Stolbergs were an aristocratic German family who Kathleen continued to work for until the end of the conflict. By 1919, she was staying in Stourbridge, Worcestershire, where her brother was a vicar. Two years later she had taken up a new post, as nurse for Princess Antoinette’s children in Monaco. She stayed with this family for 46 years becoming known as Granny rather than Nanny.

Alternatively, Marian Burgess (1874-1919), who completed her training in 1901, had been working for the Grand Duchess Kirill at the Palais Wladmir Zarsko Selo, near St Petersburg in Russia, when the First World War began. For several years she was ‘surrounded by bloodshed and murder and terror’ caught up in the Russian Revolution and, after the family fled to Finland, the Finnish Civil War. By the time armistice was declared, the once wealthy family were living on near starvation rations, but Marion continued to care for her three small charges until 1919. Having nursed the children through the Spanish Flu, she caught the virus and died.

The lives of Norland nannies, like Kathleen and Marion, offer a fascinating insight into the social history of women, childcare and domestic life. They offer glimpses of how national and international events are experienced by ordinary women. So, it is exciting to hear that exploring Norlands’ history during the First World War has encouraged the College to catalogue, digitise and protect their archive materials and continue researching their history.

73 Carolyn Steedman, Childhood, Culture, and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860-1931 (New Brunswick, NJ), 1990.
Beyond the Battlefields:
Käthe Buchler’s Photographs of Germany in the Great War

Sarah Lloyd

Caregivers with their children, © Estate of Käthe Buchler, Museum für Photographie Braunschweig/Deposit Stadtarchiv Braunschweig.

A Touring Exhibition
It has really prompted me to think about what my grandmothers’ and family members’ experiences of World War 1 were and what life would have been like.

*Exhibition visitor.*

Between October 2017 and May 2018, *Beyond the Battlefields* toured Birmingham, Manchester and Hatfield. This was the first time that Käthe Buchler’s work had been shown outside Germany with images selected from the substantial archive of black-and-white negatives and colour autochromes, which she bequeathed to her home city of Braunschweig, Lower Saxony.

From the 1910s until her death in 1930, Käthe Buchler had represented the social fabric of a north German town and life in an upper-middle class family. In expressing her own painterly view of the world, in monochrome and astonishingly limpid colour, Buchler’s subject matter and chronology offered a distinctive vision. Hers were not the familiar images of the years before, during and after the First World War. Instead they raised the intriguing possibility of showing the conflict from the perspective of women and children, of dislodging national stereotypes and challenging those of us working in the UK to open fresh perspectives on the war’s centenary and set it in new contexts.

In depicting the minutiae of daily life against the backdrop of war and its aftermath, the images also speak across the intervening century, bridging the gulf of time and historic lines of conflict.

The exhibition was organised by two of the First World War Engagement Centres funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, *Everyday Lives in War*, based at the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, and *Voices of War and Peace* in Birmingham.

**Further resources**
Matthew Shaul (ed.), *Beyond the Battlefields: Käthe Buchler’s Photographs of Germany in the Great War* (Hatfield, 2018)

Makes you question why did we go to war with them because they are the same as us.

*Exhibition visitor.*
In 2013, a team of 21 members of The St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural & Archaeological Society (www.stalbanshistory.org) set up the Home Front Research Group to explore the impact of the war on this small Hertfordshire city. One of the themes which emerged was the unsung contribution of older women as the city coped with the demands of a country at war.
A quick search of the Imperial War Museum’s website reveals an abundance of images of women ‘doing their bit’ during the First World War. From Land Girls enthusiastically waving hoes and munition workers posed in front of piles of shells, to nurses tending to wounded soldiers and members of the WRAF astride motorbikes, there is no need to look far to show that women were involved in the war effort, often taking on jobs that were dirty and a danger to life and limb.

Yet, what unites these women is that for the most part they are young and wearing some sort of uniform. These photographs, taken by official war photographers, reflect that drive by the government to encourage women to step into often unfamiliar roles; is it too much of a stretch to say that the donning of a uniform, be it badge, tunic or hat, gave these women a status perhaps denied to them in more peaceful times? That status has remained, with their stories privileged in the media, who have ‘discovered’ that women were part of the First World War story as well.

These stories, of course, deserve to be told and their contribution recognised. However, whilst hunting for images to go with our slowly developing story of St Albans, what was striking was the shortage of images of women who might fall into an older age bracket, but, as we were discovering, had no less an interesting story to tell. Where were the women who sat on committees and made lists of action points; the women who sorted the jumble, stood behind the tea urn at fundraising events and washed up after the crowds had gone home; or the women organising support for local families in need? Where, so many of our group wondered, were the women like us, for we, too, fell for the most part into that older age group, and had done our stint of volunteering for church, school and local organisations.

Some images do survive within the official record of women organising for charitable purposes. We have no names for them. Well-known within their own communities as the women who got things done, their public face was often reduced to ‘our thanks to the ladies’.

As we were finding in St Albans, whilst they might not be front and centre, women such as these did cast shadows in the records, and on occasion stepped into the spotlight, if not the photographer’s viewfinder. We did have our own smiling young women, as the image of workers posing with an order of tropical helmets for the military illustrates. However, we also began to glimpse the lives of other women, and this was particularly apparent as we worked on the story of keeping the city fed.

In some cases, these glimpses remained just that; Elizabeth Alice Jane Bates, wife of a railway worker, asked for permission to open a temporary soup kitchen as she had come into possession of some bones; Elizabeth Evatt, a doctor’s widow, requested additional supplies of sugar to make lemonade for a charitable fete; Lucy Burlingham, a former domestic cook, was removed from a list of caterers and tearooms as ‘she was too small to entertain’.

Members of the Girlington Club established during the First World War by women in Bradford for patriotic and charitable work.
© IWM Q 108592.
These women stepped out of the shadows, but then quickly returned. However, other women became more visible as we accumulated information from committee minutes and newspaper accounts. As over-worked male-dominated committees were urged to see the value of drawing on their organisational skills and social networks, women started to take on more responsibilities; women like Mrs. A.E. Garratt, who became a favourite of our group as she popped up across the various themes we were researching. Hidden behind her marital status, it was a red-letter day when we finally discovered that her first name was Edith.

It was tracking down women like Edith in the census, newspaper columns and official records that led the team to develop a Biography group, seeking to put more flesh on the bones of the stories of the women of the city. This work continues as connections are made and small pieces of the jigsaw of women’s lives both before, during and beyond the First World War, are added, stimulating new questions to explore.

Beyond recovering the stories of those earlier women from St Albans, there remain the stories of the 15 women and 6 men who constituted the Home Front Research Group. The suggestion that we might record details of our own lives for the benefit of those who come after has been met with some surprise. The assumption that it is what we have discovered that is of value, rather than we who discovered it, reflects both the modesty of the group, and also a connection with those women who just got on with what needed doing during the war without any sense they might be of interest to future community historians.

Much work remains to be done to reclaim women for the story of the First World War. Perhaps one day we will find the clues that lead to the stories of the women who worked tirelessly in the St Albans Food Office, monitoring ration books, keeping lists of suppliers and retailers, and circulating the never-ending updates from central and local government. Their one appearance in the official record is a line in the Local Food Control Committee Minute book for 30th June 1919: ‘the hearty thanks of the Committee be accorded to the ladies who had undertaken the Food Control work at the Town Hall’. (SBR863, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies).

Let’s hope that future commemorations of the First World War will resist the pull of those smiling, waving young women and consider the lives of those others, no less important, who are as yet unknown.

Further resources
Jonathan Mein, Anne Wares and Sue Mann (eds.), *St Albans: Life on the Home Front, 1914-1918* (Hatfield, 2016).

A quick search of the Imperial War Museum’s website reveals an abundance of images of women ‘doing their bit’ during the First World War.
Beyond the War Memorial

This project was a study of educational experiences during the First World War, specifically looking at students who took evening classes at the Harris Institute in Preston.

The Harris Institute provided further and technical education for working people, and is a forerunner of the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). In the University’s Special Collections is a set of class registers, which provide information on the students, including their name, from which gender can usually be deduced, age, address, and occupation, as well as what they studied. The information for the war years had previously been digitised into a searchable database. We thought that this material would be of interest to local and family historians, who could research the backgrounds and experiences of a set of students, to reveal new insights into the lives of ordinary people on the home front during the war.

The project was devised in association with the ‘Preston Remembers’ team. This was the town’s flagship centenary activity, primarily concerned with the refurbishment of the main, town-centre war memorial. Associated with that was a series of projects to research the lives of men recorded on various rolls of honour. We felt that much of the centenary work was, understandably, focussed on memorials, loss and sacrifice, but that there were other stories to be told. In taking the more life-affirming topic of education as the focal point, we thought that it might challenge the dominant narratives associated with the war.
With the support of ‘Preston Remembers’, a group of volunteers was recruited to research some of the class registers. For practical purposes, we identified specific samples of students and, using additional sources, such as the 1911 census records, newspapers and myriad other materials, began to construct life stories for some of the students, from their family backgrounds, their occupations and courses of study, to what they did after the war.

One of the main findings was that, over the course of the war, far more women attended the institute, the majority of whom worked as clerks, to study commercial subjects such as bookkeeping, shorthand etc. Others were working in cotton factories, or small shops, and also chose to study commerce. The courses were not for the casually interested, requiring the payment of fees, attendance three evenings a week, and sitting examinations. These women obviously thought it was worth it to advance their prospects in their existing occupation, or to move into a new one. Some women took courses in engineering and physical sciences, more took occasional classes in music, art and languages.

There is a well-established literature on women during the First World War, which concentrates on those who moved into traditionally male occupations in munitions, or on those who joined nursing and other uniformed organisations. Although this attention is understandable for its novelty, far more women worked in offices, also essential for the war effort, but their stories are overlooked. Perhaps because they were moving into more traditionally female occupations, they are seen as unenterprising by 21st century perceptions. This seems unfair on the women who invested a great deal into what, for them in their lives, was an important step. After the war, the majority probably returned to familiar worlds of marriage and motherhood, although we know that some pursued careers related to their studies. Similarly, most of the students, being under 30, would not have been entitled to vote in 1918. What they gained from their educational experiences, however, were not just for the duration of the war, and may have enhanced their own and their families’ lives in uncountable ways.

Working with the volunteers was an immensely rewarding experience for me. I was staggered at their research skills, while many of their preconceptions about wartime experiences were indeed challenged by their findings. There is tremendous potential in marrying the skills and enthusiasm of local and family historians with the larger research questions that are important to academic historians. We were only able to scratch the surface in our project. There are over 4,000 names on the wartime class registers (which are publicly available) and we looked at about 100. With the 1921 census data about to become accessible, it would be fascinating to explore in more depth what happened to our students immediately after the war.

Our project was not solely about women, but women appeared prominently in the findings, with new evidence on the often-overlooked aspects of education, occupation and opportunity. They were ordinary people from humble backgrounds doing, apparently, unremarkable things, but through their everyday actions they made an extraordinary contribution – to the war effort, and also to their own and other people’s lives. Social history starts from the point that it is just such ordinary people’s lives, experiences and actions that, ultimately, drive historical change and shape our world. As half the world’s population, history without women is, simply, meaningless.

Further resources
Harris Institute Class Registers: https://uclandata.uclan.ac.uk/43/

M. Andrews and J. Lomas (eds.), The Home Front in Britain. Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914 (Basingstoke, 2014).

M. Andrews and J. Waugh (eds.), How the Pershore Plum Won the Great War (Stroud, 2016)
The Devil’s Porridge Museum opened its new purpose-built facility in 2014 to coincide with the centenary of the start of World War 1. Alongside support from national and government bodies, dedicated volunteers with an enthusiasm for local history raised hundreds of thousands of pounds to give the Museum the home it deserves and to share this story of Gretna’s ‘secret’ war.
His Majesty’s Factory Gretna

During the First World War, HM Factory Gretna was the largest munitions factory in the world, stretching over an area of land nine miles long and two miles wide, from Dornock in Scotland to Longtown in England. 30,000 people worked there at its height, including 12,000 women, many of whom mixed the cordite that was nicknamed ‘the devil’s porridge’. Its existence transformed the local area. In addition to the factory itself, two townships were constructed for the workers, including schools, cinemas, dance halls, hospitals, a dentist, fire station, shops, a dairy and much more. The workforce was truly global and HM Factory Gretna was described as a ‘veritable Babel’.

