



## Role of women in the First World War

### Overview

#### Aim

To challenge perceptions about what we think we know about the role of women during the First World War.

To question which stories are recorded in history, by whom and why.

To explore why historical enquiry is so important today.

To explore how examining artefacts/photographs/objects can lead researchers in unexpected directions.

To explore the impact of the First World War on the lives of women today.

#### Curriculum links

##### Key Stage 2 History

Pupils should continue to develop a chronologically secure knowledge and understanding of British, local and world history, establishing clear narratives within and across the periods they study. They should note connections, contrasts and trends over time and develop the appropriate use of historical terms. They should regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance. They should construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.

##### Key Stage 2 English

###### Reading comprehension

- checking that the text makes sense to them, discussing their understanding, and explaining the meaning of words in context
- asking questions to improve their understanding of a text
- drawing inferences such as inferring characters' feelings, thoughts and motives from their actions, and justifying inferences with evidence
- identifying main ideas drawn from more than 1 paragraph and summarising these
- retrieve and record information from non-fiction

###### Writing composition

- plan their writing by:
  - discussing writing similar to that which they are planning to write in order to understand and learn from its structure, vocabulary and grammar
  - discussing and recording ideas
- draft and write by:



- composing and rehearsing sentences orally (including dialogue), progressively building a varied and rich vocabulary and an increasing range of sentence structures [English appendix 2](#)
- organising paragraphs around a theme
- in narratives, creating settings, characters and plot
- in non-narrative material, using simple organisational devices [for example, headings and sub-headings]
- evaluate and edit by:
  - assessing the effectiveness of their own and others' writing and suggesting improvements
  - proposing changes to grammar and vocabulary to improve consistency, including the accurate use of pronouns in sentences
- proofread for spelling and punctuation errors
- read their own writing aloud to a group or the whole class, using appropriate intonation and controlling the tone and volume so that the meaning is clear
- explain and discuss their understanding of what they have read, including through formal presentations and debates, maintaining a focus on the topic and using notes where necessary
- provide reasoned justifications for their views

### **Arts Award**

Discover A and B

Explore A and B

### **Resources**

#### **Photograph bank**

### **Activity Mats**

Evidence from the past

Arts Award

### **Activity mats**

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jul/19/when-football-banned-women-clare-balding-fa>

When football banned women

## Background information

When researching the Bastion in the Air project, Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire found photographs and posters that challenge what we think we know about the role of women during the First World War. The images also but raise some important questions about women in the workplace and in leisure. Some of these stories have parallels today.

Research into the story of women's football, which stemmed from a photograph of a team of munitionettes shows how some decisions can have long lasting consequences.

This background information provides an overview of the more known history of women in the First World War. It is based on the text from a touring exhibition commissioned by Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire. Krista Cowman, Professor of History, University of Lincoln acted as a historical consultant on this topic. The text has been changed slightly to make it more accessible to children.

The photographs, the focus of the sessions, mean pupils can question some of the myths around women's abilities in the fields of science, engineering and sport that are still relevant today. The photographs clearly show women involved not only making munitions but also in designing and building aircraft. Women had roles as engineers, designers, mechanics and pilots. The photographs do not lie...

## Key stories

- Context of women's education, employment and leisure before and after the First World War.
- The differing expectations and opportunities for women born to different classes.
- How evidence from the past can challenges and inform what we think we know continually.
- The impact of political will on the lives of women, in work and leisure.

## Women and education before the First World War

In 1900, women generally had fewer educational opportunities than men.

The 1870 Education Act - **the first law about the provision of education** in Britain - set up local school boards to provide state-run primary education.

By 1880, all children aged 5 to 10 had to go to primary school; but **for many poor children, this was their only time in school.**

Richer families usually sent their sons to private schools. They expected their daughters to marry wealthy men. It was thought these girls needed **social skills rather than formal education.**

Very few women went to university. Some bright working-class girls stayed on at school as pupil teachers and studied part-time for degrees.

## Women at work before the War

British industry grew in the 1800s. Business owners needed workers but didn't want to pay a lot of money. Business owners, by law, could pay **women and children less than men for the same type of work.** This is why women were largely limited to lower paid jobs.

Many women worked. They worked as:

- in houses as servants
- in the textile and clothing industries
- in agriculture, pottery, confectionery, laundry, retail trades, and in family businesses.

