

'Work in the Housewives' Service, like that of a household, seems never to be done': the 'practical politics' of the Women's Voluntary Service in the Second World War

Anna Muggeridge

To cite this article: Anna Muggeridge (10 Oct 2023): 'Work in the Housewives' Service, like that of a household, seems never to be done': the 'practical politics' of the Women's Voluntary Service in the Second World War, Women's History Review, DOI: [10.1080/09612025.2023.2267249](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2267249)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2267249>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 87




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

'Work in the Housewives' Service, like that of a household, seems never to be done': the 'practical politics' of the Women's Voluntary Service in the Second World War

Anna Muggeridge 

Department of History, Sociology and Politics, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT



The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) was established in 1938, to encourage women into civil defence ahead of the anticipated conflict. Once war began, it quickly expanded, with members engaging in a wide range of duties. Historians have characterised the WVS as an organisation dominated by middle-class women, but, while leadership was typically middle-class, at local level, membership was often more diverse. This article draws on the internal records of thirteen WVS Centres in the Black Country to suggest that the organisation was arguably more inclusive of a wider range of social classes than has previously been considered. It argues that working-class women were able to take on roles within the local public sphere through the very specific, localised and practical nature of the work the WVS undertook in this area. As such, it argues that the organisation played an important role in allowing women's activism to flourish in the mid-twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Women's voluntary service; second world war; Black Country; housewives; class

Introduction

On 7 November 1942, the Wolverhampton Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) Centre received a call from the WVS Regional Office, in which they were instructed to prepare a lunch using the Centre's Mobile Canteen for 'distinguished visitors'. Local volunteers 'were not told for whom' they were preparing a meal, but 'what we guessed and whispered, with bated breath, was just our own affair'.¹ It transpired that the lunch was for the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, who was undertaking a tour of the United Kingdom that month. The November 1942 Narrative Report for Wolverhampton—an internal document, which was completed by each Centre Organiser, detailing their Centre's activities each month, and sent to the WVS leadership in London for archiving—records a palpable sense of excitement among volunteers on duty. 'Amidst glorious beech trees, glowing with every autumn shade, in sparkling sunshine and the sharp tang of a wood fire, the Marquee was set up and lunch prepared for Mrs Roosevelt

CONTACT Anna Muggeridge  anna.muggeridge@worc.ac.uk  Department of History, Sociology and Politics, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

and her friends,' wrote the Wolverhampton Centre Organiser, Beatrice Handcock.² She went on to express her Centre's hope that 'this picnic ... has left memories of a side of England in wartime which will contrast with many other scenes'. The rest of the Narrative Report noted that elsewhere in Wolverhampton, work had been 'quietly busy' that month, recording detail of an inspection of the WVS-run Servicewomen's Hostel; preparation of meals for 'about thirty Military Police' who were visiting the town on a 'special duty', and participation in a 'Civil Defence Church Parade', which featured 'a few of our newly-created Housewives' Section'.³

That the WVS were included in Roosevelt's tightly choreographed tour of Britain—an exercise in 'soft diplomacy' at a crucial moment for Anglo-American relations—says much about the general esteem in which the organisation was held by the government.⁴ While Roosevelt's visit clearly caused great excitement within Wolverhampton WVS, this was very much an atypical event for the Centre and the far more mundane work undertaken during the rest of the month was characteristic of their experiences throughout the rest of the Second World War. Yet it was this mundane, routine, and perhaps dull work that served to bring many women in Wolverhampton, as elsewhere in Britain, into local public life. They were 'ordinary' women, often working-class housewives.⁵ They were not women who had been at the centre of organised feminism, or indeed the contemporary women's movement more broadly conceived.⁶ While some members may have self-identified as activists, voluntary work in the WVS was not conceived of as political. Despite this, the organisation maintains a reputation as something of a middle-class—even Conservative—organisation. James Hinton argues that the WVS played a significant role in the maintenance of middle-class hegemony in Britain throughout the Second World War. By placing middle-class women in control of local WVS Centres, he suggests, those sections of society which had dominated civic and associational life in the interwar period maintained their place in, and control over, the local public sphere in wartime.⁷

This article seeks to challenge Hinton's assertion, rethinking the role of working-class women within an organisation that has been characterised as 'middle-class'. It suggests that the civil defence work undertaken by the WVS, articulated as a 'practical politics'—the local, specific and pragmatic ways in which it worked in neighbourhoods across Britain—allowed working-class women a route into public life in the communities in which they lived. It argues that the WVS was particularly able to include such women in its activities through the Housewives' Service, which was established to enable women who were tied to the home through paid work and domestic duties the opportunity to undertake forms of voluntary war work. As such, the article adds to our knowledge of women's wartime activism, and contributes to debates surrounding the role of working-class women in the 'People's War'.⁸

Women's voluntary organisations in the Second World War

The WVS was established in 1938 by Lady Stella Reading, who had been tasked by the Home Office with increasing the number of female volunteers for civil defence duties in the anticipated conflict. Reading founded the Women's Voluntary Services for Civil Defence in London, but envisaged an organisation that had 'Centres', as each branch became known, in towns and cities across Britain. Whatever civil defence work was

required in a town or city would be overseen and conducted by local women on a voluntary basis from local Centres. What this might involve was, at first, unclear. Influenced by contemporary fears around aerial bombardment, much early recruitment, before war broke out, centred around finding women who might voluntarily drive ambulances or provide first aid in the aftermath of an air raid. However, the organisation quickly became, in Hinton's words, a 'maid-of-all-work', taking on a multitude of responsibilities as and when required, which were highly specific to the needs of a locale.⁹ Perhaps most famous today for its role in co-ordinating the evacuation of vulnerable citizens throughout the conflict, the WVS took on many other duties during wartime. These included providing assistance to the bombed out, staffing canteens and British Restaurants, and knitting countless millions of items of clothing, among hundreds of other responsibilities, all of which were undertaken voluntarily. Work varied from Centre to Centre, dependent on local needs. Volunteers in more rural areas typically found themselves busy running lunch clubs or clothing exchanges for the evacuated, while those in urban areas were more likely to be offering support at rest centres in the aftermath of bombardment.

