

## Working for the War Effort: Women at War

World War One was what we call today a Total War because every part of society was involved including; men, women and children.

### Men and Children

Millions of men joined the military to fight on the Front Line. But not all men could fight due to age, health, their job or personal beliefs. These men could still serve their country at home on what became known as the Home Front. For example in Horsham, the engineers at Lintott's engineering works produced munitions for the war effort. Farmers around Horsham District produced food for the army. Others joined the local Civil Guard to help the police keep the peace, watch important places like railways and take basic military training.

Even children helped out on the Home Front. All over the country the Scouts and Girl Guides carried messages for the War Office. They also learnt semaphore. Scouts guarded important places like the railways and kept watch for Zeppelins. The Girl Guides helped deliver milk, make parcels for soldiers and learnt first aid.

If you weren't a member of a group you could still help. Many children knitted scarves and gloves to send to soldiers. Others helped out on farms. In Horsham some were even given time off school to go blackberry picking. The berries went to Richardson's Jam factory on East Street. Children also helped by selling flags and badges on Flag Days. These were charity events held to raise money.

### Women

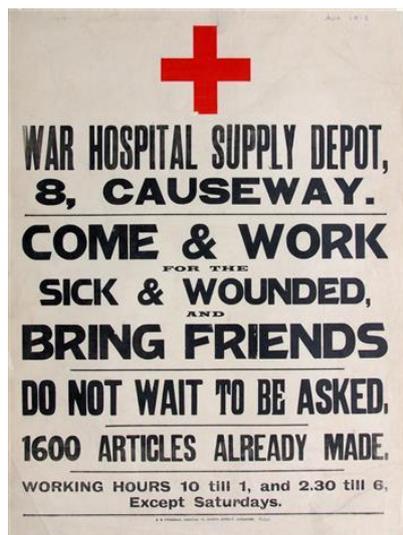
Before the war women did not all stay at home although caring for the family was an important part of women's lives. Most working class women in fact worked outside the home for wages. Even those who stayed at home would often be making 'piece-work' for money.

When war broke out many traditional jobs were used to help the war effort. For example sewing and knitting. The West Sussex County Times reports many calls for women to do their duty by making comforts for the troops – e.g. gloves and blankets. Middle Class women took it upon themselves to raise money for charities that helped the wounded and families of soldiers. They organised events like concerts and fetes around the Horsham area. The West Sussex County Times contains many reports celebrating the money raised by these events. Women in Horsham were also asked to support



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Zeppelin above Horsham railway station.  
Zeppelins were used by the Germans to spy  
and drop bombs in Britain 1914-1916.





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Horsham poster calling for volunteers for the War Hospital supply depot.

Hospitals in Britain and on the Front Line. They would volunteer at the War Hospital Supply Depot at no. 8 the Causeway, Horsham. There they rolled bandages and made splints and medical dressings. Then sent them out to Hospitals which needed them. A plaque celebrating the work they did can still be seen at no.8 today.

One of the most important jobs for those on the Home Front was the production of food. Farms around rural areas like Horsham lost men and farm animals to the army. Women were called forward to fill the gaps. The national movement of the Women's Land Army (WLA) supported farmers even though not all farmers were happy about it. In the end over 260,000 women worked in the WLA.

Women who worked in factories found their activities increased and changed. They began making uniforms and munitions. In Horsham girls worked on making these munitions at Prewett's Engineering Works. Nationally as part of the 1915 Munitions Act the government built new factories and thousands of women

were brought in to work in them. It was often hard and dangerous work.

Another job new to women on the Home Front in Horsham was as railway guards. Nationally government propaganda suggested that women were also becoming dentists, barbers and architects but in reality this was not common.

Women also took on roles connected directly to the military in the war. In Horsham the Women's Emergency Corps was set up in 1914 to provide trained women to carry out the instructions of the local Emergency Committee in case of a raid. They trained in First Aid, transport direction, signalling, camp cookery etc.

Nationally some women took one step further and joined the men on the Front Line. Two groups in particular were involved. First professional and volunteer nurses (VADs) who served in war hospitals on the Front Line. Second the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps who formed in 1917 and marched to the Front to take on positions with the army as clerks, drivers, printers etc.

Finally women were asked to sacrifice their loved ones to the war. In fact recruiters, both men and women, spoke of the woman's duty to encourage her loved ones to serve their country. This was not a view held by all. When conscription was introduced forcing men to join the army women like campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst spoke out against it.



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Horsham poster for a meeting for the Women's Emergency Corps.



## Impact of War work on women

It is true that the war brought changes for women. Culturally women became more independent as their country looked to them for help. Female workers had more opportunities and options during the war. 37% of women were working and many joined Trade Unions.

However, 24% of women were working already before the war and after the war there was a backlash. Pay for women did not improve in the war and by 1930 women were still earning half of what men were. As men returned from abroad jobs were taken back. Most employers had only given jobs to women 'for the duration'. Unemployed men grew angry with women 'taking' their jobs. Opportunities like training for female medical students in war hospitals was stopped. Men campaigned against women as teachers and demanded all women stopped work when married. Divisions even grew between single/widowed women and married women. Single women expected women to stop working once they were married. Whilst some women were needed and happy to return to care for their families when the war was over it was not all voluntary.

Many people also point to the work and contribution of women during the war effort as key in them winning the vote in 1918. Certainly that had been the goal of some of the suffrage movements who had stopped demonstrations and devoted their time to the War Effort. However historians argue that the influence of the long-term campaign has to be included. Also the government was already considering changing the voting system for men at the end of the war. The current rules would have stopped many of the men who had been fighting for their country for the last four years from voting. The government knew this had to change and planned to give all men over 21 the vote. Suffragettes and Suffragists took the opportunity to make sure this change included women. They used the example of how women had supported the war effort to push for women to be included in these changes. They were partly successful. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act changed the voting system to allow all men over 21 to vote and some women over 30 to vote too. It was not until 1928 that equal suffrage for men and women was finally achieved.

## Find out more

- **BBC iWonder** 2014 *What did war really do for women?* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z9bf9j6>
- **British Library** 2014 *World War One Articles under theme Civilians*, [http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles?related\\_themes=civilians](http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles?related_themes=civilians)
- **Mason, A.** 2014 '12 things you didn't know about women in the First World War', *Imperial War Museum*, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/12-things-you-didnt-know-about-women-in-the-first-world-war>



### Glossary

<b>Front Line</b>	- The front of the fighting in a war
<b>Home Front</b>	- A phrase used to describe what was happening in Britain that supported the war effort
<b>Munitions</b>	- Shells and bombs
<b>'Piece-work'</b>	- The making of small 'pieces' of clothing or other materials which could be sold.
<b>Propaganda</b>	- is when you present information that promotes a political cause or point of view from only one side.
<b>Conscription</b>	- making it so men have to join the army
<b>Independent</b>	- not under someone else's control, ruling yourself
<b>Contribution</b>	- the act of giving something (e.g. money, services)
<b>Suffrage</b>	- the right to vote
<b>Suffragettes and Suffragists</b>	- campaigners for the right to vote to be given to women

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