The First World War was fought in many different theatres, and one of the most important was industry. One of the key battles of World War 1 – the battle of supply -- was fought at Gretna. Feeding the guns of the front was a huge undertaking. Lives and limbs were lost in this battle, and the long-term impact on the health of the workforce has never been fully reckoned. The Devil’s Porridge Museum exists to demonstrate to people that the war did not take place in a far-away land; it happened right where the Museum now stands. Its impact can be seen all around in the hostels that were built for the workers (and are now houses lived in by Museum volunteers and others) and in the beautiful, spontaneous nature reserve that has developed at ESD Eastriggs, one of the main parts of HM Factory Gretna (still owned by the Ministry of Defence, once a hub of toxic chemicals for use in war, now home to otters, deer and salmon).

‘The Gretna Girls’

Women came from across the UK to work at HM Factory Gretna. We know there were Gaelic and Welsh speakers, young women from Aberdeen, Fife and Northern Ireland. A lot of the workforce was drawn from industrial areas such as Glasgow, Carlisle, Sunderland, Newcastle and County Durham, but ‘girls’ came from all over, including Keswick, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man. The majority of the women were young (aged 16-20) and unmarried, but some came with their husbands or families. There was a school and maternity unit, so life continued even during the dark days of war. The Devil’s Porridge Museum holds accounts of numerous workers who met and married while working at HM Factory Gretna. Several local young women ended up living at the opposite end of the world because of the men they met during the war.

The work done by the women was difficult and dangerous. The Factory was operational 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Young women mixed chemicals, transported heavy goods, worked on electric trams and in the Power Station. Many photographs exist of these female workers in decidedly ‘unfeminine’ occupations, with this perceived contradiction a source of fascination (a common theme of the time was ‘makers of life engaged in the creation of death’). Images of women in industry were also used in wartime propaganda.

For every woman directly involved in the manufacture of cordite, there must have been about 5-10 who worked in other areas to make life at HM Factory Gretna possible. There were women who issued items from the stores, bakers, cooks, matrons, hostel maids, those who worked in the Post Office, as Welfare Supervisors or nurses or in the Women’s Police Service (WPS). The WPS at Gretna was the largest in Britain at that time and they served a key role in protecting and monitoring the female workers. Life at Gretna wasn’t all hard work. For many of the female workers, it was a time of liberation – they had money in their pockets, they were among women of the same age, away from home and meeting new people while learning new skills. For some, it was exciting and, arguably, empowering.

Gretna’s ‘Secret War’?

Employees of HM Factory Gretna in World War 1 came under the terms of The Official Secrets Act and their work was codenamed ‘Moorside’. At the end of the war, the huge factory was parcelled off and sold. While there were people who knew about HM Factory Gretna and its importance in World War 1, this immense undertaking was largely forgotten - perhaps because few visible signs of it remained; perhaps because of its location in an out-of-the-way, overlooked part of Britain; or perhaps because the work was largely done by working-class women and people from overseas. A tangible reminder of the Factory existed until 1973 when the state management of alcohol ended. This was introduced in 1916 across Dumfries and Galloway and Carlisle, as a wartime emergency measure to control and limit the supply of alcohol, but it outlasted both the Factory and the war!

Once the ‘Devil’s Porridge Exhibition’ (as it was then known) was established at the back of St John’s Church, Eastriggs, in the 1980s, information and objects began to come to light. Industrial archaeology scheduled for destruction by the Ministry of Defence was salvaged and given a new home. Local historian Gordon Routledge published Gretna’s Secret War in 1999. People came forward with accounts, documents, medals, memories. ‘My mum worked there’; ‘We’ve got this photo, we don’t know what she did’; ‘My grandparents met and married while working at the Factory’; ‘No-one ever spoke about it’. These are what the Museum team regularly hear, and are always keen to find out more about the stories behind these statements.
When the Factory closed, the majority of workers returned to their previous occupations and homes. However, some of the Factory people remained. They married, settled and built lives. One example is Kate Bryson, who lived in the Post Office at Dornock before there ever was a Factory. She became a teacher in the school built in Eastriggs for the Factory, and married a Nitroglycerine Section Manager, Mr Caw. Kate Caw wrote a history of Eastriggs for the local paper in the 1960s and was a well-known and liked teacher. Her life was changed by HM Factory Gretna, as were so many other people’s. More accounts are always coming forward: the Museum exterior was recently painted, and the painter provided copies of photos and documents about his grandmother’s work at the Factory. At a recent Burns Supper, the teenage piper’s great grandmother was discovered to have been a munitions worker. Items come to the Museum that have been forgotten in attics, or kept as family treasures in drawers or on mantelpieces. The Devil’s Porridge Museum is a community museum, rooted in place, and has become a magnet for munitions stories.

Finding the Women
After a woman had worked in munitions for two months, she was given a triangular ‘On War Service’ badge (it is now the logo of The Devil’s Porridge Museum). Each badge has a unique number on the back which refers to the worker. There must have been a list of all of the female workers, but no such list remains, neither do any payroll documents or other centralised sources of information for the workers of HM Factory Gretna. Tracing the people of the Factory has been a long-term goal of the Museum, and one which our current research project is seeking to accomplish.

The project, funded by Dumfries and Galloway Coastal Communities Benefit Fund, has enabled the Museum to appoint a dedicated Research Assistant to systematise, investigate and share what is known about the people of Gretna. Named ‘The Miracle Workers’, because of an article written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after he visited HM Factory Gretna in 1916, the project has involved an online launch event, 50 research volunteers (many of them joining remotely) training in research techniques, online socials and drop-in sessions, an online mini-conference to share findings, a facebook group, an exhibition and a film. A thousand verified names are now known with more research being done every day.

The digital outcomes of the project should raise the profile of the Museum and HM Factory Gretna, while making the research accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Through public/community Wikithons, the research will be uploaded onto Wikimdia (one of the most visited websites in the world). One of the key goals of the project is to redress the gender bias of history. The majority of biographies on Wikipedia are of men, as are the majority of editors. The project will add new accounts of women from HM Factory Gretna, and these accounts will be uploaded by local young women who will learn digital skills and take ownership of the past. More women need to become wiki-editors to help change the narrative, including the criteria of what is and is not deemed ‘important’ and ‘worthy’ enough to feature on the site. HM Factory Gretna was a place where young women achieved remarkable things; we hope that sharing their story will help to inspire the next generation.

For the current research project:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtRQK-LR7XgIjQENzMQoVFw

The Devil’s Porridge is a volunteer-led Museum. After a rags-to-riches story, visitors can now enjoy a five star interactive experience in modern premises.
More at  www.devilsporridge.org.uk

‘God made the bees, The bees made the honey, The Gretna girls have done the work. And the chemists have got the money,’ Page from an autograph book in the Museum collection. A rare example of a woman’s voice from the time; it is an insight into how women may have felt about their work and value.
Image courtesy of Devil’s Porridge Museum.
On November 24th 1918 in New York City, a meeting of the Executive Board of the Women’s Peace Party, which was a section for the USA of the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, decided to send an invitation to Mrs Mary Church Terrell. It informed her that she had been elected as one of 30 delegates and alternates to the International Congress of Women’s Peace Conference (often referred to as 1919 International Women’s Congress) in Zürich at the end of the war.

Mary Terrell was granted the necessary leave to take such an important trip from her current role working at the War Camp Community Service (WCCS). 3-4 years prior to this, Mary Terrell had been a Board member of the US section of what became the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. It was felt she would be a strong candidate to be a part of this historically significant occasion.

Not all was as easy as you may think, as the State Department refused to give passports to all 30 delegates and alternates.

Despite this setback, Mary Terrell was able to secure her passport in Washington D.C. before acquiring her travel visa in New York City (which had to be done 72 hours before travel) and setting sail on April 9th 1919.

Mrs Mary Church Terrell was the only woman of non-European ancestry to attend and speak at the Women’s International Peace Congress in Zürich, May 1919.
On arrival, Mary Terrell noticed there wasn’t a single delegate from Japan, China, India, or from any other country whose inhabitants were not white. This was the second time in her life she describes having the privilege to represent not only the coloured women of the USA, but the whole continent of Africa, as well.

On the 3rd day of the Congress, Miss Jane Addams, President of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, informed Mary Terrell that it was unanimously decided that she would represent the USA the next night! The late notice did not startle her at all. Deciding to deliver her paper in German, the language spoken in Zürich, was an important decision as she wanted to ensure that as many people as possible heard what she wanted to say directly from her own mouth.

An unnamed young woman provided the necessary support for the translation of her words. With only 15 minutes to express herself, German was going to be a challenge, as speaking outside of your mother tongue needs more time. That night was spent reading the paper over and over again to find the rhythm to deliver it the following evening. Thursday morning a meeting took place, and it was agreed that Mary Terrell could present the following resolution to the Congress:

We believe no human being should be deprived of an education, prevented from earning a living, debarred from any legitimate pursuits in which he wishes to engage or be subjected to humiliation of various kinds on account of race, color, or creed.

Just before the paper was to be read to the delegates, Miss Emily Balch, an officer of the Women’s International League (WIL), came to inform Mary Terrell that changes had been made to her paper, and that it was too late to discuss the matter. As it had already been decided and sent to print for translation in German and French, there was nothing left to do than to obtain the new copy and prepare.

Challenges are always on the horizon on the journey of a Black woman talking the truth around injustices faced by her community in front of white audiences, especially coming from the USA. Tailoring the narrative is a consistent feature. Imagine Mary Terrell’s surprise when she obtained the newest copy of her paper, to find it was her very own work that had been printed. It turned out that the translator had misunderstood the additional order given and printed the first draft she had received. When discussing matters that no-one else can possibly understand, it is important that you use your own words. The message is conveyed in such a way that the speaker gives the words life, in any language spoken.

That night, the Congress was held in St Peter’s Cathedral, in which women had never been allowed to speak before. The Cathedral was packed to the brim with the citizens of Zürich with a great interest in what was to be discussed.

Six speakers spoke, in German, French, Italian and English.

Mary Terrell was the last to present to the delegates, following Ethel Snowden: suffragist, peace campaigner, socialist, and a brilliant English orator.

Mary’s account:
‘I was sent by the Supervisor of the Girls’ Department to talk with the woman who had charge of all the work among the women in New York City. I requested her to start some work among colored women and girls because there was urgent need of it in a city where the colored population was even then between one hundred and one hundred and twenty-five thousand.

‘“Oh Mrs Terrell,” she exclaimed, aghast at the proposition, “I couldn’t possibly do any work among Negro women, I know nothing whatever about the Negro mind and psychology, and I would never know when a Negro woman was telling me the truth.”

‘During the conversation she told me that “no matter what colored people know or may achieve, it is an accepted fact that nobody is willing to receive colored girls in this country.” ... I reminded her, “and so long as girls whose race represents one-tenth of the population are undesirable, ignorant and immoral, the standard of the whole American people will be dragged down, unless something is done to prevent it. “Oh,” replied the Director of Girls in New York City, very lightly and flippantly, “the world is not ready for Democracy yet.”

Mary Terrell later concluded: ‘Although I knew the attitude of many Southerners towards the race, it had never occurred to me that it would be possible to find so many “best citizens” who were unalterably opposed to giving their consent to permit competent workers to lift colored women and girls to a higher plane, even though they were not called upon to defray the expense themselves.’