By 1943, over a million women were members of the organisation, but despite its size, it has been relatively understudied by historians of the Second World War home front. James Hinton's pioneering study of the organisation remains the most comprehensive, and his view that it was dominated by middle-class, Conservative women continues to hold sway.¹⁰ Indeed, Clarisse Berthenzène has recently argued that '[a]lthough officially non-political, the WVS was very much a Conservative organisation'.¹¹ However, other studies of the WVS's involvement with Air Raid Precautions (ARP) and civil defence work, evacuation, and salvage schemes have all highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of the day-to-day activities of WVS members, and pointed to its success in recruiting working-class members, suggesting that a more nuanced analysis of the organisation might allow for a fuller understanding of its role in wartime Britain.¹² Berthenzène acknowledges the importance of the WVS's 'outreach to working-class women via the Housewives' Service', though this went further than mere 'outreach', and instead allowed these women to participate as full members, as this article demonstrates.¹³ Recent research by Charlotte Thomlinson, meanwhile, has offered a significant reappraisal of the role of WVS members, considering the ways in which these women were able to 'embrace, adapt, resist, and reject various duties of wartime citizenship'.¹⁴ These studies all suggest that there is scope to rethink how the organisation was able to engage ordinary, often working-class, women in its work, enabling them to play a full and active role in local public life.

Although the WVS was initially established by Reading at the behest of the Home Office—and so, while not a state-controlled organisation, it enjoyed a not-insignificant degree of government support—it has some parallels with other contemporary, non-partisan women's organisations such as the Women's Institutes (WI) or the Townswomen's Guilds (TG). It is, however, important to note that these organisations were, in part, campaigning organisations: as well as being social spaces, both also drew together women to campaign on issues which affected women. This was not true of the WVS, whose remit was entirely to undertake voluntary war work. Both the WI and TG encouraged its members into voluntary work for the war effort, although membership of both organisations fell during the conflict, in part, Caitriona Beaumont suggests, because

members' energies were transferred into the WVS instead.¹⁵ Like these organisations, the WVS welcomed women of all—and no—political, religious and social backgrounds. Maggie Andrews and Caitriona Beaumont have demonstrated the important role non-partisan women's organisations had in allowing women to become active in public life in the pre-war period.¹⁶ The WVS arguably fulfilled a similar role in wartime Britain, giving women, and particularly housewives, the opportunity to enter into local public life through the very practical work it undertook in their communities.

This article examines the experiences of thirteen WVS Centres in the Black Country to explore how working-class women in this area were able to do so, especially through the Housewives' Service, a sub-section of the overall WVS.¹⁷ The Black Country provides a particularly useful lens through which to examine the activities of the WVS because, as a whole, its geography embraced a range of social and cultural communities within contemporary Britain. A largely industrial area, its population was largely working-class, and it had a long tradition of women undertaking paid work, often in the 'sweated' trades which persisted into the twentieth century.¹⁸ Conversely, there were a number of towns on its outskirts which still had a distinctly rural characteristic in the 1940s. Thus, WVS Centres across the area as a whole had experience in nearly the full range of the WVS's activities—from welcoming evacuees or gathering rosehips to make syrup in rural Centres like Halesowen or Stourbridge, to dealing with the aftermath of air raids in more urban Centres such as Darlaston.¹⁹ The high proportion of working-class women involved in the WVS locally also serves to challenge some of the established narratives surrounding the organisation as a whole.

To do so, the article draws on internal WVS Narrative Reports, usually written by the Centre Organiser on a monthly basis, from across these thirteen Centres. Reports were read in full for each Centre for the duration of the war.²⁰ WVS Centres were instructed to detail their activities for the month in a number of specific areas, such as evacuation, communal feeding or ARP work. These are bureaucratic in nature, written for an internal audience and rarely containing direct quotes from members. However, in the absence of personal accounts from ordinary WVS members, such as letters, diaries or oral histories, these Reports can offer a significant insight into the work undertaken by WVS volunteers locally and contemporaneously. More significantly, their content is frequently detailed and descriptive, rather than purely narrative, offering a sense of how volunteers felt about the work they were doing. For example, most Narrative Reports noted the number of knitted items members had constructed for the war effort each month with wool sent to WVS Centres for this purpose, but rather than simply listing figures, frequent asides pepper the reports. In West Bromwich, for instance, one Report noted that the number of knitted items had dropped off lately because of 'the dark colour of the present wool, which many find very trying to their eyes and as [our knitters] are mostly elderly ladies one cannot press them to take it'.²¹ Meanwhile in Smethwick, efforts to persuade members to participate in the WVS nationwide scheme 'Knit for Liberated Countries' ran into difficulties in May 1945, with many members asking 'why the mothers in liberated counties cannot knit up the wool for their own children'.²² While such comments are naturally mediated through the voices of those in leadership positions within local Centres, they nonetheless allow an understanding of how, why and when ordinary members chose to engage with work undertaken by the WVS to be gleaned.

