

Women at war

The images from the First World War – the trenches, the body-strewn battlefields, the poppies – tell only part of the story of that terrible conflict. Both on the home front and near the front line women were playing their own part.

As men headed to war, women stepped out of the kitchen and drawing room and into the workplace. They nursed returning soldiers in hospitals and convalescent homes. They worked in factories, shops, banks, offices and the postal service. They kept the buses, trams and trains running. They tilled the land and tended the livestock. Together, this army of women kept the UK running.

Overseas, near the battle lines, 80,000 women drove ambulances, ran communications networks, cooked for troops and served as nurses. Some, used to being looked after like children, had never so much as washed a pair of socks for themselves. Feminist Vera Brittain, mother of politician Baroness Shirley Williams, was one of those who left behind middle-class comforts to deal with ‘gangrenous legs, blood and urine on the floor’. ‘My mother volunteered to become a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD),’ Baroness Williams explains. ‘She was part of the middle class that wasn’t used to working but she had sheer determination and this passionate feeling that she wanted to do what the men were doing.’ Brittain’s experience is chronicled in her memoir *Testament of Youth*.

With women moving into the public sphere, the guiding movement

On 4 August 1914, when Britain declared war on Germany, the lives of women were set to change. And that went for guiding members too



Girls of all ages supported the war effort

came into its own. Criticisms it had faced since its founding four years earlier started to fade. How could guiding be said to promote unfeminine behaviour when women were giving their all for King and country in factories and field hospitals?

The ethos of lending a hand, being of service and thinking of others – still enshrined in our

Promise and Law today – also meant that members were among the first to volunteer to help the war effort.

Significantly, 14- to 16-year-old Guides were employed by MI5 as messengers – specifically, according to former Security Service Director General Jonathan Evans, for their reliability.

Guides also served as confidential messengers for the Marconi and

Wireless Telegraph company – as well as working for the Postal Censorship office. In fact, members’ abilities were so admired that Rangers and Leaders were requested as messengers in Versailles during the peace treaty negotiations.

Guiding members helped in hospitals, made warm clothes for war-affected families and cooked for the hungry – even setting up >>

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Mini quiz

Chat through these questions with your girls to get them talking about women in the First World War.

- 1 Who were the canaries?
- 2 How much were the Guides working as messengers for MI5 paid for a 50-hour week?
- 3 How many War Service badges were awarded?
- 4 How many women (like those in the pictures, right) joined the workforce between 1914 and 1918?
- 5 A Guide from Leeds was in Germany when war broke out. What did she do to keep her spirits up?

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feeding posts at railway stations for returning soldiers. Members also gathered waste paper for the war effort (see right) and supported a national scheme collecting eggs for wounded British soldiers in France.

A War Service badge could be earned by doing 21 days' work towards the war effort or making at least 15 items of clothing. Also new was the Telegraphist's badge for which a girl had to be able to make her own wireless receiver and send messages in Morse code.

Girls played their part all over the UK. In Cheshire, for example, 1st Bollington Guides ran a convalescent home, and Alderley Edge Guides worked in the war hospital's laundry and kitchen, as well as making 700 items of clothing for soldiers. In Leicestershire, Guides worked towards their own Scarlet War Badge, given for 100 hours' service – for example preparing food in the VAD hospital and serving at the station rest room for soldiers.

But it wasn't just older girls and Leaders who did their bit. The brand-new Brownies, whose section started in the same year as the outbreak of war, rolled up their sleeves and got to work. As Gill Slocombe says, 'Brownies have always shown they're capable of making a big difference. They joined the war effort by rolling



Guides collect waste paper for recycling and (below) make swabs at a local hospital

bandages, washing old medicine bottles to sell to chemists and collecting books and magazines for injured soldiers.'

There were individual acts of heroism too – such as the Guide Captain who pulled children from the rubble of a bombed school in London's East End.

Across the Channel, Olave Baden-Powell set up a rest hut for soldiers in Calais, funded by Guides from across the world – who also stumped up enough money to buy an ambulance to transport wounded soldiers back from the chaos of the Front.

And in the war-ravaged countries of Europe, guiding grew as the war raged, with new groups

forming in France, Switzerland, Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Luxembourg.

After the Armistice, Guides continued to take their place in the public sphere. And – although wages had been lower than men's, wartime jobs had been grabbed back by returning soldiers, and women didn't finally get the vote on equal terms with men until 1928 – women as a whole had proved their worth. The taste of independence was intoxicating and it was clear that nothing could quite be the same again.

See page 84 for activities to mark the centenary with your unit. Try the Cook, First aid or Community action badges. And check out the commemorative events for all ages at www.1914.org. ■



Buy the badges – and the book!

Commemorate guiding's contribution to the First World War with a presentation pack of four badges (£3.50, code 7716). And read more in *Something for the Girls* (just £2 until 31 August, code 7887). Turn to page 3 for how to order.



Answers: 1 Women working with TNT in munitions factories – the chemical turned their skin yellow. 2 10 shillings. 3 1,400, with many Guides receiving more than one. 4 More than 1 million. 5 She made a Union Flag for her Second Class test.