Mary Church Terrell’s first-hand accounts are excerpted from her autobiography, A Coloured Woman in a White World (1940, reprinted 2021).
The relentless challenges, obstacles and adversities faced by communities of colour are still very much alive today. The exact obstacles Mary Church Terrell documented in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman In A White World*, are still faced by women of ‘colour’ today in 2021.

To read the words and accounts of a woman who identifies as Black - first generation born free in the United States of America; one of the first women of colour to be college-educated and to obtain a degree; pioneer and founder of several Black/Negro women’s organisations, such as the Colored Women’s League in Washington D.C.; and Head of the Board of Education in a major city - even with all of these attributes and her place in the worlds in which she lived and created, her value is still decided on by an infrastructure that does not have the capacity to value her due to her gender and race.

Having this information can support all women of 2021 to understand that the fight for respect is one that is fought on so many levels; however, the only level that matters is the decision to first have respect for self.

**Further resources**

Here Mary Church Terrell gives her own account of what she delivered at the Women's International Peace Congress, Zürich, in May 1919.

In the first place, I thanked the broad-minded white women of the United States for inviting me to the Congress, making it possible for me to come and for giving me the opportunity to speak. In dealing with less favoured groups, I said, if people everywhere had been imbued with the same breadth which they had displayed in this instance, race problems and a few others would long ago have disappeared from the world. It was my duty and my pleasure to state, I declared, that ever since slavery had been abolished in the United States, thousands of white people had helped with money and by personal efforts both to educate the emancipated slaves and their descendants and to lift them to a higher plane.

Then I reviewed the marvellous progress which the group had made along all lines of human endeavour in spite of the almost insurmountable obstacles in certain sections, referred to the fearful injustices of which we are often the victims and reminded my audience that the thousands of colored soldiers who had crossed the sea ‘to make the world safe for democracy’ had fought in Europe for a freedom for others which in some sections of their own country they themselves did not enjoy.

I appealed for justice and fair play for all the dark races of the earth. ‘You may talk about permanent peace till doomsday’ I predicted, ‘but the world will never have it till the dark races are given a square deal.’ I expressed regret also that at the Peace Conference in Paris ‘the two most highly civilised and the most Christian nations’ in the world had denied racial equality to Japan which she had a right to demand. It was a great opportunity to enlighten the people of Europe on conditions confronting colored people in the United States and I tried to avail myself of it as best I could.
Valerie Bossman-Quarshie reflects on her experience playing the role of Mary Church Terrell (MCT) in the re-enactment of the 1919 International Congress of Women in Zürich.

The journey towards the re-enactment of Mary Church Terrell was an emotional rollercoaster because of the formidable character I prepared to play. I had to undergo a thorough character transformation. I had mixed emotions, but fear permeated me in ways I could not understand or control. I continuously battled with real highs and real lows.

How did I not know about another formidable Black historical figure, a strong woman of colour not included in my youth of learning through books? Now in my adulthood, I was discovering this phenomenal Black woman. Why had she not been more visible? Why has her story not been considered noteworthy enough to be celebrated on the world stage?

Imposter syndrome is felt by many, but even more so by Black people who experience it within predominantly white working environments, where they are a minority and feel less effective, less empowered, and even insecure because of the lack of representation. Often when experiencing the negative impact of imposter syndrome, I have found myself questioning everything about myself, having to deal with the emotional battles of ‘Am I good Enough?’ Why am I being treated differently or made to feel inadequate? What happened to equal opportunities? Does my presence matter? Will my message make changes for those coming after me, for my children’s children in the future. My only concern is that if there would have been no role for me to portray or to teach years ago. Without MCT’s inner strengths and determination, an entire race of people, is as evident today as it was 100 years ago. Where we were together as a Black community, we took pride and supported one another. I thought that Mary Church Terrell might also have experienced micro-aggressions. I felt so many emotions which I had to put on hold as I gathered momentum for the task ahead, to play the legendary Mary Church Terrell!

If I was asked for words to describe the journey of playing MCT, I would say spiritual, mentally draining, inspiring, physically challenging and very empowering. The iconic Mary Church Terrell is a figure that every Black woman should embody and not be treated differently because of their race or class?

History hidden feels very raw for me as part of the UK’s Ghanaian diaspora. Often not knowing my own histories, I hardly knew as a child whether to embrace being African. When growing up, I often felt miniscule and disregarded as a member of society, although when we were together as a Black community, we took pride and supported one another. I thought that Mary Church Terrell might also have experienced micro-aggressions. I felt so many emotions which I had to put on hold as I gathered momentum for the task ahead, to play the legendary Mary Church Terrell!

Imposter syndrome is felt by many, but even more so by Black people who experience it within predominantly white working environments, where they are a minority and feel less effective, less empowered, and even insecure because of the lack of representation. Often when experiencing the negative impact of imposter syndrome, I have found myself questioning everything about myself, having to deal with the emotional battles of ‘Am I good Enough?’ Why am I being treated differently or made to feel inadequate? What happened to equal opportunities? Does my presence matter? Will my message make changes for those coming after me, for my children’s children in the future. My only concern is that if there would have been no role for me to portray or to teach years ago. Without MCT’s inner strengths and determination, an entire race of people, is as evident today as it was 100 years ago. Where we were together as a Black community, we took pride and supported one another. I thought that Mary Church Terrell might also have experienced micro-aggressions. I felt so many emotions which I had to put on hold as I gathered momentum for the task ahead, to play the legendary Mary Church Terrell!

If I was asked for words to describe the journey of playing MCT, I would say spiritual, mentally draining, inspiring, physically challenging and very empowering. The iconic Mary Church Terrell is a figure that every Black woman should embody and feel in her inner being. The weight and pressure of being the only Black person on the epic voyage, selected to represent an entire race of people, is as evident today as it was 100 years ago. Without MCT’s inner strengths and determination, there would have been no role for me to portray or to teach my children’s children in the future. My only concern is that if Mary Church Terrell is such a legend, but I’m only discovering her now, how many other Black historical figures have I missed, and how many more will the next generation of UK Africans and Afro-Caribbeans miss out on again?

I sounded nothing like MCT and looked nothing like her. If you observe the historical evidence, and are not told she was Black, you might say that she was not a woman of colour at all. Apart from wearing clothes of that era, we had no physical similarities, but I wanted to give justice to her character. As the pressure mounted within me, I knew that I must deliver the very best speech to give credit to this woman who I came to admire and respect. Did I know what that looks like?

Whilst travelling to Zürich, surrounded by so many new faces, listening to so many concepts, feeling very much out of my own depth, not to forget being away from my young family, I experienced so strongly that feeling of not-belonging. I felt very much like that minority ethnic woman embodied by MCT herself. Like her, I was there to represent. Embarking on a new journey and forging new friendships in a strange land was very challenging, but I embraced my inner MCT.

MCT delivered her speech in fluent German to make the audience feel comfortable hearing what she had to say within others’ territories. So much thought and effort went into it. As I reflect on the journey, I experience again the same feelings and these would often mirror Mary’s experience. I understand what impacts my race, ethnic communities and cultures. Even today, conversations spark so many challenges. I was the only woman of colour at an all-white event, doing her level best to discuss matters that do not really matter to anyone not from my community.

A generation of Black ancestors created ideas and practices and were marginalised because of their colour. Many indigenous communities lacked representation, and yet continuously delivered a plea for equality in the hope that it would be considered and lead to effective change of policies and ideologies. When would the plight of Black communities and the fight for equality be acknowledged? Black people’s suffering has had less coverage and they still managed to flourish like their white counterparts can and do.

Finally the day of filming came. I had overcome so much within a short amount of time. At one point I still toyed with the idea of leaving and going home. But what stirred me on was when I learnt that Mary’s paper was edited at the last minute, and she was basically told just to get on with it, the decision had been made and there was nothing she could do. I am 100% sure she too felt like going home.

However, I did not, and remembered what Charlotte Bill (film director) had invested in someone like me, a person from the borough of Islington, London, and the Black UK Africa diaspora, to play such an iconic role. I had to work through a new mixture of emotions to keep moving forward. MCT did the necessary work to make visible the African/African American/Black community, women and political struggles faced by all. I overcame the obstacles in a very similar way to do the same.

Looking back, I understand the relevance of the role I played and what it means to be called. It’s when you’re asked to stand up and be counted to make a difference.

Further Resources: Versailles 1919 Return of the Dangerous Women https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gavbkc2PdHl&t=7s
Valerie Bossman-Quarshie plays the role of Mary Church Terrell (MCT) in the film re-enactment, 'Versailles 1919 Return of the Dangerous Women'. Film images used with the kind permission of Charlotte Bill, Film Director.
Suffrage Banner – International Delegates, c.1908. Image courtesy of The Women’s Library at the London School of Economics, FO1C.
On the eve of the First World War, winning the right to vote in parliamentary elections was British women’s most important political goal. It was hoped the parliamentary franchise would both affirm women’s status as citizens and bring women’s voices, priorities and interests to political decision-making.

These were aims they shared with women across the world; for, as Julia Gillard, former prime minister of Australia, has noted, ‘one thing that should strike us is how international the movement for suffrage was though the era was so much less globalized than our own’. This internationalism was threatened by the First World War, but survived to blossom again in the inter-war years.

In the Edwardian era, suffrage groups in different countries interacted extensively. Emmeline Pankhurst, leader of the infamous Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), undertook lecture tours in the USA. She even starred in a film - *What 80 Million Women Want* (1913) - with American Suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Margaret Cousins, one of the founders of the Irish Women’s Franchise League, spent time in London, studying the WSPU’s methods between 1909 and 1910. She later emigrated to India, where she became involved in the Indian women’s movement and the Gandhian freedom movement. Alternatively, Princess Sophia Kuldeep Singh, the daughter of a deposed Maharajah and a goddaughter of Queen Victoria, who lived in Hampton Court Palace, was an enthusiastic supporter of the WSPU and the Women’s Tax Resistance League. She argued there should be no taxation without representation, and supported the Women’s Freedom League’s census boycott in 1911, writing across her census return: ‘If women don’t count, neither should they be counted.’

International co-operation between suffrage movements was often idealistic, sometimes inspired by religious and humanitarian convictions. There was a strong commitment to peace. As they believed women’s primary roles were as nurturers, mothers and carers, many believed that women’s attitudes to war and conflict were fundamentally different to those of men. Olive Schreiner’s response to the horrors of the Boer War (1899-1902) noted:

> There is, perhaps, no woman, whether she has borne children, or be merely potentially a child bearer, who could look down upon the battlefield covered with the slain, but the thought would rise in her, So many mothers’ sons! So many bodies brought into the world to lie there!  

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27 *Daily Mail*, 30 December 1913.
To Schreiner and many others, women taking a role in government would herald ‘the death of war as a means of arranging human differences’.79 Her views were not necessarily shared by all women, particularly some of those fighting against imperialism. For example, in Ireland, Constance Markievicz, who argued that Irish Women should prioritise Irish independence over women’s issues, was ready to take up arms to further this cause.80 She founded the Irish Republican movement’s boy scouts, Na Fianna Éireann, teaching the lads camp-craft and scouting, preparing them to fight for their country’s independence. Markievicz was one of 200 women who took an active part in the Rising against British imperial rule on Easter Monday in 1916. The republicans sought to occupy strategic buildings in Dublin, with Markievicz acting as a sniper and second in command of the group that took over and held St Stephen’s Green for several days despite heavy retaliation from the British army. When the republicans surrendered, the ringleaders, including Constance, were court martialed. She was sentenced to death, then pardoned.81

The roots of the suffrage movement’s internationalism and co-operation lay in the 19th century anti-slavery movement, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (1873), and the International Council of Women (1888), all of which brought women together across national boundaries. In 1902, the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Legal Citizenship was formed, becoming the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) at a meeting two years later in Berlin. The main headquarters of the organisation was in London, and its founders included Millicent Fawcett, leader of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), the largest women’s suffrage organisation in Britain.82 As the Black civil rights leader, W.E.B. DuBois, pointed out, the demand for women’s suffrage is ‘a great human question’ that was not ‘uninteresting or unimportant to coloured citizens of the world’.83 However, many national suffrage movements were divided by race or class. The British suffrage movement was inevitably rooted in the imperialist attitudes of the wider society, and a tendency to assume a sense of racial and national superiority towards other countries. This was challenged when parts of the British Empire demonstrated their commitment to democracy by enfranchising women before Britain did. For example, New Zealand became the first country to enfranchise women in 1893.84 Other national suffrage campaigns had also achieved some success by the outbreak of war in 1914, including Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Russia, Canada and Finland, where the first female MPs were elected in 1907. In Britain, women did not vote in parliamentary elections until December 1918, although some women could vote in local elections from 1869.