Narrative Reports do not include any personal details (such as names or occupations) of ordinary members of local Centres. Nonetheless, descriptions such as these allow a sense of the social composition of each Centre to be ascertained, as well as a broader sense of how volunteers locally chose to engage with the practical work the WVS undertook within communities. This article, therefore, first uses the Narrative Reports to demonstrate that the membership of the organisation within the Black Country was far more working-class than historians of the WVS have previously assumed. It then utilises evidence from these records to suggest that these members were able, through their voluntary work within the organisation, and particularly the Housewives' Service, to take on active roles in local public life.

'[M]any of the women are engaged [...] in whole or part time work':²³ working-class women in the WVS

Although the WVS was set up in 1938, it took some time for the thirteen Centres in the Black Country to become established. Most were not formed until the summer of 1939, with little activity taking place until after war broke out. Indeed, initially, establishment of a Centre could prove challenging. In Rowley Regis, for example, the Centre Organiser appeared to have some difficulty getting women to enrol when the Centre was established in June 1939. She blamed this in part on the council, who refused to share details of women who had signed up for civil defence work with the local authority with her, and the fact that, when approached by the WVS, local women seemed to 'have a great suspicion of signing more than one form and enrolling with us [too]'.²⁴ There are hints here at some of the tensions that could form between those who led local Centres, and their rank-and-file membership. Nonetheless, by the autumn of 1940 when, perhaps not coincidentally, this Centre Organiser had been replaced and the period of 'phoney war' was over, Rowley Regis WVS was active and thriving, undertaking significant amounts of voluntary work, such as finding billets for the 'over 300 persons' who had arrived in the town as evacuees between October and December 1940.²⁵

There is no detail in the monthly Narrative Reports on how each Centre Organiser was appointed, but this was typically done by WVS Regional Organisers, who would ask local officials, such as the town clerk, for the recommendation of a suitable candidate. As Hinton notes, this frequently meant that women approached were those who were already well-established within local public life, through a role in other voluntary associations, for example, or through a connection to the council. As such, most were middle-class women, though the fact that the role of Centre Organiser was 'essentially equivalent to a full-time job' must not be underestimated, as it likely precluded most working-class women, even those not in paid employment, from taking on such a role if invited.²⁶ Narrative Reports do not generally name members of the WVS, with the exception of the Centre Organiser, who would sign each Report, and who was therefore traceable through other records—typically the 1939 National Register. Evidence from this, such as the occupation of Centre Organisers, their husbands or other family members, and their employment of live-in domestic servants, suggests that within the Black Country, WVS leadership roles do seem to have been dominated by middle-class women, as Hinton suggests.

Between 1939 and 1945, the thirteen WVS Centres whose records are drawn on here were led by seventeen women. All but four Centres had the same Centre Organiser across the war and only Bilston, Rowley Regis, Smethwick and Wolverhampton experienced a change in leadership during the conflict. All seventeen women were traceable through the 1939 Register and earlier censuses, and, in some cases, through local newspapers or town directories.²⁷ Most appear to have been from relatively affluent backgrounds, with many being the wives or daughters of businessmen or men working in the professions. For example, Kathleen Somers, Halesowen's Centre Organiser, was the wife of a prominent local industrialist, while in Walsall, Centre Organiser Marguerite Drabble was married to a general practitioner. Only one of the seventeen gave an occupation on the 1939 National Register: Bilston Centre Organiser, Alice Dawson, who was a headmistress. Although reasons for a change in leadership were not provided in the Narrative Reports, it is perhaps notable that Dawson gave up the role midway through the war and was replaced by a woman who does not appear to have undertaken paid work, further indicative of the impracticalities of taking on this role alongside paid employment. Additionally, eight of the Centre Organisers employed at least one live-in domestic servant in 1939 and of these, three employed two or more live-in servants; it is possible that others enjoyed domestic support that was not indicated on the 1939 Register.

While it is therefore undeniable that most of these women were middle-class, there is less of a clear correlation between the WVS in the Black Country, and the Conservative party, as Hinton and Berthenzène suggest was the case.²⁸ Four of the local Centre Organisers—Vera Rose (Oldbury), Lilian Lench (Rowley Regis), Charlotte Hazel (West Bromwich) and Dora Wesson (Wednesbury)—were local councillors, but only Lench and Wesson were Conservatives. Rose was an Independent councillor, and Hazel a Liberal. The other Centre Organisers appear to have no clear connection to the Conservative party, or indeed any other political party.²⁹

Yet while the 'typical' Centre Organiser in this area appears to fit the otherwise established profile of women who led WVS organisations, there is substantial evidence that, locally, the membership was far more diverse and indeed dominated by working-class women. Evidence from the monthly Narrative Reports from across all thirteen Centres indicates that a significant proportion of WVS members in the Black Country were working-class women, many of whom held part- or full-time jobs alongside domestic responsibilities, particularly as the war wore on.³⁰ This was exacerbated by the conscription of women, which was first introduced in 1941 and by 1943 included women up to the age of 50. Although those who had children under 14 or older male relatives to care for could be exempted, many housewives involved with the WVS may have been compelled to work by this legislation.³¹ Indeed, Penny Summerfield estimates that, by 1943, around 43 percent of British women in paid employment were married.³² Ian Gazeley, meanwhile, records that 'the adult women's share of the workforce increased from 19.75 percent [in October 1938] to 27 per cent' by January 1945.³³ It is possible that the proportion of women in paid work may have been higher than the national average in the Black Country, an area which had a significant industrial, working-class population; a long tradition of female employment after marriage, and many factories and foundries producing for the war industries.³⁴

