

HEART OF CONFLICT

WOMEN AT WORK

“It would have been utterly impossible for us to have waged a successful war had it not been for the skill and ardour, enthusiasm and industry which the women of the country have thrown into the war.”

Prime Minister, David Lloyd George.

Before the Great War, the main employment opportunities for women were domestic service, nursing and teaching. But as millions of men joined up to fight, many traditionally male industries had little choice but to employ women. Many thought that it would be beyond the capabilities of females to work as engineers and mechanics, lathe operators or crane drivers; ‘fire girls’ and ambulance drivers. They were wrong – very many women jumped at the chance to do something meaningful and essential to the war effort, while in the process earn more.

It wasn’t plain sailing. Many of the remaining male workforce resented women coming straight in when they had to serve a seven-year apprenticeship to undertake skilled work, while some wives and mothers were also resentful as the women were freeing previously essential workers to now go to the front. Employers were less unhappy once they became confident work standards didn’t drop, and women were usually paid just over half a man’s wage for a very similar job – “equal pay” didn’t exist!

For most women workers, however, the work they were doing was not only extremely useful, but it paid around £1 per week as opposed to half a crown for a 12 hour, 7 day a week job as a domestic servant. This extra money (when it wasn’t selflessly spent on War Bonds) was welcome, especially if it helped to supplement to Army Separation Allowance which did not go far in expensive urban areas.

This new female ‘army’ was both pilloried and feted by the press in equal measure. Some newspapers saw women as undertaking their patriotic duty and routinely praised them for their hard work in difficult conditions. On the other hand working class girls (not the middle class ones that often worked alongside them) who had left domestic service to work elsewhere were sometimes accused of abandoning their former employers.

The Munitionettes

Following the scandal of severe shortage of shells at the front lines, the Ministry of Munitions was formed in 1915 and headed by David Lloyd George. Women volunteered in their thousands to make munitions, recognising how vital the work was. It was estimated that by 1918 nearly 1 million women were working in the munitions industry and the number of factories went from 3 to 150 nationwide. The close links between mining and explosives meant that inevitably some of the factories were in Cornwall including at Camborne and Hayle. Overall nearly 3,000 women were employed in Cornwall.

The work was noisy, dangerous and physically demanding. Factories ran 24 hours a day, 12 hour shifts were common. Deaths and serious injuries did inevitably occur, but details were kept out of the press (under the Defence of the Realm Act, of DORA) in case it affected national morale. Deaths from explosions, accidents or exposure to chemicals resulting in cancers were covered up, but two women known to have died in an explosion in Cornwall are May Stoneman (21) and Cissie Rogers (20), both buried at Phillack churchyard.

The uniform worn by the women included a cap to keep their hair out of machinery. It also had a

dual purpose for some, as it covered up hair turned orangey-yellow from chemicals which also dyed the skin. With typical British humour, these women were known as Canary Girls. No soap or beauty cream could cover up the skin colour, they had to wait for it to wear off. Some women who were pregnant had yellow babies too.

The final toll on the health of the munitions workers is impossible to calculate as so much was covered up or undocumented, but it is estimated that there were many thousands of incidents and accidents. However, changes did occur as the grim statistics rose. Matrons were introduced to check that workers observed safety protocols; no metal hair grips, jewellery, belt buckles or buttons were allowed, shoes were often wooden clogs to avoid sparks. Being found with matches could lead to prison. The only metal allowed were the tags with each woman's identification number. In serious accidents, these were the only gruesome evidence of those lost.

Women's Land Army

Many thousands of women also applied to work on the land, where they could earn 20 shillings a week for gruelling outdoor work. Volunteers signed a contract agreeing to work anywhere in the country. These women faced the same prejudice as female factory workers and deemed 'incapable of lifting a harness', considered by some women as having 'driven their menfolk into the army' (agriculture was a protected occupation for a while) and – not least because they scandalised many a local with wearing trousers – of 'loose morals'; the latter crime requiring the employment of Welfare Officers to 'ensure that conduct becoming a lady was practised everywhere'. (Quite how that was possible while mucking out pigs is not documented!)

The work was brutally hard, especially in winter and billets were not much more luxurious than the animals enjoyed. Eventually, probably driven by isolation and rejection by the rural communities, one worker (Meriel Talbot) launched *The Landwomen* magazine to foster ties amongst those waging 'The Food War'.

In November 1918, 55 members of the WLA received a Distinguished Service Bar from Princess Mary. But a few days later the Food Army was disbanded.

The end of the war meant that women were expected to go back to their former lives; they had to make way for returning soldiers. Some – such as females who'd worked in military situations routinely alongside soldiers in the Womens Auxiliary Army Corps – were deemed to have somehow behaved inappropriately because of the roles they'd undertaken and were deemed not employable. The phrase 'No WAACS need apply' was common in job adverts.

But change was coming: votes for women were now only a few years away. Women were soon to have the power to influence politics.

The heroic war work and the resulting change in perception by men that women were indeed equal to doing a man's job began the process of women being able to participate more fully in society.

Written by W. Norton/Bridging Arts