

BRITISH WOMEN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR - EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS FROM THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

The following accounts are transcribed interviews from the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive. They represent the experiences of women from all social classes in Britain. Read the accounts and answer the following three questions:

- 1) How did women participate in the war? How did their jobs differ from those of men?*
- 2) What problems were women faced with during the war?*
- 3) How did women challenge existing gender roles during the war?*
- 4) How important were class differences?*

1) Drivers and Clerks

Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) were established in 1909 to provide medical assistance in wartime. By 1914, there were over 2,500 detachments in Britain manned by 74,000 VADs, two-thirds of them women. VADs worked as assistant nurses, ambulance drivers and cooks. Alice Remington was the daughter of an architect. In 1914 she was fifteen.

This was my big chance of getting out and away. I wasn't attracted to nursing and so I thought the next best thing I could do was to learn how to drive and how to do simple mechanics. My parents were a little bit horrified that I would meet the rough and rude men in the garage – quite true I did – but I didn't tell them very much really. I went out at about half past seven in the morning and I got home round about six at night, very grubby [...].

Having completed her driving lessons, Alice became a Red Cross VAD driver.

The VAD drivers were drawn from the same social class. The mechanics at the garage weren't. The – how does one put it, the working class or what? – they went into the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps [WAAC] chiefly. I think because they hadn't the money to learn how to drive and at that time their class didn't have cars and do things in cars. Therefore to get into the war and do their bit it was much easier to go along with the stream and go to the WAACs.

At the outbreak of the war, Elizabeth Lee was working in her father's toyshop. Her brother ran a garage, so she had learned to drive. After driving for the Red Cross as a VAD in London, she volunteered for the Army Service Corps and went on a month's trial.

We were each given one of these about thirty-hundredweight vans, and the men led us a devil of a life. They'd cut a petrol pipe half-through, they'd unscrew a valve on there, they'd change over the leads on the sparking plugs. They'd empty oil out of your lamps (because they was all paraffin lamps). The girls dropped out one by one. All this driving we used to do – they would give us the wrong directions. Some of us knew our way around the area but many of us didn't. And the sergeant backed the men up – he always gave us the dirtiest jobs to do, if it was a coal-heaving job we had to do it, or if it was to find an out-of-the-way place, it fell on the girls.

The men resented women in the army. Every time a woman went in the army, they were transferred elsewhere, out to France, you see, overseas, everything of that sort. At the end of the month there was just two of us left. But they couldn't get much wrong with me, because I knew more than a good many of them did. And also I was cunning enough to always be prepared with a bit of stiff binding tape in case there was a leak in my petrol, and I looked at my tyres and tested them. When we had a tool inspection they'd pinch our tools, so that we were short of tools. You know, all sorts of nasty little niggly things that they'd do because they didn't want us. They wanted to try us out, because on the whole they were nice chaps; there were a couple of beastly ones, but to them it was a lark, for kicks.

Anyway, when we passed our test there were two of us that were taken on, they couldn't have been nicer to us; we were one of them then. And one of them said to me one day, 'Sorry we led you such a dance, but we didn't want

women drivers, and we got our heads together and we thought we'd get a bit of fun out of these girls'. They wanted fun in other ways but it didn't work out. It did with some of them, but not with me.

Ruby Ord was eighteen in 1914 and lived in Nottingham. During the war, she joined the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). She served as a clerk in Calais when it was bombed.

We had a woman called Stackhard – she was professional stage. She was a motor driver, a transport driver, and very, very good at her job. We were in this hotel and a raid started. All the staff of the hotel went down to the basement and they told us we could do so too, but we didn't. You were in the dark immediately in the old war when there was a raid – no blackout: everything was just switched off at the mains.

We had got two officers there, suffering from shell-shock and the men with them were in a panic. And Stackhard felt her way to the piano, and she played for two hours while the raid lasted, and we all sang and these men didn't know there was a raid on. Afterwards the men were so overwhelmed at her courage and her staying power, they said, 'If anybody ever says a bad word about the WAACs they'll have to answer to us for it after this.' Because people were very ready to criticize us, especially when we came home on leave; it was terrible. We were the women who had 'followed the men to France'.

Emily Rumbold was the daughter of a baker and lived in Bath. She joined the WAAC and was detailed to work in the Calais docks, packing cleaned clothes taken from the dead and wounded.

They were being sent up the Line again and we had to pack them into sacks. As one sack was filled so you passed it on to somebody else. The WAAC officers were only in camp and they had jurisdiction of us out of working hours. The men officers were in charge of us all during the working hours.

If you wanted to move a heavy sack no man would help you. I remember once saying something or other that I wanted done and the man said, 'Oh well, you came over here to do any job, you jolly well do it'. He stood and watched me. They were very bitter at first but they got used to us.