The high level of paid employment undertaken by local WVS members was commended upon by several Centre Organisers across the war. In West Bromwich, for example,

the Centre Organiser observed in December 1942 that 'the district being entirely industrial, many of the women are engaged, in addition to the care of their homes, in whole or part time work' but noted that despite this 'a large number' were willing 'to take on extra [voluntary] duties'.³⁵ In Darlaston, the Centre Organiser was similarly pleased by working members' efforts, writing in September 1943 that local volunteers should be 'justly proud' of their work for the WVS, 'considering that Darlaston is ... an industrial area with practically all its women working'.³⁶ Walsall saw 'a great many members having taken full time war work, and many others part time' by April 1942.³⁷ At times, there is some suggestion that the high levels of paid employment among members occasionally limited the success of certain schemes. In early 1944, Wolverhampton WVS tried to establish a home help scheme, which would provide assistance to the elderly or infirm with everyday tasks like shopping. However, as Wolverhampton was 'a highly industrialised town', many 'WVS members [were] working during the daytime', which limited this scheme's viability.³⁸ In Oldbury, meanwhile, members had a novel suggestion for helping working women make time for WVS duties, suggesting in February 1944 that 'Basic Training [a short course of lectures required for new members] be done via the wireless for those who are too tired from work to come in [to the Centre] in the evening'.³⁹ Ultimately, this suggestion went no further, but the idea perhaps took inspiration from the significant number of radio shows aimed at housewives during wartime.⁴⁰ It is notable that the idea came directly from members, who likely had personal experience of the challenges of fitting voluntary commitments around paid work.

References to the high proportion of members working in paid employment in addition to their WVS activities—and, of course, their housework—are peppered throughout the local Narrative Reports for the duration of the war, and support Lucy Noakes's assertion that 'the success of the [WVS] in recruiting widely from the working-class should not be underestimated'.⁴¹ However, what drove these women to volunteer, particularly given their significant other responsibilities, both paid and unpaid, is less immediately clear. Certainly, some may have felt a desire to play their part in the so-called 'people's war'. This concept—the idea of a unified populace working together to meet the challenges of war and defeat the enemy—was the subject of much contemporary propaganda, but has since been problematised by many historians, who rightly assert that such rhetoric cannot be read as the lived experience of all British people, pointing to the ways that class, gender, racial and other divisions became more entrenched at specific points, belying this propaganda.⁴² Nonetheless, at least some members may have identified with this rhetoric, and felt that volunteering with the WVS might enable them to become part of 'the people'—or perhaps at least appear to be doing so.

Evidence from the Narrative Reports suggests that this may have been the case, with women far more likely to join the organisation in the immediate aftermath of a sudden crisis.⁴³ The Black Country saw relatively little by way of aerial bombardment during the conflict when compared with major cities, but it did not escape entirely. Given that bombardment was comparatively rare and often highly localised, if a town fell victim to the blitz on a specific occasion, it is possible to track a sharp rise in enrolments in the WVS there shortly thereafter. For example, following an air raid on Oldbury in late July 1942, 102 new members signed up to volunteer with the WVS there in August, compared with 64 in June and 46 in September.⁴⁴ For some, the shock of bombs falling in their

community may have spurred on a sense of patriotic duty and a desire to do whatever they could to assist in the aftermath of future raids, leading them to enrol in the WVS. Others, meanwhile, may have been more concerned with being *seen* to be doing something after an emergency, possibly even feeling a sense of shame for not having done so earlier. Still others, as Maggie Andrews suggests, may have desired a distraction, finding in volunteering something that would ‘divert their thoughts from worrying about their own loved ones’ or indeed their own safety, during a crisis.⁴⁵

These sensations arguably worked in reverse as ‘war-weariness’ began to set in and the end of the conflict was felt to be in sight.⁴⁶ For example, in Oldbury by September 1943, ‘the good news from the War Front’ had ‘a rather bad effect on [...] attendance. Many women seem to think it is now quite unnecessary to hear how to deal with firebombs’.⁴⁷ In 1944, Wolverhampton’s Centre Organiser found that ‘persuading people to Knit for Liberated Countries’, a nationwide WVS scheme, was ‘hard work’.⁴⁸ As the sense of danger receded, and the war was felt to be in its final throes, some individuals appear to have been less willing to undertake voluntary war work within the WVS. Nonetheless, it does appear that until the very final months of the conflict, WVS Centres in the Black Country were able to retain their volunteers. In March 1945, for example, West Bromwich members were reported to be ‘very little occupied with no call on their services’ but despite this, there had been ‘no resignations’.⁴⁹

Arguably, the ebb and flow of recruitment and engagement with WVS work across the war speaks to women choosing how, and when, to engage with the organisation. Members had a degree of autonomy in the forms of work they undertook within the WVS. While a Centre might receive official instruction that they would be required to help with a specific event such as a trainload of evacuees arriving, or sending out a mobile canteen, importantly there was no obligation on individual members to help out with particular schemes, or even to give a certain number of hours’ voluntary work over a given period. For an individual member, the choice of when—indeed, whether—to participate in the kinds of civil defence work her Centre was undertaking at a given moment, and thus her interactions with her local public sphere, were driven by her own interests and availability, as well as external factors such as those suggested above. Indeed, the flexible nature of the opportunities the WVS offered its members enabled them to make important choices in how they engaged with it. Rather than being obliged to attend monthly or weekly meetings, the very local, specific and pragmatic nature of much of the organisation’s work left it far more open to working-class women than has typically been assumed. In turn, this allowed these women to take on an active and visible role in local public life.