From the 1890s, there was a big increase in the numbers of women who had office jobs. Since 1870 girls had access to primary education. This meant they could now read and write. Many working-class girls took up jobs as clerks and telephonists. Men **still carried out most supervisory roles, operated expensive machinery and held the higher-paid jobs.**

## Women at work during the War

In July 1914, women made up nearly a quarter of all people in employment in Britain. By the end of the War in November 1918, women made up more than a third of the workforce. The main change for women was that they had the opportunity to prove that they performed as well as men in a variety of jobs, not just low-skilled or domestic jobs.

As a result of the War, large numbers of women either got jobs or moved from existing employment to roles in industry, nursing, farming and even the armed forces. The number of day nurseries increased too, freeing mothers of young children to work in jobs to support the War effort.

Before the War, trade unions did not welcome women. After the War, trade union membership for women increased from 357,000 in 1914 to over 1 million in 1918.

## Women at work after the War

Men largely didn't change their views on women's work even after the War. What women did to support the war effort was often **not valued** when peace came.

Many women wanted to stay in work but a lot of jobs had only been created **only for the War effort** and so were **not needed in peacetime**. Some servicemen returning from the War and looking for work wanted women to give up their jobs.

Researchers for Bastion in the Air found Maude Lowe's **Certificate of Employment** and **Certificate of Demobilization**. These documents show that women were given very little warning before they lost their jobs and no recognition of their contribution to the War effort.

The situation was even harder for **married women**. Many men and women at the time shared the view that a wife's full-time job was to look after the home. Some single and widowed women thought they should have priority in getting jobs over married women. Many people thought married women would be provided for by their husbands. In 1921, unmarried women civil servants persuaded their employer not to recruit married women. They were successful and this ban lasted until 1946.

## Military

All of the women's military services ended by 1921 because military commanders saw no need for women in peacetime forces.

These jobs were only recreated because of the threat of the Second World War in the 1930s. Women once again proved their value to the military services.

The Cold War followed the Second World War. This meant women were still needed to support the armed forces. Social attitudes had changed over the years too. Since the 1990s women have carried out largely the same roles as men in the armed forces.

## Humanitarian and Community Work

Many women carried out **humanitarian and community work** with voluntary groups during the war. These included:

- The **First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY)**. This group went to Calais in 1914 to drive ambulances for the French and Belgian armies. In January 1916 the women were finally allowed to work for the British Army. By the end of the war, its members had been awarded 17 British Military Medals and had 11 Mentions in Dispatches (military reports to commanders); 27 French Croix de Guerre; and one French Legion d'Honneur
- The **Women's Emergency Corps (WEC)** formed within 48 hours of the start of the War in August 1914 (it later became the **Women's Volunteer Reserve**). The volunteers gave out meals. They also met Belgian refugees at stations and found places for them to stay. They were also drivers.

In 1914, many women offered to support the War effort. The War Office turned them away believing, wrongly, that the war would end quickly. The War Office did not want civilian organizations near the frontline. Some senior officers didn't want to work with

women who had been **suffragettes**. Some women's groups offered to work for other allies. Belgium, France and Serbia accepted them gladly.

### Medical Work

The medical profession accepted women doctors in 1876. Women doctors were vital to hospitals in the UK and in the field, working in voluntary organisations including **the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps, the Scottish Women's Hospitals Association, and the Women's Hospital Corps**.

**The Army however had no women doctors.** Only 297 full-time nurses were serving in Queen Mary's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) when war broke out. 2,117 qualified civilian nurses were available for military hospital service from the part-time Territorial Force Nursing Service (TFNS).

The government set up a scheme in 1909 to provide extra nurses in a major war. Together with the **British Red Cross** and the **Order of St John**, it established **Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs)** to recruit and train local volunteers. These women didn't need to have medical knowledge as training was provided. VADs also had roles such as cooks, laundresses, clerks, typists, telephonists and drivers. All were volunteers so often from wealthy backgrounds where they could afford to work for no pay.

Women served in medical roles in Britain and overseas, including in the firing line.

**Around 200 nurses in the British nursing services died during the war.**

### New Roles

Women gradually filled jobs left by men who had joined the military. They took on jobs only men had done before, such as driving, sweeping chimneys, gardening, bricklaying, brewing and ship building. Men were not always happy about this.