I was still thrilled at being there, I was thrilled at doing the job that I was doing. But we missed colour – it was all khaki and mud; that was my chief memory. We thought we'd try and get a room, where we could buy our own cushions and have a little bit of colour there, and do as we liked. We found that it wasn't at all feasible because all the better-class people in Calais had all left. It was only the almost undesirables that had been left. We went to the doors and – 'There are officers already here.' We fled.

2) Doctors and Nurses

In August 1914, the Scottish doctor Elsie Inglis asked the War Office what she could do. She received the following answer:

My good lady, go home and sit still.

In 1913, encouraged by friends, Eleanora Pemberton had joined the Red Cross in London. In 1914, she joined the Red Cross VAD, and arrived as a nurse in Boulogne in the wake of the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force from Mons.

One's impression was a good deal of chaos. There was a shortage of doctors, shortage of nurses, shortage of anaesthetics, shortage of everything. There were quite a number of nurses in the Queen Alexandra's Army Nursing Service – the QAs as they were called — stationed all over the world and they couldn't be got back in two minutes. A lot of them did come back. A great many more nurses were recruited for the reserve from civilian nurses in England; they wore a grey uniform with a red border, the others wore the red capes, the

reserves wore the red border. Originally QAs were very snooty. They would have nothing to do with the VADs and weren't very keen on the reserve nurses either.

The casualties from the shells and poison gas arrived from France at stations like Charing Cross, at night. They went into the care of nurses like Margaret Warren, by then a Red Cross VAD nurse, based at Brooklands Hospital, south of London.

They were very often very shocked, probably extremely dirty if they'd just recently come from the trenches, very thankful to be out, but probably in great pain, and the antidotes for pain were very poor; there was aspirin, we had morphia – and morphia was not given except by an injection, one little tablet of morphia put into a teaspoonful of water, and you had to wait until this little tablet had dissolved, then you sucked it up into the needle, and tried to find a good place to give this injection. Many of the men had the most frightful carbuncles and terrible boils and things from the very bad conditions they'd been in, and as we had no penicillin then they had to be got out of their system in some way.

When I found that a limb had to be removed, the soldier would say to me, 'Nurse, you will come into the theatre with me, won't you?'. The first time I was there, there was a great big Sergeant Dunn – a very charming man – and he had to have his leg amputated, and I'd been trying so hard to get his leg better, and there I was left with this leg in my hand, and the doctor turned to me and said, 'Well, put it in the bucket, nurse.'

Caroline Edgley, a Red Cross VAD nurse in her twenties, was based at the 4th Northern General Hospital in Lincoln, where she received soldiers whose last treatment had been at a casualty clearing station in France.

They'd have just one dressing put on their bare wounds and [were] put on a train again. And they landed at Lincoln Station and [were] brought straight up to the hospital with all the clothes that they'd been wearing for the last six weeks or more. You'd have to peel it off them. One man after he'd been washed and dressed said he thought he must be in heaven. He eventually had to have his leg off. Taken into this big tent and they'd be sawing his leg off.

3) Fashion and Appearance

Ruby Ord:

The day before we sailed for France we were issued with uniforms, I think mine was down to my ankles. They were one-piece dresses with no shaping. We had to go to France, of all places, in this type of uniform. We were not allowed to wear gloves because we might look like officers. We had these terrible greatcoats that weighed a ton. The uniform was a disgrace to anybody – an orphan is better turned out than we were.

When we arrived in France, it seemed to rain all the time. The roads were liquid mud, and trailing skirts in the mud – we asked if we could be allowed to turn up the dresses, and were told they must be nine inches from the ground. A big notice was put up in the camp, and we changed that to nine inches from the waist: we didn't know about mini-skirts. We decided amongst ourselves, the rebels – after all, we were suffragettes, a number of us – and we said, 'We are going to cut them off at the length we want so that they can't make us let the hems down.' So we just cut them off at the length we wanted and bound them round. It was quite a respectable length but not to their way of thinking. As you walked the mud splashed up, and we had only one dress. So if it was filthy dirty, you had to wear a filthy dirty dress. [...]

We had those dark brown collars. So we bought light ones, which we weren't allowed to wear, but which we continued to wear. This is one of the things one learns early in life – if enough of you do something there is

nothing that can be done about it. So it was a question of esprit de corps, our corps, not theirs! Enough of us wore these lighter collars so that eventually they ignored them.

Emily Rumbold:

We were the pioneers of short hair. A Frenchman cut my hair and did it beautifully – I've never had it cut so nicely since. He'd partly served his time in London. It was all bobbed hair; it was most attractive. They used to call me Mop after that. Some of the girls – their heads were not clean, that's why I had mine cut short. My mother was horrified when I arrived home and found I had short hair.

As more men joined the armed forces, the country grew short of labour. The government decided that more women must help to produce food and goods to support the war effort, and so the Women's Land Army was established to. Annie Edwards joined the Red Cross. In 1915, she saw a poster for the Land Army.

I had to have three references. So I went to Canon Baggley's wife and asked her if she would sign. And she said she couldn't say anything bad about me, at all. She admired me in every way of my life excepting she objected to me dressing like a man and it's going to spoil me. Because in those days that's the first time a woman, a female, ever wore trousers, breeches or anything. I had my skirts right down. Mustn't show your ankle.