‘Our women are working very hard ... victory is our motto!’:⁵⁰ local civil defence:

The civil defence work done by WVS volunteers varied, largely dependent on what was required in a particular moment and at a particular Centre, across the conflict. This was the case in the thirteen Black Country Centres, where constantly shifting and changing local circumstances dictated the forms civil defence work was to take. In the Black Country, as elsewhere, the staffing of rest centres following an air raid could take up significant amounts of time. When, for example, Darlaston was struck by an air raid in 1941,

the WVS rest centre was called into action at 2:30am on 5 June—forty-five minutes after the first bombs had fallen—and remained open until 6:30pm on 7 June, a period of seventy-six hours throughout which basic first aid; hot food and drinks; spaces to sleep, and assistance for the homeless was provided continuously by volunteers.⁵¹ Elsewhere, work was more mundane and ordinary. Almost all Narrative Reports mention the quite literal bread and butter work of making sandwiches or hot meals. For example, in Stourbridge, by October 1940 WVS volunteers were feeding ‘around four to five hundred per week’ in the town’s main canteen, with an additional smaller canteen serving sandwiches ‘between 10am and 12pm daily’.⁵² In Walsall and Wolverhampton, the two largest towns in the area, WVS-run hostels for servicewomen on leave were established and run entirely by volunteers. In December 1942 alone, Walsall’s hostel found room for 151 servicewomen to spend at least one night, served 5,321 meals, and organised a Christmas party complete with gift-giving for servicewomen who ‘thoroughly enjoyed it’.⁵³

In several Centres locally, the WVS had a role in organising evacuees, perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of their wartime work. Narrative Reports frequently list the number of evacuees who had arrived and the local Centre’s role in organising billets, but also the more pastoral nature of support provided by volunteers in this capacity. In Wolverhampton, for instance, one Report noted that ‘many are the personal problems the evacuated mothers bring to discuss with us. Sometimes the relief of a compassionate listener is all that is needed [...] to ease the woman’s mind; oftentimes this abstract comfort is more needed than material help’.⁵⁴ Social engagements were arranged for the evacuated: in Stourbridge, for example, a church hall was opened and tea provided every afternoon for evacuees in January 1941, though by July, when numbers of evacuees had fallen a ‘chat and a cup of tea’ was provided once a week.⁵⁵

On other occasions, WVS Centres were called upon to fill gaps in state provision, most often in hospitals. This did not involve providing medical care, but instead volunteering in canteens or laundries at moments of staff shortage: in December 1943, for example, Stourbridge WVS helped with ‘domestic work’ at Old Swinford Maternity Hospital when staff ‘all went down with flu’.⁵⁶ A more permanent situation seems to have existed at a Walsall hospital, where volunteers undertook ‘sewing, dusting and vegetable preparing’ on a regular rota.⁵⁷ In Oldbury, members ‘helped at the West Bromwich Hospital when they were rushed with a convoy from Normandy’ in August 1944—their role was not specified, but it was likely similar to those described above.⁵⁸ WVS members also helped out local authorities with general administration. Darlaston WVS organised the distribution of food ration books to ‘one third of the town’s population’, for example, while in Dudley, when women became eligible for Fire Guard duties, the WVS was asked to help out with registering women for the role, described as ‘a biggish job – 11,000 forms to deal with’.⁵⁹

The work of the WVS in the Black Country was, as this suggests, heavily gendered, and indeed largely aimed at supporting women and children. Women volunteers almost without exception undertook jobs which were highly domestic in nature. They cooked, cleaned and cared for populations stationed in the area, whether these were existing residents; evacuees; billeted workers, or service personnel. Even in the aftermath of an air raid, their role was to support male civil defence workers and the homeless in such ‘caring’ roles, rather than, for example, taking part in the search for survivors. In only one instance does a local Narrative Report record women undertaking a more

‘masculine’ role in civil defence: in Wednesbury, some WVS members undertook signalling classes with the town’s Home Guard, and even here, there was no suggestion of women being trained in the use of weapons, or taking an active defence role.⁶⁰ This is unsurprising: as Lucy Noakes has argued, ‘[c]ontinuity, not change, shaped gender roles within civil defence’.⁶¹

Thus, the work done by the WVS and its members, at least within the Black Country, certainly reinforced, rather than challenged, contemporary gender roles. Yet it was still vitally important in allowing women to take on a full and active role in the local public sphere. Making sandwiches, organising billets for the evacuated, or knitting jerseys for servicemen were all tasks that enabled these women to take on a formal, recognised role in public life through the organisation. What is particularly significant here is that this work was done by women of all social classes. As noted, leadership roles in these thirteen Centres did remain in the hands of more middle-class women who were already established in local public life, but it was very often the rank-and-file membership of working-class volunteers who undertook much of this day-to-day work. The highly localised, specific and above all practical voluntary opportunities offered by the WVS enabled these women to increasingly take on recognised roles in the public sphere.

‘Work in the Housewives’ Service, like that of a household, seems never to be done’:⁶² housewifery in the community:

This became even more localised through the establishment of the Housewives’ Service (HS). The HS was established by the WVS to allow women who were tied to the home through a combination of either domestic responsibilities or paid work—and frequently both—the opportunity to partake in voluntary work, by allowing them the opportunity to undertake this within their own homes and immediate communities. It was, writes Hinton, ‘the most effective way in which WVS brought working-class wives into the WVS’.⁶³ Jessica Hammett, too, asserts that ‘the housewives’ service which was the most successful of the neighbours’ civil defence associations established during the war’, though she cautions that individual HS groups were ‘generally reliant on local enthusiasm and initiative and thus their success varied hugely’ and that the government did not ‘fully appreciate the potential worth of housewives’ labour’.⁶⁴ While this may be true, the very existence of the HS is indicative of the value placed by the WVS leadership on the significant contribution working-class women might make to the war effort through voluntary civil defence work.