Employers told women their jobs would only last until the men returned from the War. They were usually not paid the same amount as men. In some cases, employers took on several women to replace one man, or broke down skilled tasks into several less skilled stages, so they could pay women less.

### Munitions Work

By spring 1915, there weren't enough men to make munitions. 'Munitions' means anything that feeds the military effort. Lincolnshire was a major producer of munitions, including the world's first battle tanks, artillery, machine guns, explosives, horse-drawn waggons and motorized vehicles.

The government set up a **Ministry of Munitions** in July 1915. David Lloyd George was Munitions Minister. He encouraged women to take on munitions jobs throughout Britain.

Female munitions workers, nicknamed 'munitionettes', often worked 12-hour shifts in factories open 24 hours a day. Munition chemicals were poisonous and working with them for long periods of time was dangerous. TNT could turn skin yellow and hair a ginger colour. This led to another to munitionettes being nicknamed 'canaries'.

Major factory accidents did happen: an explosion at Silvertown (London) killed 73 and injured over 400, and one at Chilwell (Nottinghamshire) killed 134 and injured 250.

## Aircraft Production

Lincolnshire rapidly became one of the world's largest aircraft manufacturing centres. Its **engineering companies** changed from peacetime activity to make munitions. Women played a big part in this story not only in assembling equipment but also in designing and engineering.

In Lincoln, the first government aircraft contract was awarded to **Ruston, Proctor & Co Ltd** (the building can still be seen opposite Morrisons in Lincoln) in January 1915. They had built over 2,000 aircraft by the end of the War; the largest manufacturer of aircraft engines in Britain.

**Robey & Co Ltd** built aircraft for the Royal Naval Air Service until 1919, and **Clayton & Shuttleworth Ltd** (the Lincs FM building) began building small coastal patrol airships in early 1916. They later built aircraft, including Handley-Page O/400 bombers, the largest aircraft built in the UK at the time, and one of the largest in the world.

Outside Lincoln, **Marshall's Sons & Co** built aircraft in Gainsborough, and small companies throughout the county supplied components for aircraft.

## Government Work

During the War, Britain was the 'Home Front'. The population was directly affected by German air attacks and German submarines blockading food and other supplies.

Women played an important part in the growing state authorities: for example, the number of women employed at the Treasury grew by 35% during the war.

The **Ministry of Reconstruction** included a **Women's Advisory Committee** advising on options for women whose jobs would be threatened by demobilisation (men returning from War). The **Women's Housing Sub-Committee** asked working-class housewives for their views on housing that would be needed after the War.

**Dorothy Peel** and **Maud Pember Reeves** were co-directors of the women's service at the Ministry of Food. They toured the country giving **cookery classes** and teaching housewives **how to manage on rations**.

## Agricultural Work

Voluntary women's organisations sprang up to help work the land, including the **Women's National Land Service Corps** and the **Women's Farm and Garden Union**. In 1915, the government set up the **Women's Forage Corps** and the **Women's Forestry Corps**.

These groups could not recruit enough women to fill the gaps left by the men. The government set up the **Women's Land Army (WLA)** in March 1917 to take on milking, care of animals and general work on farms. Between March 1917 and May 1919, around 23,000 'land girls' served in the WLA. It was disbanded in 1919 but was re-formed in 1939, in time for the Second World War.

## Police Work

Women took on police powers **for the first time** during the war. **Mrs Edith Smith** became Britain's first policewoman, with full powers of arrest. She was sworn in as a member of the **Grantham Borough Police** in December 1915.



## Military Work

The **Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC)** was formed in February 1917 because the Army's **casualties were so high** that it was running out of men. Many served close to the front lines in France, Belgium, Italy and Greece, and three were awarded Military Medals for bravery.

In November 1917, the **Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)** was formed. By the time it was disbanded in 1919, it had around 500 officers and 5,000 other ranks.

On 1 April 1918, the Air Ministry established the **Royal Air Force (RAF)** and **Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF)**. Over 9,000 women transferred to it from other services.

In all three military services, women performed **work similar to civilian women**, such as clerical work in offices, but also **learned new trades**, such as repairing motor vehicles.