Despite the challenges, 240 delegates, from 22 countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the USA, Switzerland, Italy, Russia, Belgium, Austria, South Africa and Canada attended the International Suffrage Conference held in Budapest in 1913. One year later, women, such as NUWSS executive member Chrystal Macmillan, watched in horror as Europe slipped towards war. She helped to draft the last minute ‘International Manifesto of Women’ signed on 31 July by ‘representatives of twelve million women’, and delivered to the British Foreign Secretary and Foreign Ambassadors in London. It implored these men to avoid ‘the threatened unparalleled disaster’ and instead negotiate and make concessions to maintain the peace.85 The efforts were in vain, and when war broke out many suffrage organisations across the world were conflicted about whether they could retain their support for internationalism and pacifism, or should support their own national governments’ conduct in the war.

81 Liverpool Echo, 8 May 1916.
Many suffrage campaigners and organisations, such as the Women’s Freedom League, maintained their commitment to peace throughout the conflict.89 NUWSS member, Helena Swanwick, was amongst those who continued to exchange warm sisterly greetings with suffrage supporters in Germany.90 Many women sought to alleviate the distress the conflict brought to ordinary citizens. WSPU and NUWSS supporter, Alice Clark, whose family were famous shoe manufacturers, opposed the First World War on religious grounds and joined her sister Hilda in working for the Quaker War Relief campaigns. She also undertook midwifery training in order to assist her sister, a trained doctor, in caring for war-refugees.91 Chrystal Macmillan organised food dispatches to Belgian refugees in Holland following the fall of Antwerp in 1914. Others worked with charities to offer relief and an enthusiastic welcome to the hundreds of thousands of Belgian refugees who poured into Britain in the autumn and winter of 1914.92 In Lancashire, WSPU activist and pacifist Edith Rigby bought a smallholding, called Marigold Cottage, near Howick just outside Preston. She kept animals and grew fruit and vegetables for the urban poor of Preston.93 Princess Sophia Kuldeep Singh became a Red Cross nurse at the Lady Hardinge Hospital in Brighton, whilst Sylvia Pankhurst continued to undertake welfare work in the East End of London.94

In the USA, which did not enter the conflict until 1917, the outbreak of war led to a Peace Parade of 1500 women in New York. The following year, the Woman’s Peace Party (WPP) was formed, with Jane Addams appointed its first president. The WPP called for the American Government to organise a conference of neutral nations to try to bring an end to the conflict.95 Nevertheless, it was not felt possible for the planned International Suffrage Conference, due to take place in Berlin in 1915, to go ahead. Instead, the Dutch suffrage movement welcomed over 1,000 delegates from twelve countries, including Germany, the USA and France to an International Congress of Women in the Hague in April 1915. Jane Addams presided over the conference. Chrystall Macmillan was one of the organisers, and one of only three attendees from Britain. Approximately 200 British suffrage campaigners had planned to attend, but only 25 received passports; almost all of these then found themselves stranded on the docks at Tilbury, when the North Sea was closed to shipping.96

Aletta Jacobs, the Dutch suffrage leader, sought to unite women through their shared experience of grief in response to death caused by war. In her opening address she explained:

"...women through their shared experience of grief in response to death caused by war."

Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst suspended WSPU militant suffrage campaigns and threw themselves into the war effort, making speeches encouraging men to enlist, while their supporters handed out white feathers to men in civilian uniform.88 The NUWSS was deeply divided between those who maintained their commitment to internationalism and pacifism, and those who abandoned it, caught up in patriotic fervour. Welfare work and care of the sick and injured offered a way of appealing to both groups. The NUWSS equipped women’s ambulance corps and hospital units, including the Scottish Women’s Hospital, which supplied nurses, doctors, cooks and orderlies to units in Corsica, France, Malta, Romania, Russia, Salonika and Serbia. Suffrage supporter Mabel St Clair Stobart set up a field hospital in Belgium.97 Mabel Lida Ramsey, a suffragist doctor from Plymouth, worked behind the lines in Belgium and France. Dr Alice Hutchinson and thirty members of the two Scottish Women’s Hospital Units found themselves fighting to save lives at a hospital in Vranjaschka, Serbia, in November 1915. It took many months for them to return home after the town was overrun by the advancing Austrian Army. Encountering and caring for the sick and injured from, and in, numerous countries across the world, gave a practical application to many women’s internationalism and humanitarianism. Although initially shocked when told to nurse German soldiers, the experience helped to shape Vera Brittain’s lifelong commitment to pacifism.88
With mourning hearts, we stand united here. We grieve for many brave young men who have lost their lives on the battlefield before attaining their full manhood; we mourn with the poor mothers bereft of their sons; with the thousands of young widows and fatherless children, and we feel that we can no longer endure in this 20th century of civilization that government should tolerate brute force as the only solution of international disputes.97

Women were encouraged to transcend national affiliations, and so for three days they discussed alternative, non-violent forms of conflict resolution, calling for a process of continuous mediation to be implemented until peace could be restored.

The congress also saw the formation of the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, which changed its name to the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 1921; an international organisation that has campaigned for peace ever since. When the conference ended, a small group of women, including Jane Addams; Chrystal Macmillan; Aletta Jacobs; Rosika Schwimmer, who had taken a leading role in winning the vote for Hungarian women; Rosa Genoni from Italy; and Cor Ramondt-Hirshmann from Germany, visited the leaders of 14 European countries, including Russia, to try and persuade them to sign a non-aggression pact.98 Other women in Europe and North America sought to promote the idea of neutral mediation to stop hostilities and the need to explore the causes of war. Regrettably their efforts were in vain; more women lost their sons, brothers, husbands and loved ones before the armistice in 1918. The importance of these international approaches and the work of WILPF were recognised when Jane Addams was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1931.

Differences between suffrage supporters over whether to support war or pacifism continued in Britain, and were exacerbated when conscription was introduced in 1916. Some in the NUWSS considered any links to pacifism would scupper their chances of obtaining the vote for women. Their position was a response to anti-suffrage arguments in the Edwardian era, which claimed that women had no right to vote because they did not take up arms for their country. Such sentiments were echoed when, in 1918, conscientious objectors were disenfranchised for ten years. Others felt internationalism and peace education were intrinsic to the suffrage movement; eleven members of the NUWSS executive resigned. Some focussed their efforts on humanitarian relief of those in their own country and abroad. Kathleen Courtney, who attended the Hague Conference in 1915, went to the Eastern Mediterranean where she worked with the Friends War Victims Committee.99 Differences of opinion occurred within families, as well as between colleagues, as the daughters of celebrity suffragette Mrs Pankhurst demonstrate. Christabel’s support for the war never waned. She regarded nothing but the complete destruction of Germany as an acceptable end to the hostilities.

She considered death preferable to living under German rule, and by 1917 she was describing pacifism as a disease of old countries, brought about by over-prosperity and false security. Alternatively, Emmeline’s two other daughters, Sylvia and Adele (who had moved to Australia) strongly opposed the introduction of conscription in 1916. Sylvia was one of a number of women who assisted men seeking to escape conscription by hiding or travelling to Ireland. Sylvia was arrested and imprisoned for five months for sedition when, on 3 August 1917, the police raided the Workers Suffrage Federation, which she ran in East London. She was not the only woman who opposed conscription to receive the attention of the Secret Service. Alice Wheeldon had an MI5 agent lodged in her home, setting off a trail of events that led to her trial for treason at the Old Bailey in 1917.

The armistice of November 1918 gave a new impetus to peace and humanitarian campaigners. Many hoped a peace settlement would provide scope to create ‘democratic governance, social justice, and national self-determination’.

For humanitarians, the naval blockade against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire, which continued to cause food shortages, was an immediate concern. When it was not lifted, appalling deprivation was inflicted on displaced and starving women and children across Europe. Eglantyne Jebb and her sister, Dorothy Buxton, were appalled by the crisis and joined the Fight the Famine Council, set up in 1919. Jebb was arrested and fined for distributing leaflets in Trafalgar Square with a photograph she had taken of a starving baby in Austria. The leaflet included the headline: ‘Our Blockade has caused this – millions of children are starving to death.’

As Mona Siegel has observed, ’1919 saw a virtual explosion of global women’s activism spurred directly by the catastrophic conflict of 1914-1918’. Yet, the Paris Peace Conference, where 33 nations met to draw up terms for the end of the war, held at Versailles in 1919, was made up almost entirely of men, representing predominantly male electorates. Marguerite de Witt-Schlumberger, president of the French Union for Peace, maintained her commitment to international organisations, such as the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the League of Nations and the Red Cross. In 1923, 390,296 women in Wales signed a Memorial petition, through the Welsh Women’s Suffrage, wrote to USA President Woodrow Wilson, pointing out that women had been involved in the war alongside men and asking him to give ‘vocal expression to more than half of humanity represented by women who in so many countries have been condemned to an unjust and cruel silence by the denial of the vote’. She was to be disappointed. Women in France did not get the vote until 1946. Women’s issues were marginalised from the peace process, although African American women - Ida Gibbs Hunt and Mary Church Terrell - came to Paris to demand racial and gender equality. Chinese nationalist, Soumay Tcheng, was, however, an official attaché to her country’s peace delegation.

Between 12th and 19th of May 1919, women held their own Peace Conference in Zürich. It was attended by delegates from Australia, Denmark, France, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, Romania, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland, with the USA, Britain and Germany particularly well represented. Over the next twenty years, women continued to undertake humanitarian work. Eglantyne Jebb and Dorothy Buxton founded the Save the Children Fund in 1920 and helped to draft the ‘Declaration of Geneva of the Rights of the Child’, officially adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. Women continued to campaign for peace, maintaining their commitment to international organisations, such as the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the League of Nations and the Red Cross. In 1923, 390,296 women in Wales signed a Memorial petition, through the Welsh League of Nations Union, appealing to the women of America to join them in a call for ‘LAW NOT WAR’. Women from across Britain attended the Women’s Peacemakers’ Pilgrimage, which ended with 10,000 people gathering in Hyde Park in London on 19 June 1926. In 1932, WILPF gathered 6 million signatures for a petition for a World Disarmament Conference.


Politics and Internationalism
Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Ida Gibbs Hunt and Addie Waites Hunton are a few of the African American women who established groups and travelled to Europe, including England, to spread their narratives of what they were experiencing in the United States of America and to gain support for change.

At times, they shared Suffragette platforms alongside white women whose fight for equality was based solely on gender. The African American woman fought to be seen as a woman who was not de-valued due to her race. She called for the equality of her people to live, work and develop alongside so many other communities.

At the end of the American Civil War in 1865, African American children were now born ‘Free’. The development of education, economics and ideas of liberty caused the establishment of groups to address the marginalisation and aggression by white America against African Americans.

Ida B. Wells remembers meeting White British, Black British and African communities who supported her during her stay in England. Afforded an audience with the National British Women’s Temperance Association and other groups, she shared the plight created within the United States by the lynching of Black men. The support of allies was sought, and continues to be sought, to address the discrimination that is faced by African American communities at the hands of White American communities.

She was a visible presence, and her words travelled throughout the UK: London, Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Glasgow, Oxford, Nottingham, Leeds, Southport, Cambridge, York, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Gateshead-on-Tyne and Durham.
Pan African Congress 1919

At the same time as meetings were called to discuss ‘war and peace’, men and women of the African/Black communities scheduled meetings to discuss the global plight of our race around liberty, education, economics, politics, colonisation, exploitation and genocide/murder.