To join the HS, a woman had to attend four ARP lectures, after which she qualified for WVS membership. Once a WVS member, she could pick and choose what roles she felt able to undertake. For some women, particularly those without paid employment, or with domestic support, this might quite intense and time-consuming, such as long hours at a canteen, or coordinating a rest centre after an air raid. Nella Last, wartime Mass Observation diarist and WVS member in Barrow-in-Furness, typifies such a member, with her long hours at ‘the Centre’ featuring heavily in her diaries, and later academic scholarship on her experiences.⁶⁵ As her diaries record, Nella Last was a middle-aged housewife whose two sons had left home; she did not undertake paid employment and was supported in her domestic labour by a daily maid through the conflict. While her husband did not always, from her observations, appreciate the time she spent at

Barrow's WVS Centre, her circumstances meant she felt able to give this level of commitment to the WVS.⁶⁶ For women who were keen to undertake voluntary civil defence work but who did not enjoy a similar domestic situation, or those who had to fit any voluntary work around their paid employment, enrolling in the HS provided an ideal outlet.

In the thirteen Black Country Centres, the HS was particularly popular, likely because of the relatively large proportion of working-class housewives there, for whom the HS was designed. Exact numbers, both locally and nationally, are hard to find. A WVS internal publication from 1942 noted that the HS had over 321,000 members nationwide, but this survey was not completed annually.⁶⁷ Hinton suggests that by 1943, about 30 percent of WVS members were exclusively active in the HS.⁶⁸ Narrative Reports for the thirteen Centres do not regularly note the exact numbers of individual women active in particular aspects of WVS work, but where these figures were recorded they support the assertion that this was the section of the WVS in which most local members were active. Indeed, with relatively few exceptions, the HS appears to have been *more* popular in the Black Country than Hinton's nationwide average would suggest. For example, in a July 1941 internal survey conducted by Dudley WVS, it was estimated that 1,800 of the Centre's roughly 2,100 members—about 85 per cent—were *only* members of the HS, and did not undertake other duties for the WVS.⁶⁹ A similar exercise in Rowley Regis in June 1942 revealed that 291 of the 400 WVS members in the town (73 percent) were only involved with the HS.⁷⁰ In March 1943, almost identical figures were produced in a survey in West Bromwich: 404 members, of which 298 (74 percent) were 'HS only'.⁷¹ For these three Centres, at least, Hinton's figure of 30 percent seems particularly conservative.

Even in towns where the proportion of women in the HS was not reported, almost without exception it seems to have been a particularly significant aspect of the WVS's work. For example, a 'big drive' for the HS in Tipton in February 1941 produced 355 new enrolments that month alone—though it is worth noting that subsequent Narrative Reports do not elaborate on how active, or otherwise, these new members were.⁷² In Walsall, meanwhile, a milestone 1,000 HS members was reached by October 1942.⁷³ Of the thirteen Centres surveyed, only one—Smethwick—seemed to struggle in encouraging women to join the HS. Despite repeated efforts to establish a HS there, the scheme did not take off in the town, for reasons that were not elaborated upon in the Narrative Reports; it may have been that the Smethwick Centre Organiser was unpopular with local women, who proved reluctant to work with her on this scheme.⁷⁴ This instance seems to support Hammett's claim that the success of a particular HS branch was often based on levels of local enthusiasm.⁷⁵ However, in all other Centres surveyed, the particular success of the HS, at least in terms of recruitment, was mentioned in multiple Narrative Reports, suggesting that the scheme was particularly popular in the Black Country.

In an area where, as demonstrated, so many WVS members were in paid employment, the HS offered an ideal opportunity to take on a voluntary role in civil defence which fitted around their other commitments, both paid and unpaid. It was the HS which most effectively enabled working-class women to contribute to local—often *very* local—public life, as its members provided practical support and a semi-official presence in streets, neighbourhoods, and communities. HS members' homes effectively became highly localised versions of WVS Centres. A HS member might volunteer her home as

the salvage depot for her street, for example, where neighbours could bring salvage before this was collected for transportation to a central location, or for her home to be the neighbourhood's 'decontamination station' in the event of gas attacks.⁷⁶ Mass casualties from such attacks did not ultimately materialise, but had been widely feared.⁷⁷ In anticipation, some HS members agreed to open their homes, and specifically their bathtubs, to anyone in the neighbourhood who was gassed and required decontamination. Additionally, HS members were given first aid training and their homes stocked with basic medical supplies and blankets, so that, in the event of an air raid on her street, HS members could assist ARP officers. In Dudley, for instance, by July 1941, 775 first aid boxes had been distributed to the homes of HS members, which were made identifiable to the community by the placing of a red WVS card in the window of a front room.⁷⁸ The bombed out were taken to an HS member's home, identifiable by these red cards, until they could be taken to an official shelter. They would be given basic first aid, tea and sandwiches, and clothing and blankets, if required. In Wolverhampton, the WVS even organised for HS members' stocks to include sanitary towels.⁷⁹

HS members were also expected—indeed, encouraged—to care for more temporary members of the local community, specifically service personnel stationed nearby. This generally involved providing 'hospitality' in their own homes, which included opportunities to bathe, be fed a home-cooked meal, and sometimes a bed for the night. For instance, Dudley HS members "adopted" 80 ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service] members stationed in the vicinity, offering hospitality' at home.⁸⁰ Members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force [WAAF] were offered 'hospitality' by Oldbury HS members 'when they get their 24 h' leave'.⁸¹ In Halesowen, by March 1943 arrangements had been made for WAAFs stationed on a nearby barrage balloon site to be 'provided with regular hot baths in HS members' homes'.⁸² In Walsall, HS members frequently found themselves 'acting as hostesses [providing room and board] owing to shortages of accommodation' in the town's WVS-run hostel for servicewomen.⁸³ This hospitality appears to have been designed to allow servicewomen to enjoy a brief period of civilian life while on leave, and it is worth noting that HS do not appear to have been provided with any additional food rations to encourage its provision.