Annie was sent to work at a farm in Chichester to fill in for the men who joined the war.

The first year I was out in the field, harvest time, and wet through with sweat [...]. In those days our corsets were severe, all steel bones and they got nasty. And when I put the horses in the stable at twelve o'clock I went up in the hayloft and I took them off. And close to the farm there was an outside lavatory, where they was emptied about every third year or something. I went and folded them and took them there. And from that day to this I never wore them.

4) Production Line

In 1914, Jane Cox lived in Mile End, a poor area in London. She was thirteen. After the war started, she began working at Schneiders, a factory making civilian and service caps.

The dye used for khaki clothing was toxic and led to boils [...] If you stopped to blow your nose you got the sack [i.e. you were fired]. You couldn't go to the toilet. You really worked in those days. There was no recompense for illness or anything else; no holidays with pay. The one on my back was worse. It was right on the spine. And we had no treatment. It was just lucky that it really cleared up because I never got any treatment for anything at all. The women at work thought my mother was terrible not to look after me. But my father was dying.

Then when my young sister died, all my mother was interested in was bringing home a few shillings. I started to get clothes. And no sooner I'd bought anything my mother'd pawn it.

'Munitionettes' – producing the explosives and gas that comprised the raw material of war – were the largest group of women workers engaged in war activity. A job in a munitions factory could mean a vast increase in the pay on offer before the war. Sixteen-year-old Isabella Clarke, locked in poverty in Roman Catholic Belfast, made the crossing to White Lund in Morecambe, where she worked at filling 9.2-inch gas shells.

We weren't allowed to wear any of our clothes. If you had linen buttons on – there was tin inside, you see, and it would cause an explosion. We were also supplied with cocoa going on duty and coming off duty, and we had our own surgery and doctor. And we were supplied with rubber shoes – pumps, really – and they

were all platforms from the entrance of the factory to the department wherever we worked. Your feet never touched the ground, and there was soldiers on guard all the way round.

They could always tell by the colour of our eyes whether the gas was affecting us, and unfortunately we were coming home for our Easter holidays and my friend was stopped. They noticed that both her eyes and mine - the white of my eyes was discoloured a little bit, but hers was badly. Then they come and informed me that she'd died. Very little of this gas, once it got into your inside, did affect you. Your hair didn't go yellow but when you went to bed, as you took your head off the pillow, the pillowslip was pink. [...] My friend being dead, it upset me and when I went back to Morecambe there was an explosion and I decided to leave. I wanted to go to London to Woolwich Arsenal and they told me in the labour exchange no, that I was too young, but they were going to send me to Coventry. I said, 'Is Coventry near London?' They told me, 'Yes.' I was that ignorant, I thought it was only a tram ride, so I came. I used to send my mother a pound a week and my grandmother five shillings. The first time I went home she wanted to know how it was I had such nice clothes and such a lot of money.

Born in Blackfriars, the daughter of an electrical engineer, Annie Howell took a job in a factory making gas masks.

The war never sunk into me, that the war meant they'd got to kill each other to win. It never entered my head. I just knew it was a gas mask. One day, I said to this girl, 'This gas mask, what's it for - where do they put the gas?' 'Oh, no,' she said, 'they don't put the gas in it. The Germans' - always the Germans, never us - 'the Germans throw gas bombs over and they gas the men.' 'Oh,' I said. I was a bit ignorant in lots of ways.

Lilian Miles lied about her age - she was thirteen when war was declared - to get a munitions job at White and Poppe's in Coventry.

I knew a girl that had been out the night before with me. And with the blackout someone gave us a couple of matches to light the candle when we got in our room. She used one match. Next morning she went to pull her handkerchief out when we were in the works. And out flew this match. The foremistress saw it. They suspended her right away. I tried to tell them it was quite accidental. And they said it didn't matter what I said. Proceedings would be taken. She was brought into court next day. They just said 'Twenty-eight days.' They took her away to prison, to Winson Green. And she never got over it. Within a few months she died. She was twenty years of age.

Munitionettes - 'Tommy's sisters' - were also known as 'canaries'. Lilian Miles:

The yellow powder turned us yellow all over. I had black hair and it was practically green. Once you come out of it, it wore off. Within a couple of weeks it was gone. But while you were in it you were yellow. You'd wash and wash and it didn't make no difference. It didn't come off. Your whole body was yellow.

Elsie McIntyre, sixteen in 1914, was working at the Barnbow National Shell Factory in Leeds.

We were filling 4.5[-inch], 18-pounders and 6-inch shells. We had a fortnight in the powder and after the fortnight we had a fortnight on the stencil side. That was the dirty side. You could only do a fortnight. And then you had to come out, owing to the poison. And it was those people that you saw going about, they had yellow hands even through the gloves. We had two half-pints of milk a day to keep out the poison from the powder.