The Pan African Congress convened 19th-22nd February 1919 in Paris, France. It was organised and funded by Blaise Diagne, the first Indigenous African man to be elected into government in France (responsible for relationship-building throughout the African French colonies), in collaboration with W.E.B. Dubois of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP). The Congress included Addie Waites Hunton and Mrs Ida Gibbs Hunt, wife of US consul William Henry Hunt, who was working at the American consulate in Saint-Étienne, France.

Her school mates were Mrs Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper, two phenomenal women known for their consistent fight and advocacy of Black women and Black communities’ rights, freedoms and liberties. Both women were already in France, and had roles within their communities which allowed them to share the stage and discuss topics that impacted the individual Black man and woman, as well as their communities.

The first noted meeting of its kind, the Pan African Conference in London, 23rd-25th July 1900, was a conversation led by Henry Sylvester Williams, a West Indian Barrister who had formed the African Association in London. The 1919 Congress lasted 4 days and allowed both men and women to discuss the questions around:

- The right of self-determination for African societies to determine their own governance.
- The ability to receive a fair education.
- The ability to establish fair trading.
- Jim Crow Laws and lynching in America.
- Self-rule for the former German colonies in Africa.
Addie Waites Hunton
African American Troops in France

Extracts from Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn Johnson, *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces* (Brooklyn, 1920), pp.183–188.

In talking with the soldiers, however, and ultimately with the French people, we were told that the story of the roughness of the colored men was being told to the civilians in order that all possible association between them might be avoided. They had been systematically informed that their dark-skinned allies were not only unworthy of any courtesies from their homes, but that they were so brutal and vicious as to be absolutely dangerous. They were even told that they belonged to a semi-human species who only a few years ago had been caught in the American forests, and only been tamed enough to work under the white American’s direction ... In one city, the soldiers informed us, colored Americans were confined to certain streets in order that their contact with the French people might have all possible limitations.

Following is a copy of an order gotten out, and a duplicate preserved:

HEADQUARTERS SECOND BATTALION
804TH PIONEER INFANTRY
A.E.F., FRANCE
WARCO, FRANCE, MARCH 20, 1919

Enlisted men of this organization will not talk to or be in company with any white women, regardless of whether the women solicit their company or not.

By Order of Captain Byrne.

A True Copy,
S/L/D

This propaganda was spread from the streets of the large cities to the topmost peaks of the Alps Mountains, away up among the little shepherd girls, who knew nothing except what others came up to tell them. “Soldat noir-vilain,” they remarked to the writer one day ... “black soldiers were villains.” ... In the beginning both white and colored soldiers found rest and pleasure in visiting historic and picturesque region about Challes-les-Eaux and Chambery, but later it was set aside by the Y.M.C.A. for colored soldiers only. Naturally the inhabitants were much amazed to find that they were not being molested in any way, and toward the close of the work the different impressions that were being gathered by the French people became almost a constant topic of conversation ... During the victory parade [on the 14th July 1919] in Paris, no colored Americans were permitted to participate, notwithstanding the fact that numerous individuals as well as organizations had been cited or decorated for bravery. This the French people were not able to understand, but in due time they learned that it was all due to the American policy of discrimination.

In 1919, Addie Hunton was the voice of the African American women, and of the African American troops that she had been responsible for providing moral support to throughout the war in a foreign land.

Back to the Troops in France

After the Congress, Addie Hunton continued to learn more about the inequalities facing African American men within France. She experienced inconsistencies within an illusion of progress. This did not stop her from doing her level best to ensure the morale of the men and women she served within the roles she created or was sought after to fill.

100 years later we are still experiencing the same inconsistencies, and are finding ourselves in the exact positions of our ancestors. We are doing our level best to raise the morale of men, women and children globally, to share truth and gain a better understanding of the worlds we live in. We are all responsible for improving the world as we grow to know how.

Further resources


https://dailysuffragist.omeka.net/items/show/501


https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Africanism

Inspired by the events in the small sawmill town of Söderhamn two weeks earlier, close to 6,000 women factory workers marched on the Milk Central in Stockholm on 27th April 1917 to protest against the increase in milk prices. Image: Axel Malmström, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Swedish Hunger Uprisings

Anna Hammerin

As more and more women's voices from the First World War years are being uncovered, it may be natural to focus on the experiences of women in belligerent countries. However, neutral countries were also overwhelmingly affected by the war, primarily by way of food and fuel shortages. Whilst not at war, Sweden was - like a number of other neutral countries - in war.\[^{106}\] Only recently has a clearer picture of the women's situation and actions in these countries started to emerge.

In neutral Sweden, the year 1917 was particularly challenging. A perfect storm of a failed national harvest; a long, harsh winter; and increasing food rationing resulted in a wave of hunger uprisings sweeping across the country. As in Russia, the hunger protests were initiated by working-class women, and the events of 1917 and 1918 led to Sweden's democratic breakthrough. New, or rather re-discovered, evidence reveals the extent and significance of Swedish women's actions. There are calls to include the women's story in national school history books and adding more to our understanding of the past.

While the events of 1917-1918 are virtually unknown to the majority of Swedes today, most Swedish historians seem to agree that the official start of the so-called Swedish hunger uprisings was on 16th April 1917. This was the date when an all-men committee in the small, southern town of Västervik adopted a Russian-style workers' committee, by taking control of the town's food resources and issuing a manifesto with demands sent to the Swedish Parliament. However, a search through Swedish newspapers from April 1917 reveals that the story started nearly a week earlier, led by four women in the sawmill town of Söderhamn on the Swedish east coast.

On 11th April 1917, Anna Jonsson (a mother of six), along with her own mother and two friends, was joined by 200 women on a 6-mile march from their rural homes to the Söderhamn Bread Bureau, where they presented their demands for an increased allocation of ration cards and the lowering of food and milk prices. In the week that followed, they staged a school strike and successfully managed to change the length of the school day to allow the children to be fed at home with what little food was available. Within two weeks the actions of these four women had escalated into nationwide hunger protests involving an estimated 300,000 people.

\[^{106}\] Ali Ronan, retrieved from interview held on 23rd September 2021.
Anna Hammerin, a Swedish national and project coordinator for the Hertfordshire-based Everyday Lives in War First World War Engagement Centre, came across the story as she visited her mother’s and grandmother’s birthplace of Söderhamn in 2017. Her grandfather was also the town’s policeman during the years 1917-1938. Until that point, Anna had not realised that Sweden had a First World War history of any consequence! Her first and immediate reaction was to place a phone call to her Centre colleague, in the UK, with the outburst: ‘I have found First World War history in my own country – and not only that: this is history created by women!’

With the encouragement of Everyday Lives in War, Anna set out to re-discover the story of the women of Söderhamn. To understand the background and rationale for the women’s actions, Anna started her exploratory journey in the years leading up to the war. She realised that there was still a living and collective memory of the women in Söderhamn, particularly among the members of the local oral-history group, SISAM KULT. From an initial meeting with this history group, the project started to grow organically, connecting her to a number of key individuals that would help the story evolve: Marita Jansson, grand-daughter of the pioneering Anna Jonsson; Elisabeth Breig-Åberg, Curator of the Söderhamn Museum; Ulla Ejemar, former Curator of the Swedish archives, Arkiv Gävleborg; Ulf Wickbom, Swedish Journalist who first discovered the story of the Söderhamn women; and Håkan Blomqvist, labour historian and author of the book The Potato Revolution, which focused on the later events that occurred in Stockholm. Along the way, Karen Brookfield, independent consultant and former Deputy Director (Strategy) at the National Lottery Heritage Fund, provided advice and guidance on the Swedish story set within an international context.

The project quickly took on a life of its own. With so many personal and insightful narratives, it soon became clear that the story would need to be approached, in part, as a family history project. More importantly, due to the story being absent in Swedish school history books, Anna felt the need to try to find a way to reach not only a Swedish audience but also an international one. To a Swedish audience, the fact that the country had managed to transform from one of the poorest countries in Europe into one of the wealthiest and most socially equal by way of working-class struggles and pressures ‘from below’ – started by women – should be a reason for pride and celebration. To an international audience, the story of the Swedish events of 1917-1918 gives insight into a neutral country’s situation (often of deprivation) during the First World War. For that reason, Anna decided to make use of her collection of materials and primary-source information to produce a documentary film which will be available in spring 2022 for free online access via a dedicated website, which will also offer additional in-depth resources. Anna hopes the film and the website will be a way to capture all the important partnerships that were forged as part of the project, and to celebrate the generosity of all those who freely gave their time to share their personal stories. It will also be an opportunity to dust off and infuse new life to amazing original film-footage and picture materials made available by the Swedish Television and the Swedish archives, Arkiv Gävleborg.

Anna explains that the experience of the project journey, since its inception in the autumn of 2017, has already left a lasting mark: ‘The meeting of minds and hearts in the search for the missing women of the Swedish hunger uprisings 1917 has made us realise the importance for a country to know all aspects of its history. More importantly: we need to have a history that reflects the contributions of all, regardless of gender. We cannot wait for the moment we are able to share the story of the courageous Swedish women protesters of 1917 to the wider world!’

Further resources

Arkiv Gävleborg (Swedish archives), https://www.arkivgavleborg.se/

‘Swedish Hunger Uprisings 1917’ - a film in progress by Anna Hammerin. For enquiries, please email: swedishuprisings1917@yahoo.com

Re-enacting the events of 1917: On film set in Söderhamn, Sweden, where the role of Anna Jonsson was portrayed by her grand-daughter Marita Jansson, here carefully captured by film photographer Adam Jones-Lloyd for posterity. Photo: Anna Hammerin.
The story of a volunteer-led exhibition about the 17 women who stood for Parliament in the December 1918 General Election.

Brought to us by Hilary Chuter, Lizzie Gent, Becky Perry, Ali Ronan, Jane Ward and Jill Woodward – a dedicated group of local researchers and a designer.

One of the stories told is that of local socialist and suffrage campaigner and People’s History Museum ‘Radical Hero’, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who ran (and lost) as the Labour candidate for Rusholme.

The exhibition also puts the 1918 general election into the wider context of the international feminist struggle for votes for women in the early 20th century. (https://phm.org.uk/exhibitions/the-women-who-said-yes/)
In 2016, Alison (Ali) Ronan coordinated a group of 25 volunteers from across six textile towns of North East Lancashire and Manchester. Ali takes up the story.

Our project team researched a book and made a film about the spontaneous and socialist, anti-militarist Women’s Peace Crusade that spread like wildfire across the region in 1917/1918. We met regularly, and by the end of the (very successful) project we were all keen to move onto another piece of research.

At the same time, I had also been working on a series of letters written between a Manchester conscientious objector, Frank Merrick, and his suffragist wife, Hope Squire, which discussed in detail the run up to the 1918 General Election, and the candidature of the pacifist and socialist Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in Manchester. ‘Let’s look at her’, I suggested. ‘Oh no,’ came the reply, ‘let’s look at all the women who stood.’

And so, it began. Not all the volunteers had the time to dedicate to this new project, so finally at the beginning of 2018, four volunteers and I met in the archives and began to look at the 1918 General Election. We discovered that the General Election in December 1918 was the first to be held on a single day, and we determined to work towards that day in December 2018.

Finally, we discovered that 17 women had stood, and we agreed to share out the research. We were determined to place the exhibition into the wider context of Britain’s imperialism and the international struggles for women’s rights. Little is known about the half-page piece of legislation rushed through the Commons on November 21st 1918, but the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 gave women over 21 the right to stand as MPs. Rather ironic as women had to be 30 to vote!

We soon understood that it was really hard to find out who these women were and that their names have largely been forgotten. We realised we couldn’t just Google; we had to go painstakingly through the returns from the election. Although hardly anyone could name the 17 women who stood as prospective MPs in the first election after WWI, we began to recognise these women as quite extraordinary.

