

Women in World War II



War Memorials Trust

Introduction

Women across the world were involved in the war effort during World War II, and the UK was no exception. The participation of women in various war related roles was more extensive than during World War I and was driven partly by the nature of World War II requiring the more complete mobilisation of the whole population. The aim of this information sheet is to outline what roles women in the UK took on during the war and the impact of this both on the war and women's status and roles more widely. It can be used to accompany WMT's lesson plan on women during the war and the 'Women of World War II memorial' information sheet, to provide background information for pupils.

Women before the war

In the inter-war period women's roles were more restricted than they are now. While many women did work in a wider range of jobs and were better educated compared to the pre-World War I years, about two-thirds were not in paid employment. It was seen as acceptable for single women to have jobs but would usually have to give these up when they got married or had a child (only one-tenth of married women worked). Women were expected to look after their homes and families, and domestic work was more difficult and labour-intensive than now.

Jobs women did during the war

Many women began to take on a number of jobs in the months leading up to and after the outbreak of World War II. Initially they were volunteers but the National Service Act of 1941 allowed conscription of women for the first time which meant that, depending on their circumstances, women could be made to contribute to the war effort through war work. Their jobs fell into a number of categories as outlined below:

• **Factories and industrial jobs**

It became clear early on in the war that a high level of mechanisation would be required and many women took jobs in factories, creating weapons and munitions. According to the Ministry of Labour in 1938 19% of women worked in industrial jobs; by 1945 this had increased to 27%. Shipbuilding and engineering were other industries where women became part of the workforce during the war.

• **Agricultural work**

Many women joined the Women's Land Army (they were commonly known as 'Land Girls'). This was originally established during World War I and re-formed in June 1939. It placed women with farms that needed workers due to male workers going to fight. This was essential for increasing food production during the war. Numbers peaked at around 80,000 recruits.

• **Civil Defence and Emergency Services**

The Civil Defence Service incorporated roles such as first aid, wardens, and rescue parties as well as the Auxiliary Fire Service and Air Raid Precautions (ARP).

• **Military**

Women were also recruited into non-combat roles in the military, including the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAFs) and the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS). Within these women had a number of roles including clerk and telephonist but also more traditionally masculine roles such as mechanic. Women were generally enrolled for the duration of the war and could be sent to serve throughout Britain and overseas. During the war, approximately 487,000 women volunteered for women's services. Because they were not allowed to participate in front-line combat women tended to not be recognised with awards for bravery because these were awarded for direct action against the enemy.

- **Civilian roles vacated by men**

The call-up of working age men for active service meant that many previously male-dominated jobs began to recruit more women during the war. Women were usually paid less than men for these jobs and were expected to relinquish them when the war was over and men came back.

Why women did war work

The scale of World War II meant that women had to be mobilised and work in the roles outlined above, especially after the introduction of conscription in 1941. The term 'home front' demonstrates the ways that the war was fought in ways other than military combat. The jobs women did were essential to the war effort.

There are reasons, though, why so many women volunteered for this work before it became compulsory. The most obvious of these was patriotism – there was a real fear of invasion by the enemy and many people wanted to 'do their bit' to protect their homes and their country. For many women, the war also provided an opportunity to do something exciting and valuable, fulfilling their potential in a way they had been unable to do before. Women's roles could be quite restrictive and joining up in one of these roles was, for many, an 'escape.' Despite the difficult and dangerous conditions of wartime many personal testimonies of women from the time describe the excitement and friendships found as a result of their work and how they enjoyed it.

Remembering women's wartime roles

There are many memorials that remember World War II and sometimes women are commemorated by these alongside men. You sometimes find women's names listed on war memorials with the names of local men that fought in the war. However, until recently there has not been a specific memorial to remember the many roles women had during the war and the impact that their work made. In 2005 the Memorial to the Women of World War II (pictured below) was unveiled in London as a memorial to all women who contributed to the war in the ways described on this sheet.



There is more information about this memorial on WMT's 'Women of World War II memorial' information sheet.

Memorial to the Women of World War II, London © War Memorials Trust, 2016

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