Most notably, against a backdrop of not-insignificant concerns about women's sexuality in wartime, including the sexual behaviour of married women whose own husbands might be away in the armed forces, HS members were also encouraged to offer such hospitality to servicemen.⁸⁴ Halesowen HS members regularly found themselves 'entertaining lonely soldiers' stationed in the vicinity.⁸⁵ In Stourbridge, too, Narrative Reports frequently mention members 'entertaining soldiers at their own homes'.⁸⁶ An April 1942 Report from Wolverhampton noted that the hostesses of overseas troops did such a good job that the troops 'apparently much appreciated even our much-maligned Black Country'.⁸⁷ As with references to providing hospitality to female members of the forces, Narrative Reports suggest that this involved providing home comforts for soldiers stationed nearby. These included British troops, as well as many American servicemen, stationed in the west of the UK prior to the opening of the second front. The presence of American troops was at times mentioned: three GIs caused much excitement on arriving at the WVS office in Dudley, on one occasion, asking 'if we could press their trousers for a Dance!'.⁸⁸ However, race relations went unmentioned in all surviving Narrative Reports. Given this, it is likely that most—if not all—the troops being 'entertained', especially at

HS members' homes, were white. Nonetheless, in light of contemporary anxieties over, for example, the number of babies born to women whose husbands were not the father, the active encouragement of HS members to take these men into their homes overnight might appear surprising.⁸⁹

Arguably, however, belonging to the HS and the WVS more broadly conferred respectability upon these women. In 'entertaining' soldiers, they were caring for young men stationed hundreds, if not thousands, of miles from their own homes, perhaps even acting as substitute mothers. This kind of 'social motherhood', identified by Eileen Yeo, has its roots in the nineteenth century, and for many decades had been associated with the behaviours of middle- and upper-class women. As Yeo argues, it enabled women from such backgrounds to take on roles in the public sphere when legal and cultural impediments prevented their doing so by other means.⁹⁰ But the HS was a significant departure from this, as it enabled working-class women to undertake a form of 'social motherhood' within their own homes.

Essentially, the HS enabled women to provide forms of domestic support within their immediate communities, something that had, of course, long been part of working-class female solidarity.⁹¹ Sue Bruley, for instance, describes how 'neighbourliness' operated in working-class communities in South Wales mining villages during the 1926 General Strike.⁹² The role of the HS and the WVS was, in some ways, a formalisation of this support. Indeed, the precedent for working-class women providing such forms of support informally and between themselves was, at times, recognised in WVS Narrative Reports, particularly during the bad influenza outbreak in the winter of 1943/1944. In Tipton, the Ministry of Health sought the WVS's cooperation in providing practical help for the unwell but 'on enquiry it was found that many HS members had been giving neighbours' service' already.⁹³ A similar meeting was organised by health authorities in Walsall, seeking to discuss how the HS might provide practical assistance, such as by shopping for the unwell. As the Centre Organiser noted rather tartly in the Narrative Report, 'some housewives have been doing this for a long time in their own areas' without requiring a formal rota.⁹⁴ Much of what the HS did—providing support within the community—was not new, even if certain aspects of this community support, like providing first aid in the event of an air raid, was specific to wartime circumstance. Arguably, however, it was through the HS and the WVS that these previously informal processes became more official. The WVS sought to build on, and perhaps formalise, the forms of neighbourly support women had been giving one another for decades within their local communities. But in so doing, the contribution that these women made to local public life, through their domestic labours, was recognised and, crucially, valued.

Housewives, the WVS and the 'People's War'

The voluntary civil defence work undertaken by the WVS might be understood as yet more unpaid labour for working-class women, at a time when the privations of war made the domestic duties of daily life even more challenging.⁹⁵ Certainly, the additional demands on an individual's time that HS or WVS duties brought must be acknowledged. However, it is equally important to note that joining the WVS was a personal choice, and not compulsory. For those who wanted to find a way to contribute to the 'People's War',

voluntary civil defence work in the WVS was one way to do so. But even allowing for the pressures of contemporary propaganda, the organisation remained a voluntary one. Unlike other forms of war work and wartime service, women could not be conscripted into the WVS. The women in these thirteen Centres who gave their time did so voluntarily, whether as leaders and organisers, or ordinary members.

In encouraging and enabling women into civil defence work, the WVS arguably went some way towards recognising the value of women's domestic labour. Some of the voluntary work done by the WVS, such as manning a canteen for several hours, was simply not realistic for a working-class woman holding down a part- or full-time job alongside her own domestic responsibilities. The HS, therefore, was particularly significant in enabling those women so desired to participate in local public life and more broadly become part of the 'People's War', through a manageable form of voluntary war work which recognised and allowed for the other demands on their time. The practicalities of being the person responsible for first aid on a street; being the community's 'decontamination station' in the event of a gas attack; or even offering hospitality to service personnel stationed nearby effectively drew these women into the public sphere.

