

Reporting the War: Women in World War I

Helen Crawford (1877-1954)

My name is Helen Crawford and I was born in Glasgow in 1877. During my life I was a suffragette, anti-war campaigner and leader of the Rent Strikes. My husband was a minister and his parish was in a slum area of Glasgow. Seeing the misery and poverty of the workers in Glasgow, with their physically broken down bodies, bowlegged and with rickets, left me deeply shocked.

Around the same time I became very interested in the work of Josephine Butler, particularly her book *The Education and Employment of Women*. This led me to believe that women would only be able to receive a better education and working life when they received the vote, so I joined the Women's Social and Political Union and became a suffragette in 1910.

I believed in direct action to get the Government's attention. I was arrested on different occasions for breaking the windows of the Education Minister's house and army recruitment centers, attacking police officers, carrying out bomb attacks and speaking publicly at protest events. During my time in prison I took part in hunger strikes. I was always released under the Cat and Mouse Act, whereby suffragettes were released from prison when they became seriously ill and were returned once they had recovered to complete their sentence.

At the outbreak of the war, the WSPU agreed to stop militant actions and support the war effort. I disagreed with this strategy and, like other militants such as Sylvia Pankhurst, eventually joined the Women's Peace Party. In June 1916, I launched the Women's Peace Crusade, an initiative designed to unite people of all social classes against the war.

The movement soon spread across Britain, with demonstrations taking place in Leeds, Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and Lancashire. One of our demonstrations at Glasgow Green attracted 14,000 people. But we also faced hostilities and at a march in Lancashire, counter-demonstrators shouted 'Traitors! Murderers!'

I also worked with the Independent Labour Party to encourage Scottish women to oppose the war. I was one of the leaders of the Rent Strikes in 1915, along with Mary Barbour and Agnes Dollan.

After the war, I remained active in politics and was instrumental in establishing the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the 1920s.

Edith Smith (1876-1924)

My name is Edith Smith and I was the first female police officer with full powers of arrest. At the outbreak of war, women became involved in police work because so many men were fighting overseas. Nina Boyle and Margaret Damer Dawson co-founded the Women's Police Service in 1914. The service was completely staffed by volunteers. I was appointed police constable in 1915 and served in Grantham, London until 1918.

Not only was I a policewoman during this period, but I also worked as the matron nurse at Lindis Nursing Home on Dudley Road in Gratham. For two years I worked seven days a week, without holidays or weekends.

I eventually left the service after a disagreement with one of the co-founders. My contribution to the war work was notable, but I was not the only woman to work in a traditionally male-dominated job. Many women also worked in factories, transport, agriculture, civil service, translation and more.

Lizzie Robinson (1896-?)

My name is Lizzie Robinson and I was born in Govan in Glasgow. Originally I worked in a laundry, but when the war began, I - along with many other working class women - went to work in the factories.

It was difficult and dangerous work: we worked long hours and some of us contracted jaundice because we worked with the explosive TNT. Jaundice turns your skin yellow, which led to us munitions workers being nicknamed 'canaries'. Also, shells could explode during production and kill or injure workers.

Before the war, women were almost never employed in heavy industries, but by the end of the war in 1918, almost a million women worked in munitions! I was the first woman who was decorated by King George V with the Medal of the Order of the British Empire. I was given it for my devotion to my work and I felt incredibly proud.

Despite the hard work and the danger, many of us wouldn't have changed it: the pay was better and we had much more personal freedom than we'd had in traditional pre-war employment, like domestic service. However, most of us were sacked when the men returned from the war. Even if we managed to keep our jobs, we were paid much lower wages than the men.

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928)

My name is Emmeline Pankhurst and I was born in Manchester in 1858 to a politically active family. I became involved in the campaign for the vote for women at the young age of 14 and founded the Women's Franchise League with my husband in 1889. The organisation was successful in winning the vote for a selection of married women in local elections under the Local Government Act of 1894.

Along with my daughters, Sylvia, Christabel and Adela, I set up the militant suffragette campaign in 1903 under the Women's Social and Political Union. I started the campaign because I believed that the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (the suffragists) were not effective in raising awareness of women's suffrage. Newspapers had largely stopped reporting about the women's voting issue in the early 1900s.

We, the suffragettes, adopted militant tactics and the motto 'deeds not words'. Our actions included window-smashing, flour-bombing, chaining ourselves to railings and arson attacks. Our actions often led to our imprisonment. We began hunger strikes in prison and were often force-fed, a barbaric practice which aroused public sympathy. As a result, we gained a lot more public attention than the suffragists ever had.

We stopped our militant actions at the outbreak of the conflict on the condition that suffragettes were released from prison. I began campaigning for trade unions to let women work in the industries that had previously been dominated by men, and encouraged women to join these new industries. We supported participation in the war effort, as we thought it a valuable opportunity for women to prove themselves worthy of citizenship and the vote. Our decision to support the war drive, especially conscription, caused a number of our members to break away from the WSPU, including my daughter Sylvia.