The woman who won was the Irish revolutionary/nationalist Constance Markievicz, standing for Sinn Fein in a Dublin constituency. In line with her party, she did not take her seat in Parliament: a convention that still stands today.

The rest of the women were an eclectic group, spanning class, wealth, the burgeoning Labour movement, the Liberal establishment, the Conservative Party, and the suffragist and suffragette movements; the independent candidates were mostly ex-Women’s Freedom League members. The women were academics, teachers, and campaigners for workers’ rights, and in one case a future fascist. One, Violet Markham, was even anti-suffrage. She stood in Mansfield and wrote in one election pamphlet ‘[that] men have looked after us in the past and will continue to do so’.

Most of the women who stood were suffragists and pacifists. Socialist Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who stood for Labour in Manchester, said it was an election fought on emotion, and she recalled that:

‘If you said to the electorate that I’m campaigning for better housing, or that we should hang the Kaiser, they would have gone with hanging the Kaiser.’

In early Spring 2018, I had been asked to be on a panel at the People’s History Museum to choose a successful applicant for the community exhibition planned for the summer 2018. I suddenly realised that ‘we’ could create an exhibition for this, so I withdrew from the panel and started to explore small funding opportunities; we also had a little bit of money left from the Women’s Peace Crusade project. We put in an application to the panel, and we won! We then worked as hard as we could! We found a friendly designer, and Manchester Metropolitan University paid for the boards to be created. The exhibition at the Peoples’ History Museum was launched on July 21st to an enthusiastic audience and ran very successfully until the end of October 2018. It then went to Wigan Library, where it was launched to great interest and drew a wide audience until it was taken down in February 2019.

During that time, I went to a conference in London, where the archivist from the House of Commons suggested that we might hold the exhibition in the Houses of Parliament as they offer space to community groups who have the support of their local MP. Our local MP, Afzal Khan, was very enthusiastic and signed
the appropriate papers. We applied and got given a week in early March 2019!

Four of us went to London, struggling on the Tube with the exhibition wrapped up in large plastic bags. We put it up in a corridor just outside the House of Commons, where it was seen by the public and MPs. Afzal Khan came to congratulate us, and the exhibition stayed up for a week.

It then moved to Wallesey Library in the Wirral, launched with another enthusiastically received public talk. It got marooned there at the outbreak of the pandemic. There is still interest in the exhibition although, at the moment, it is stored in my study.

The first lockdown in early 2020 interrupted the volunteers, who were working on another small exhibition about pioneering women doctors in early 20th century Manchester.

We are undeterred and hope to continue our research in the near future. The 17 women who said ‘Yes’ continue to inspire us.

1918 General Election:

Battersea North: Mrs Charlotte Despard (Labour)
Belfast, Victoria: Miss Winifred Carney (Sinn Fein)
Birmingham, Ladywood: Mrs Margery Corbett Ashley (Liberal)
Brentford and Chiswick: Mrs Rachel Strachey (Independent)
Chelsea: Miss Emily Phipps (Independent)

*Dublin, St Patricks: Countess Constance Markievicz (Sinn Fein)*

Enfield: Mrs Janet McEwan (Liberal)
Glasgow, Bridgeton: Miss Eunice G Murray (Independent)
Kennington: Mrs Alice Lucas (Conservative) - delayed election due to death of previous Tory candidate (who was Lucas’s husband)

Manchester, Rusholme: Mrs Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (Labour)
Hendon: Mrs Edith How-Martyn (Independent)
Mansfield: Mrs Violet Carruthers (Liberal)
Portsmouth South: Miss Alison Garland (Liberal)
Richmond, Surrey: Mrs Nora Dacre Fox (Independent)
Smethwick: Miss Christabel Pankhurst (Women’s party)
University of Wales: Mrs Millicent Mackenzie (Labour)
Stourbridge: Mrs Mary Macarthur (Labour)

Independent (5) Labour (4) Liberal (4) SF (2) Conservative (1) Women’s Party (1).
Deiseb Heddwch Menywod Cymru i America

The Welsh Women’s Peace Petition to America

‘Apeliwn arnoch chi, Ferched Unol Daleithiau’r America ... i drosglwyddo i’r oesau a ddêl fyd di-ryfel yn dreftadaeth dragwydd’

Yn 1923, ag erchyllterau’r Rhyfel Byd Cyntaf wedi ysgogi cenhedlaeth gyfan yn erbyn gwrthdaro arfog, trefnadodd menywod Cymru ymgrych heb ei hail dros heddwch byd. Llofnododd 390,296 o fenywod Cymru Ddeiseb Goffa at sylw ‘Merched America’ – a oedd, yn ôl y wasg yn Efog Newydd yn 7 milltir o hyd – yn galw ar i America ymuno â’r gyngfrair newydd, sef Cynghrair y Cenhedloedd, a’i harwain hi. Eto i gyd, ymdengys bod y stori ryfeddol hon wedi mynd yn angob hyd at 2014, pan ‘ailddarganfuwyd’ rhwymiad lledd llychlyd yn Llyfrgell TEMPL Heddwch ac lechyd Cymru yng Nghaerdydd.

O dipyn i beth, llwyddodd gwirfoddolwyr a grwpiau cymunedol a oedd yn cymryd rhan ym mhrosiect Cymru’n Cofo dan adain Canolfan Materion Rhyngwladol Cymru (CMRhC), i ddechrau rholi’r hanes yn ôl at ei gilydd. Heb os, dyma ddarn rhyfeddol
o Draddodiad Heddwch Cymru, a stori sydd yn ei thro wedi ysbydol ymgrych heddwch gyfoes dan faner Heddwch Nain/ Mam-gu. Dwyn Academi Heddwch Cymru a rhwydwaith o weithwyr gwirfoddol yng Nghymru ac America, mae cynlluniau bellach ar y gwell i ddadhiru canrif yr aple’i on yn 2023-24 gan ddod â rhannau Cymreig ac Americanaidd y Ddeiseb Heddwch yn ôl at ei gyliedd.

Wedi ei drefnu gan fenywod a oedd yn weithgar yn Undeb Cynghair y Cenhedloedd Cymru (UCCC), rhagflaenwyd CMRhC, plannwyd hedyn y syniad yng nghlymblaid menywod ‘Ysgol Gwasanaeth Cymdeithas Cymru’ yn Llandrindod, yn mis Awst 1922. Yn y cyfnod hwn, roedd gan UCCC 20,796 aelod mewn 300 cangen leol ar hyd a lled Cymru – gan gynnwys llawer o fenywod a oedd wedi bod yn weithgar yn y mudiad dros ryddfreinio menywod. Ar 23ain o Fai 1923 yn Aberystwyth mewn ‘cynhadledd genedlaethol o fenywod’, cadarnhawyd cynlluniau ar gyfer ymgyrch i Gymru gyfan, a fyddai’n defnyddio trefnwyr lleol i ymddiriedi.

Cerfiwyd cist dderw enfawr i gario’r 7 milltir o lofnodion a’r rheiny wedi eu rhwymo; yna gwnaed clawr hardd o ledr Moroco a llythrennau aur arno. Ym mis Chwefror 1924, aeth Elined Prys ac Annie Hughes-Griffiths (Cadeirydd UCCC) â'r Ddeiseb draw i America, ac yno, ymuno ag aelodaeth sef Mary Ellis. Mewn cinio yn ysgol Cwpan, gyda thros 400 o Americaneasau yn cynrychioli 60 o Gymdeithasau Cenedlaethol i fenywod, mewn rhwydwyd nhw ag aelodaeth o 16 miilion, a’r rheiny wedi ei gyfrifio i’w gwdangos i America. Yn 1925 derbyniodd UCCC ymateb America: sef bod y mudiadau menywod a dynnwyd ynghyd yn sgil y Daith Heddwch, wedi ymuno i greu ‘Conference on the Cause and Cure of War’ – a aeth yn ei flaen i gyfarfod ym 1924.

Cerfiwyd cist dderw enfawr i gario’r 7 milltir o lofnodion, a’r rheiny wedi eu rhwymo; yna gwnaed clawr hardd o ledr Moroco a llythrennau aur arno. Ym mis Chwefror 1924, aeth Elined Prys ac Annie Hughes-Griffiths (Cadeirydd UCCC) â'r Ddeiseb draw i America, ac yno, ymuno ag aelodaeth sef Mary Ellis. Mewn cinio yn ysgol Cwpan, gyda thros 400 o Americaneasau yn cynrychioli 60 o Gymdeithasau Cenedlaethol i fenywod, mewn rhwydwyd nhw ag aelodaeth o 16 miilion, a’r rheiny wedi ei gyfrifio i’w gwdangos i America. Yn 1925 derbyniodd UCCC ymateb America: sef bod y mudiadau menywod a dynnwyd ynsgil y Daith Heddwch, wedi ymuno i greu ‘Conference on the Cause and Cure of War’ – a aeth yn ei flaen i gyfarfod ym 1924.

Bron i naw deg mlynedd yn ddiweddarach, wedi dod o hyd i’r Gofeb Heddwch yn y Deml Heddwch, ysbydolwyd gwirfoddolwyr a grwpiau mewn cymunedau ledled Cymru i ddysgu mwy am y stori ryfeddol hon. Yn yr arddangosfa Taith Heddwch 1924.

Politics and Internationalism

75
Yng Ngwynedd, nodwyd 90 mlynedd Pererindod Heddwch Merched Gogledd Cymru drwy ailerdded y daith a gosod placiau ym Mhenygroes a Chaernarfon i goffau’r bendod gyfoethog hon yn hanes etifeddiaeth heddwch Cymru.

**Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu**

Mae Iona Price, un o drefnwyr Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu, yn cofio digwydd dod ar draws clawr cain Deiseb Merched Cymru i Ferched America 1923-24 yn Arddangosfa’r Cofio yn Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, ac yn cofio mai dyma oedd y prif sbardun i sefydlu Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu. Roedd yn drysor anghofiedig ac yn destun rhyfeddod.

**Rhyfeddod**

Rhyfeddod at faint y gamp o gasglu bron i 400,000 o lofnodion a rhoi llais i ferched di-rym, dim ots pa mor anghysbell oedd eu hanheddau, a chario eu neges dramar. **Syfrdandod** nad oedd neb wedi clywed am y Ddeiseb, nac am yr Orymdaith Heddwch o gefn gwlad Cymru yn 1926. ‘Ni allem ganiatáu i gyfraniad Merched Cymru gael ei anghofio’ oedd argyhoeddiad Iona, wrth iddi gofio sut yr oedd pawb yn ymateb gan holi ‘Sgwyn i a wnaeth Nain lofnodi?’

Sefydlwyd Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu â'r nod o Ddathlu, Cofio a Gwiredd dyheadau'r Ddeiseb. Cynhaliwyd lansiad i ddechrau codi defnydd i ddefnyddio'r llofnodion gwreiddiol fel modd i gychwyn deialog am weledigaeth y merched o fyd di-ryfel.

Erbyn 2019 roedd y grwp wedi gallu cadarnhau bod cist y Ddeiseb yn y Smithsonian ac wedi ennyn diddordeb yno. Ac ym mis Chwefror 2020 roedd Jill Evans ASE yn dyst i ailagor y gist derw fawr a chael cip ar y llu o ddeisebau a lofnodwyd gan cysylltu â chyrff perthnasol yng Nghymru a chynhaliwyd cyfarfod yn Eisteddfod Genedlaethol 2019. Bellach, mae cangen Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu yn America wedi ei sefydlu hefyd, ac mae hi wedi bod yn brysyr yn archwilio hanes y Daith Heddwch ac yn rhannu r’i stor.