## Classroom activities

### The role of women

#### Session notes 1 Evidence from the past

This activity can be framed by explaining that pupils will work with photographs and documents that researchers from Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire have found. To find out more about these **pieces of evidence**, pupils must think of good questions to ask.

**First** ask what sorts of questions might help them **describe** what is happening in the photographs. Here are some prompts or questions to use to summarise or for feedback.

- What does the photograph look like physically? (black and white, colour, old, new, well looked after?)
- Describe the scene in the photographs (Clues: is it black and white, colour, old, new, what can you say about the buildings, the people, men? Women? What they are wearing? What are they doing? What sort of equipment is in the photograph? Is it day or night, day? Is the photographed staged or natural?)
- Why is this photograph important?
- What can it tell us about the people in the picture?

**Next** ask what can they **deduce** from their set of photographs? Again, ask for questions.

- Who might have owned it?
- Who might have taken the photograph, why?
- Who might have commissioned/ordered it?
- How might it have been used?
- Where did it come from?

**Finally**, they will focus on what they can **conclude** from their investigations.

Print out and hand out copies of the photographs (XXXX sets) to groups of four to six pupils:

- The drawing office at Robeys
- Covering wings at Robeys
- Munitionettes football team.

Invite pupils to go through the three stages of questions described above and write down their answers.



Next ask the children to share their findings by:

- Showing the photograph to the whole class
- Summarising their descriptions, deductions and conclusions.

Next share the information provided with the photographs.

- Is there anything different or surprising from this text?

### **Put yourself in the picture**

What might it have been like, to be a woman at this time in history?

Recreate the image.

Put yourself in the shoes of one of the people in the picture. Write an account of what was happening at the time. Start your sentences:

I see...

I hear....

I touch....

I smell....

I feel....

What happened just before this photograph was taken?

What happened just after?

What happened to the person in the picture after the War?

## Women's football

### Session 2

This session focuses on one photograph that may challenge pupils' perceptions. It leads into an exploration of women's football.

Explain that the team at Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire came across the photograph of a football team, in the archive and it led to some research. The team know that this is a football team made up of munitionettes but they don't know much more about who the women are or where the team played.

#### Share the story

Women played football in Victorian times. There is an account of a match in London that attracted 10,000 spectators for 1890. There was also an article in the Manchester Guardian around the same time saying that the novelty of women's football will wear off. This echoes some recent comments about women's football that are only now starting to be challenged.

In 1915, women's football was hugely popular and women were encouraged to play. Women's football matches drew huge crowds of over 10,000. The rise in popularity of women's football came about directly as a result of the War, with so many men going to the front and women working in munitions etc.

One of the best-known women's teams came from Preston, Dick, Kerrs Ladies Football Club, a team of munitionettes. The team started by playing and beating men but went on to play against other women's sides. They also raised money for wartime charities from the large crowds they attracted. From one match alone, they raised £600, a lot of money at the time.

Women's football continued to be successful after the War with a team from Newcastle attracting a crowd of 35,000.

However

Despite, or perhaps because, women's football was so popular the Football Association (FA) banned it in December 1921. It may surprise pupils to learn that this ban was in place until 1971 (around the time their grandparents were growing up).

In an attempt to stop the women's game, the FA used flimsy arguments to suggest that playing football would damage women's bodies.

This quotation is from the captain of Plymouth Ladies Football Club at the time. It could be from today:

"The controlling body of the FA are a hundred years behind the times and their action is purely sex prejudice.



Not one of our girls has felt any ill effects from participating in the game."

It wasn't just misplaced concern for the welfare of women that led to the FA ban. Dick Kerr's Football Team and others had played games to raise funds to support striking miners. This was considered to be far too political for women.

Perhaps the most convincing reason for the FA banning women's matches was financial. The women's games attracted large crowds and large sums of money. Unlike the men's game, none of this money went to the FA. It is possible that the FA saw the women's game as a threat.

### **Discuss**

It is a fascinating story. It is interesting to think about where women's football might be now, had it been given the same resources as the men's game.

Instead, over 100 years on, there are campaigns such as This Girl Can, designed to encourage girls to participate in sport.

### **Brief**

Create a campaign to stop the FA from banning women's football in 1921.

Can pupils provide arguments from the future to support women footballers from the past?

This resource contains a propaganda posters that can be used to spark debate around both campaigns and the role of women.