At the end of the war, the Representation of the People Act of 1918 was passed. This enabled women over the age of 30 who owned property (or who were married to a man who owned property) the right to vote, compared to all men over 21 having the right to vote. This introduced 8.5 million women to the electorate, but it was not good enough. Further, only one woman was elected to parliament in the General Election of 1918.

The effectiveness of the suffragettes is now a matter of historical debate. I and many others argue that it brought the cause the attention it needed, whereas others argue that our activism lost us a lot of public support.

Mary Barbour (1875-1958)

I am Mary Barbour, and I was born in Kilbarchan in Scotland in 1875. I married an engineer called David Barbour, and together we moved to Govan in Glasgow where we lived with our two sons. I was a co-founder of the Women's Peace Crusade, alongside Helen Crawford, but I became especially famous for my role in the Rent Strikes of 1915.

The rent strikes were in response to opportunistic landlords in Glasgow, who had drastically raised rents for working class tenants at a time when many men were away on active service or employed in war work. While rents were increasing, the tenements were in very bad condition and terribly overcrowded.

So, along with Agnes Dollan, Helen Crawford and others, we decided to mobilise the women of Glasgow under the Glasgow Women's Housing Association and take radical action! Banding together, we refused to pay the high rents and forcibly resisted evictions. When the sheriff's officers came to throw people out of their homes, we would stage mass protests to stop them from entering. Sometimes the sheriff's officers would be attacked with flour bombs or other missiles. We finally realised how much power we had when the munitions factories went on strike in our support.

This made the Government concerned about disruption to wartime production, so they passed the Rents and Mortgage Interest Restriction Act of 1915, which froze rents at the levels of 1914.

After the war, I was elected as a councilor and continued to work for the people of Glasgow. I was an advocate for the Glasgow Women's Welfare and Advisory Clinic, which was the first place to distribute information on birth control in Scotland. This allowed women to have more independence and control over their bodies. In 1920, I became one of Glasgow's first woman councilors.

Marie Chisholm (1896-1981)

My name is Marie Chisholm and I was born in Nairn in Scotland in 1896, but I moved to Dorset with my family soon after. I was only 18 when the war started, but I was committed to helping out so I volunteered as a nurse and ambulance driver on the Western Front in Belgium.

I was always interested in motorbikes and when I was 18 years old, my dad bought me a Douglas motorbike. I was around this time I met Elsie Knocker. We soon became good friends and competed in motorcycle and sidecar trials together. When the war started, Elsie suggested that we move to London and become dispatch drivers for the Women's Emergency Corps. My motorbike skills were spotted by Dr Hector Munro, who was setting up a Flying Ambulance Corps in connection with the Belgian Red Cross. He asked me to join it. Both Elsie and I went.

Our work consisted of finding and collecting wounded soldiers who were near the front lines and transporting them to field hospitals. Elsie and I thought we could save more lives if we could treat the soldiers where they were, so we set up a dressing station in the Belgian village of Pervyse near Ypres.

The work we did was emotionally difficult. No one can understand unless you have seen the rows of dead men laid out with their jaws blown off, arms and legs mutilated. It was also dangerous; we faced bombing raids and gas attacks along with the men.

Our efforts helped to save the lives of thousands of soldiers and we were given a number of medals and awards. After the war, I joined the WRAF but finally the injuries I had sustained during the war caught up with me, and under doctor's orders I went back to Nairn to lead a quieter life.

Lily Parr (1905-1978)

My name is Lily Parr, and I am the only woman to be inducted into the English Football Hall of Fame at the National Football Museum.

Women's football was established before WWI, but it wasn't well received. This changed when the Football Association suspended its men's matches at the end of the 1914-15 season and factories established teams made up of their workers.

I, along with most my team mates, worked at Dick, Kerr & Co, a Preston munitions factory. At first, the novelty of women playing football was used to raise money for war charities. As more teams were formed, people started to enjoy the matches for the skill and ability of the players.

Our team, the Dick Kerr Ladies, regularly drew large crowds. Crowds kept coming even after the Armistice, with astonishing attendances of 60,000 watching women's matches in 1920 and raising a fortune for post-war charities. Being in a team was exciting and it gave the girls a great sense of camaraderie.

However, in 1921 the FA banned women from playing football on any of their club grounds on spurious health grounds. They declared that football was 'unsuitable for females' because the 'jerky kicking and hard knocks are bad for future mothers'. But we all knew that it was because the FA wanted to corral the money into men's football, which was pretty spiteful to the women who had done their war work. The ban was not lifted until 1971.

Despite this, a few female teams continued for a while. In 1937 the Dick, Kerr Ladies played Edinburgh City Girls in the Championship of Great Britain and the World, winning 5-1. I became one of the greatest scorers in English history, netting more than 1,000 goals during a 31-year career.