Yn ôl yng Nghymru, mae gwirfoddolwyr Archif Menywod Cymru yn ceisio darganfod sut yn y byd y llwyddwyd i gasglu 390, 296 o lofnodion o bob rhan o Gymru mewn cwta chwe mis yn 1923. Maen nhw’n calonbwyntio ar y pwyllgor canolog a’i dim o dros 400 o drefnwyd lleol, benywddai gan fwyaf, a fu’n gyfrifol am yr orchfa. ‘Ni allem ganiatáu i gyfraniad Merched Cymru gael ei anghofio’ oedd argyhoeddiad Iona, wrth iddi gofio sut yr oedd pawb yn ymateb gan holi ‘Sgwyn i a wnaeth Nain lofnodi?’

Bydd 2023-24 yn gyfnod o ddathlu canrif Deiseb Heddwch Menywod Cymru. Mae partneriaeth dan arweiniad Academi Heddwch Cymru wrthi’n cynllunio rhaglen o weithgareddau i ddathlu canrif Dewisiadau Heddwch Cymru a fydd yn cynnwys ardangosfa, llyfr am y stori a Chynhadledd Heddwch ym Mhrifysgol Aberystwyth. Mae’r Llyfrgell Genedlaethol yn gweithio gyda laureates yr Academi Heddwch Cymru am ystori Heddwch Cymru. Dyma’r ddeiseb Heddwch Menywod Cymru, sy’n cynyddo’r ddadlau am gyfreithiau'r amelydd, a rhyngwladol. Felly, mae’n rhaid i’r llenyddiaeth newydd hybu'r llofnodion a ddefnyddio’r daith i rhyngwladol fu’n bennaf iawn bellach.
The Welsh Women’s Peace Petition to America

‘We appeal to you, Women of the United States of America... to hand down to the generations who come after us, the Proud Heritage of a Warless World’

In 1923, with the horrors of World War 1 having galvanised a generation against armed conflict, the women of Wales organised an unprecedented campaign for world peace. 390,296 Welsh women signed a Memorial Petition to the ‘Women of America’ – remarked to be 7 miles long, by the New York press - calling for the US to join and lead the new League of Nations. Yet this remarkable story seemed to have become a ‘hidden history’ until in 2014, when a dusty old leather binding was ‘rediscovered’ in the Library of Wales’ Temple of Peace and Health in Cardiff.

Volunteers and community groups participating in the WW100 ‘Wales for Peace’ project through WCIA, the Welsh Centre for International Affairs and partners, gradually pieced together this incredible part of Wales’ Peace Heritage, which...
inspired the creation of a present-day women’s peace campaign, ‘Heddwch Nain/Mamp-gu’ (our Grandmothers’ Peace). Plans are now progressing through Academi Heddwch (Wales’ Peace Academy), with a network of volunteer contributors in Wales and America, to mark the centenary in 2023-24 by reuniting the Welsh and American parts of the Peace Petition.

Organised by women active in the Welsh League of Nations Union (WLNU) – predecessor to today’s WCIA - the idea originated at a women’s caucus of the ‘Welsh School of Social Service’ in Llandrindod Wells, in August 1922. At this point, the WLNU had 20,796 members across 300 local branches Wales-wide - including many women who had been active in the suffrage movement. On 23rd May 1923, a ‘national conference of women’ in Aberystwyth finalised plans for a Wales-wide campaign, orchestrated through community organisers in every county. A peace declaration was illuminated by calligrapher Cecily West, and reproduced in souvenir leaflets for every signatory. By the end of 1923, 30% of Wales’ female population had signed ‘Yr Apêl’: the Welsh Women’s Peace Petition.

A Great Oak Chest was carved to contain the 7 miles of petition signatures, counted and bound, and a beautiful Memorial created in Moroccan leather and gold leaf. In February 1924, Elined Prys and Annie Hughes-Griffiths (WLNU Chair) made the voyage across the Atlantic, where they joined the third member of the delegation, Mary Ellis, who had gone before them. At a luncheon in New York City, attended by over 400 American women – representing 60 national women’s clubs, with memberships of over 16 million people – the oak chest was ceremonially unlocked; the following day it was handed over to the US National Committee for the Prevention of War. Days later, the Welsh Peace delegates met President Calvin Coolidge and Secretary of State Charles Evan Hughes, presenting the Women’s Memorial at the White House in Washington. Following this, Annie Hughes Griffiths and Gladys Thomas undertook a 2-month transcontinental ‘Peace Tour’ of America, taking the Welsh message of peace onwards to Chicago, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Williams (Arizona), Albuquerque, Niagara and Utica.

Following their return to Wales, in 1925 the WLNU received America’s response: that the women’s movements brought together by their tour, had joined forces to form the ‘Conference on the Cause and Cure of War’ – which went on to meet annually, and to influence American Foreign Policy, until World War 2. In 1926, Wales hosted (in Aberystwyth) the World Peace Congress of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies. Also in 1926, 2,000 women calling for ‘Hedd nid Cledd / Law Not War’ descended on the town of Penygroes in Caernarfonshire ‘flying the blue flags of peace’; from whence they marched to Caernarfon Castle, Conwy, and via 15 rallies along the coast to Chester, ultimately to Hyde Park in London. On returning from the ‘North Wales Women’s Peace Pilgrimage’, its organisers formed the North Wales Women’s Peace Council, which continued to coordinate campaigns for many years.

Nearly ninety years later, the Women’s Peace Memorial of Wales was rediscovered at the Temple of Peace, whilst WCIA was assembling plans for the WW100 ‘Wales for Peace’ project. This inspired volunteers and community groups Wales-wide to unearth its incredible story. First displayed as part of the ‘Remembering for Peace’ exhibition at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, in January 2016, youth and student researchers soon started exploring and digitising the WLNU Archives, piecing together 1920s Peace campaigns. By 2017, the interest had inspired the standalone touring exhibition ‘Women, War and Peace’, in which the Petition was juxtaposed alongside incredible portraits by international photojournalist Lee Karen Stow, which travelled to Cardiff Bay, Beddgelert, Cricieth, Swansea, Bangor, and remains on display in Cardiff’s Temple of Peace. Each community organised a programme of volunteer-led events and activities for schools, exploring local peace heritage. In 2018, discovery of ‘Annie’s Diary’ – a personal record kept by WLNU campaigner Annie Hughes Griffiths – led to an innovative ‘Book Club’, in which 10 volunteers transcribed her diary entries, and then came together to ‘unveil the inside story’ of the American Peace Tour. Captured by Valley & Vale community film-makers (available on YouTube as ‘Inspired by Annie’ - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9wy6Cu4r4I), the diary also inspired Alaw Primary School in the Rhondda to develop a cross-curricular project, bringing to life 1920s America, women’s rights, peace issues and history.
In Gwynedd, a re-enactment to mark the 90th Anniversary of the North Wales Peace Pilgrimage was organised, and plaques were unveiled in Penygroes and Caernarfon to commemorate this rich moment from Wales’ Peace Heritage.

Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu.

Iona Price recalls stumbling across the Memorial Cover in the National Library exhibition. Her response was one of amazement at the sheer magnitude of the petition and how it gave women a voice that would carry across the sea from no matter how remote a homestead nor how powerless they may have felt. She was even more amazed that nobody had heard of either the Petition or the Peace Pilgrimage. Her first question was ‘I wonder if my own grandmother signed it?’

Determined that this remarkable contribution by the Women of Wales should not be forgotten, soon ‘Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu’ had been established; a group of volunteers inspired and determined to celebrate, remember and realise the aspirations of the original petition, using it as a tool to start a dialogue in the 21st century about a vision for a world without war.

Heddwch Nain involved American Welsh volunteers, who found that the petition was still held in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington – quickly generating interest in the United States. In February 2020, Welsh MEP Jill Evans witnessed the reopening of the great oak chest and glimpsed the many reams of petitions, signed by so many of Wales’ grandmothers.

Today, a North American branch of Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu has been formed, and they have been busy exploring the Peace Tour and sharing the story.

Back in Wales, Archif Menywod Cymru/Women’s Archive Wales volunteers are actively researching the background to the petition. They’re focussing on the 400 local organisers who collected the signatures from farm to farm, from street to street. They have been struck by how the campaign attracted volunteers from a wide range of religious, political and professional backgrounds, Welsh and English speaking alike, all united in their passion to see World Peace.

2023-24 will mark the centenary of the Women’s Peace Petition. A partnership led by Academi Heddwch (the Wales Peace Institute) is planning a programme of events and activities to celebrate Wales’ women peacemakers, which includes a book about the story, and a Peace Conference at Aberystwyth University. As part of this work, the National Library of Wales is collaborating with the Smithsonian on a project to digitise the petition, and the National Museum Wales is planning an exhibition. It’s the partnership’s hope that the Memorial, chest and petition signatures can be reunited in Wales, so that the original Peace Appeal can inspire a new generation of Welsh internationalists, promoting peace locally, nationally and internationally, and establishing new connections between Wales and North America.

Further information

Partners:
Academi Heddwch Cymru
Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales
CND Cymru,
International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Wales
International Politics Department, Aberystwyth University
National Library of Wales
Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu
Heddwch Nain/Mam-gu North America
Archif Menywod Cymru/Women’s Archive Wales
Wales Centre for International Affairs
Elin Jones, SM and the Llywydd of the Welsh Parliament
On her their lives depend

Tandem Theatre works in partnership. On Her Their Lives Depend was a collaboration with women’s organisations and organisations addressing homelessness in Bolton, Salford and Manchester.

Three drama groups explored the theme of World War 1 and the impact it had on women. They focused on certain issues such as poverty, loss and changes in women’s status. The women also learnt how the war affected their local area by visiting their local museum and receiving a guided tour.

One participant, for example, was particularly startled by a poster stating: ‘Women of Lancashire! Do you realise that if you keep back a son or sweetheart you are prolonging the war and adding to the peril of those who have gone?’ From this, the group explored the different ways women would have felt pressured to encourage male loved ones to sign up. One of the groups’ overriding themes was not only the loss the women would have felt when their loved ones lost their lives in the war, but how to deal with that loss.

The women used the knowledge they learnt through the workshops and from the museum visits to create their own unique piece of theatre to perform. These performances were shown at their respective centres and at their local museums.
Q: What did the First World War mean to the project participants? Fran: I think one of the biggest problems was how little people knew about the First World War and how much about the Second World War: trying to say ‘that was really interesting, but that happened later than the First World War’.

As WW2 is in more recent memory, and very present in a lot of popular culture, people tend to know more about it. The reasons for the war were quite straightforward and Britain’s role in the war is often celebrated. In contrast, the reasons for WW1 were more complicated; it’s not featured as much in popular culture, and it doesn’t seem to be glorified as much due to the awful conditions of the soldiers and the horrendous death toll, etc.

Most of the participants that we work with have low academic attainment, and most of them don’t have English and Maths, let alone a GCSE History qualification. And I think what’s really fascinating from my point of view, is that you hear, ‘Oh, I can only do history if I can memorise dates, if I can write an essay’. And my response is, ‘no, you can just enjoy it, you can learn about it without having to write an essay or memorise a load of dates’.

That’s why I love doing projects where it’s practice-based learning. We can explore elements of history that, even if you were to do a history qualification, you might not necessarily explore. Through doing the project and discovering that some women might be relieved when men left for war, we’re able to highlight something that isn’t talked about a lot.

We’re not there to address trauma. We call it being ‘one-step removed’. We address an issue through exploring a character. People ended up being a character that reflected an issue that they were facing themselves. So we’re exploring women in the First World War, and the role of women, and how difficult it was for women. Also, how sometimes when men left, women became a bit more independent. And, actually, was it a bit of a relief for some women to not have their husband present or have any kind of male presence?

It was interesting that discussions of people’s own experience came into what we were exploring. For one woman, it was very much about the abuse of power that men would hold over women, especially at that time, but it always bled into a conversation about her own experiences of the abuse of power.

And there was another woman who had a male partner, and it was a very unhealthy and potentially dangerous relationship for her to be in. But she really, really missed him. So what she really wanted to explore was a female character who was really missing her husband who was away at war, and writing a letter about how much she misses him. And that was quite complicated from our point of view, trying to facilitate this discussion of what is a healthy relationship and what is an unhealthy relationship. And, because we weren’t therapists, that was more challenging - but there was definitely a sense of, this is what I’m experiencing, and this is how I can relate to the stories of these women I’m hearing about in the First World War.

Politics and Internationalism

Conversation with Fran Nutt of Tandem Theatre, 16 July 2021:

Q: How did you work with the groups? Fran: Sometimes we created a scene based on what we’ve talked about, what we call rehearsed improvisations. There’s no pressure to write a script or remember lines. And it doesn’t matter if it’s not exactly how you rehearsed it, because both people in the scene know the gist of the story. Other times things were more directed by me. I might say to somebody, imagine you’re waving everybody off to war, and then freeze, okay, now tell me a line of how you’re feeling about people going to war. So we explore it in whatever way we can and create something out of it. Then we take all those bits of scenes and try to make a coherent story that usually lasts between 15 and 20 minutes. By the time we get to creating a story, it becomes a little bit more focused on a character they’ve created, how that character feels, and it becomes a lot more emotional. And I think that’s where the participants’ own experiences come into it. The piece that we created wasn’t necessarily teaching anybody about the First World War. It was a lot more grounded in the experience of an ordinary person, as opposed to what was going on at the time.
Q: Why does women’s history matter?
Fran: I suppose the biggest issue is just how much it has been ignored. And how women are still ignored and underrepresented in so many sections of society, and yet we make up 50% of the population. There are some really interesting points of history when women have had such a massive impact.

If we can elevate elements of history that were previously ignored, that’s fantastic. I think if we can do it in a way that’s practical, especially for groups with low academic attainment…especially if you’re working with women as a way of empowering them, they can look back and see what this person did 100 years ago. When we went on to do the suffragist project in every borough of Greater Manchester, we split it into two halves, with the first looking at the past, and the second looking to now. The Wigan group really went for it. They made loads of suffragist materials, and they visited museums. Then they looked at modern methods and came up with a period poverty campaign, and got the Mayor of Wigan to visit them. If we’d just gone in and said, we’re going to do a period poverty campaign, I don’t know whether we’d have had the organic enthusiasm that developed because we’d started historically. Seeing where you fit in this timeline, in history, is empowering.

Q: How did your plans develop between the two projects?
Fran: The suffragist one was interesting because I didn’t know anything really about the suffragists. I just knew it was the centenary of women getting the vote. I went to the Manchester Central Library Archives. And then looking at all these archives, I found there were more suffragists than suffragettes. I think having learned from the First World War project, we thought, right, we won’t just look back at what happened, we will try and apply it to today. I think it was definitely like a stepping-stone process going on.

Q: How important is it to have access to the museum collections and archives?
Fran: Yeah, I could talk about this for ages. In the Suffragist project, each thing the young people looked at was directly related to one thing I found in the archives. One was a Because booklet, where it just said women should have the vote because… because…. And so we did a booklet-making exercise. Another was a Bazaar handbook. We brought all 10 groups together at Manchester Central Library and we recreated the bazaar. There was a programme for a demonstration. So we recreated a demonstration at Salford Museum and Art Gallery because they’ve got a recreation of a Victorian Street. We got everyone to dress up; it wasn’t technically historically accurate, but Victorian clothes - and they had their banners and sashes and badges and things that they made. There was one big poster of a tree, showing the suffragist movement, I think the metaphor being like, we’ve got loads and loads of branches, but we are rooted in the same cause. And I got each group a jigsaw piece in the shape of their borough. And they decorated it with stuff about their local suffragist. And then when we had this big bazaar, we brought them all together, and we made one giant jigsaw. And the whole point was, it’s through us working together in our different ways that we can achieve this one thing that we’re aiming to do.

Q: I’m getting the sense that your projects are all shaped in some way by the participants, and working on one project helps develop the next one?
Fran: That’s really interesting. I’ve not even thought about it in that way. But I totally agree. I think as a facilitator, as opposed to a director. I did drama at Manchester University, and I did theatre in prisons, it’s all about being a facilitator. I’m taking the ideas from the participants, rather than just going straight in there and saying, this is what we’re going to do, this is what you’re going to learn, and being more didactic.

https://onherlivesdepend.wordpress.com/
Wor Women on the Home Front & Wor Women and Leisure

Elaine Slater, Tyneside Women’s Health

Wor Women on the Home Front was our first WW1 project, but its success led to a second Wor Women and Leisure project.

We initially developed a WW1 project due to feedback from women who wanted to explore the past and how women’s roles in WW1 might have impacted their lives today. All of the women accessing Tyneside Women’s Health (TWH) have mental health or wellbeing issues, and this project enabled us to introduce women to things they would not normally do or see, such as visiting local archives and museums. We wanted to help women develop new skills, such as digital storytelling, and to develop their confidence to access things in their communities, such as libraries.

We also wanted to learn about our history and to capture local and untold WW1 stories.

Where did your project start from?
The project started by contacting local libraries and museums to arrange visits to archives, so that the participants could learn about local history and to raise their interest in the project.

Did you focus on new narratives/stories/angles?
All of the stories were new and personal, based on women’s families or things they had found out about, or what they had seen on project visits.
Were there any surprises about the direction that the project took?
Some of the unexpected outcomes include:

- The involvement of our singing group and invitations to perform at Beamish Museum. This group also recorded a CD at the end of the Wor Women and Leisure project.
- The success of the touring exhibition, which visited many libraries and museums across the North East for a year after the project ended.
- The second project produced a book detailing women’s leisure experiences.

To what extent were partnerships with other organisations/agencies important to your project?
Both of our Wor Women projects were delivered in partnership with Curiosity Creative. The projects would not have been possible without this partnership due to their experience of heritage projects and their digital skills. Curiosity Creative recorded and produced all of the digital stories.

What has been the legacy of the project for your organisation and for the people you worked with?
The key legacies have been:

- The production of digital stories/CDs/book which can still be viewed and circulated.
- Development of partnerships with museums and libraries.
- Ongoing collaboration projects with Curiosity Creative.
- The skills development of participants (e.g. accessing heritage resources, oral history recording, research, object handling, creative writing, improved digital skills).
- The project also reduced isolation and built confidence to participate in other community projects.

How did you feel at the end of the project? What was the impact on you and your colleagues?
We were proud of our projects and very pleased with our achievements, in particular the material results such as the digital stories, book and touring exhibition. The project also won a Women’s History Network Community Prize – ‘Very Highly Commended’.

One service-user wrote a piece for Tyneside Women’s Health Service User Newsletter, which highlighted the success and enjoyment felt about the exhibition launch on International Women’s Day 2015: ‘Interested parties from Tyneside Women’s Health collated stories and photographs, through research and interviews, and made digital stories recounting their findings. Lorraine made a fantastic outfit befitting a ‘Lady’ and it went down extremely well with the visitors. My file of my family research was pleasingly thumbed through, and a magazine of poems and prints (created by TWH women) was read with gusto. There was also a selection of hats, that had been created by our many talented seamstresses, on display. The event opened officially in Beamish at midday with welcome speeches from Elaine and Leonora. There was a buffet laid out and much needed cups of steaming hot tea.

Exhibition launch: image courtesy of Tyneside Women’s Health.
and coffee. Although ‘Positive Notes’ weren’t singing until later on in the afternoon they were there in full force, wearing splendid outfits of the period (Where was my outfit? I wanted one!). There was a larger gathering than I expected and the opening of the exhibition was a great success. It was lovely to see so many friends and family members attend and, despite the rather chilly weather, it was a fantastic day to enjoy the splendours of Beamish: A year-long project finally, and successfully, concluded in such magnificent surroundings. A big thank you to Alex, from Curiosity Creative Ltd, Beamish Museum and (above all) Wor Wonderful Women, from TWH, for all their fantastic efforts.....lest we forget.’

In what ways did the history of WW1 women matter to your organisation and to those who participated?
The projects gave vulnerable women the opportunity to participate in a project that allowed them to explore heritage, creativity and local culture. Women would not usually visit museums or libraries alone, so the project enabled them to feel comfortable and connected by doing this with others. Women learned new skills and were enthused by the efforts of their ancestors.

Through the untold stories that have been discovered, women have greater knowledge of how their own family members contributed, and these stories have now been permanently recorded and archived. One woman in particular had an interest in family history but did not know where to begin with research. She attended 3 sessions at Newcastle Central Library and was introduced to Ancestry.com. In her own time, she spoke with her older sister to gain a basic idea of her family members, as she had struggled to remember names of great grandparents, which made searching census records difficult. This lady had also never used a computer before the project, so required a lot of one-to-one support from facilitators within Library sessions to search for records. By the end of the project, the lady had carried out enough research to begin to create her own family tree and managed to find out where her great grandmother lived during the war, and how difficult her life must have been living in a small home in Gateshead with 6 children, her husband and father-in-law! She also found out about her grandmother, when she was married, and where she worked during the war. The participant still had her great grandmother’s bible, as well as various family photographs. All of this information and images were turned into a digital story for the Wor Women on the Home Front exhibition. She also plans to buy her own computer and carry on researching her family tree!

Further resources
https://curiositycreative.org.uk/project/wor-women-on-the-home-front
Further Projects

In compiling this booklet, we also came across the following projects, all of which contribute new knowledge and fresh perspectives.

Impressions Gallery, Bradford. No-Man’s Land: women’s photography and the First World War
https://www.impressions-gallery.com/event/no-mans-land/

Royal College of Nursing. Service Scrapbooks: nursing, storytelling and the First World War
https://www.rcn.org.uk/servicescrapbooks

Friends of Birmingham Archives & Heritage. Born in Birmingham: Maternity, Midwives and Infant Welfare 1914-1924
https://borninbirmingham.home.blog/

Radcliffe on Trent Local History Society. Radcliffe on Trent Women and the First World War
http://www.radcliffeontrentww1.org.uk/guide-to-radcliffe-women/radcliffe-women-biographies/

Teesside University. Dear Mrs Pennyman ... Letters of the King’s Own Scottish Borderers Widows and Orphan Fund
http://www.dearrmspennyman.com/

Behind the Lines Theatre. All the Nice Girls. Lesbian Love in the Limelight. Pioneering Performers in Music Hall, Variety and Revue
https://www.behindthelines.info/all-the-nice-girls/

Nottingham Local History Association. Nottingham Women in WW1
https://nlha.org.uk/news/nottingham-women-ww1/

UK Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in partnership with the Clapham Film Unit. These Dangerous Women
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0a2xYvXwGiw

Glasgow Housing Association. Our Housing Heritage: How Glasgow tenants ‘fought the huns at home’ during World War 1
https://www.scottishhousingnews.com/article/our-housing-heritage-how-glasgow-tenants-fought-the-huns-at-home-during-world-war-one

And while the traces of many centenary projects have all but disappeared, the following repositories are useful records of activity.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund keeps a record of projects it supported
https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/projects
including, for example, No Game for Girls: a history of women’s football
https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/projects/no-game-girls-history-womens-football-ww1

The BBC has an extensive archive linked to its World War 1 at Home programming. Women. How the war transformed the role and status of women.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01p329t
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Oliver Wilkinson

Peter Down, Dorset County Museum

Tatjana Janković, Narodna biblioteka ‘Vuk Karadžić’, Kragujevac, Serbia

Gateways, First World War Engagement Centre

Living Legacies 1914-18, First World War Engagement Centre

The Women’s Library

https://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collection-highlights/The-Womens-Library

Imperial War Museum

https://www.iwm.org.uk/

Norland College

https://www.norland.ac.uk/

Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/contact-us/

Pershore Heritage and History Society

https://doit.life/organisation/416982

Staffordshire Heritage and Archives


Museum für Photographie, Braunschweig, Germany

http://www.photomuseum.de/
Ours is not, and could never be, a complete account of women’s experiences in the period. Our aim is to valorize the work already done by community historians, to inspire future research, and to suggest approaches for exploring women’s lives. We aim to show why these histories matter and how they generate movement, energy and connection.