The WVS did not seek to challenge existing gender roles, as work was generally focused around the domestic. Significantly, however, the WVS both recognised the importance of this work, and, through the HS, provided a means for women who wanted to contribute to the war effort but who were constrained by their other responsibilities the ability to do so. Most significantly, they afforded this opportunity to working-class women. Certainly, leadership roles within local branches in the Black Country were largely the preserve of middle-class women, as elsewhere in Britain. But in this very working-class, industrialised area, the organisation enabled working-class women to take on a formal role in local public life. The WVS recognised and facilitated the contribution that the ordinary housewife could make to the 'People's War', across the duration of the conflict.

Notes

1. WRVSA&HC, WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WVH, November 1942.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Raffaella Baritono, "'Mrs. Roosevelt Goes on Tour": Eleanor Roosevelt's Soft Diplomacy During World War II', in: *Eleanor Roosevelt's Views on Diplomacy and Democracy: The Global Citizen*, eds. Dario Fazzi and Anya Luscombe, (London: Palgrave, 2020), 41–64.
5. For the contested nature of the 'ordinary person', see: Claire Langhamer, 'Who the hell are ordinary people?' Ordinarity as a category of historical analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28, (2018), 175–195.
6. Caitriona Beaumont, 'Citizens not feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organisations in England, 1928–39', *Women's History Review*, 9, (2000), 411–429.
7. James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
8. The significant literature on narratives of the 'People's War' is discussed more fully below.
9. Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership*, 6.
10. James Hinton, 'Voluntarism and the Welfare/Warfare State: Women's Voluntary Services in the 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9, (1998), 274–305; Hinton, *Women, social*

- leadership*; Hinton, 'Conservative Women and Voluntary Social Service', 1938-51, in: *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s*, eds. Stuart Ball and Ian Halliday, (London: Routledge, 2002), 100—119.
11. Clarisse Berthenzène, 'The middlebrow and the making of 'a new common sense': women's voluntarism, Conservative politics and representations of womanhood', in: *Rethinking right-wing women: Gender and the Conservative Party, 1880s to the present*, eds. Clarisse Berthenzène and Julie V. Gottlieb, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 104—121, 113.
 12. Lucy Noakes, "'Serve to Save": Gender, Citizenship and Civil Defence in Britain 1937-41', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47, (2012), 734-753; Maggie Andrews, *Women and Evacuation in the Second World War: Femininity, Domesticity and Motherhood*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Henry Irving, "'We want everybody's salvage!": Recycling, Voluntarism and the People's War', *Cultural and Social History*, 16, (2019), 165—184.
 13. Berthenzène, 'The middlebrow', 116.
 14. Charlotte Tomlinson, 'A Million Forgotten Women: Voluntarism, Citizenship, and the Women's Voluntary Services in Second World War Britain', (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2021).
 15. Caitriona Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens: Domesticity and the women's movement in England, 1928-64*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 137.
 16. Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997 & 2015); Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens*.
 17. Bilston, Darlaston, Dudley, Halesowen, Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Stourbridge, Tipton, Walsall, Wednesbury, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton.
 18. Shelia Blackburn, 'Working-Class Attitudes to Social Reform: Black Country Chainmakers and Anti-Sweating Legislation, 1880-1930', *International Review of Social History*, 33, (1988), 42-69.
 19. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-WORC/SBG, November 1940; WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-WORC/HSO, September 1942; WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-STAF/DLN, June 1941.
 20. There were occasional gaps in the record, where a monthly report for a Centre was either not filed, or has subsequently been lost or damaged. Narrative Reports have been digitised for Centres in England, Wales and Scotland and are available at <<http://catalogue.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/calmview/>>, last accessed 26 September 2023.
 21. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1945-CB/WBW, March 1945.
 22. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1945-CB/SMW, May 1945.
 23. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WBW, November/December 1942.
 24. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1939-STAF/RRS, June 1939.
 25. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-STAF/RRS, December 1940.
 26. Hinton, *Women, Social leadership*, 39.
 27. The information which follows in this paragraph is derived from these sources.
 28. Hinton, *Women, social leadership*; Berthenzène, 'The middlebrow'.
 29. Names of Centre Organisers were cross-referenced with the names of women councillors in each of the locales.
 30. These members were not named in Narrative Reports, so it is not possible to trace them through census returns, as above.
 31. Susan L. Carruthers, "'Manning the Factories": Propaganda and Policy on the Employment of Women, 1939-1947', *History*, 75, (1990), 232—256.
 32. Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, (London: Routledge, 1984), 29—31.
 33. Ian Gazeley, 'Women's pay in British industry during the Second World War', *Economic History Review*, 61, (2008), 651-671, 653.
 34. For married women's employment in the area, see for example: Blackburn, 'Working Class Attitudes to Social Reform'.
 35. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WBW, November/December 1942.
 36. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-STAF/DLN, September 1943.

37. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WSL, April 1942.
38. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-CB/WVH, January 1944.
39. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-WORC/OBRY, February 1944.
40. Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
41. Noakes, 'Serve to Save', 747.
42. For an overview of the extensive historiography of the 'people's war', see: Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939–1945* (New Edition), (London: Pimlico, 1992); Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Geoffrey Field, *Blood, Sweat, and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
43. David Edgerton, 'The Nationalisation of British History: Historians, Nationalism and the Myths of 1940', *English Historical Review*, 136, (2021), 950–985. This evidence, perhaps, contradicts David Edgerton's recent suggestion that the 'people's war' only became widely used in the 1960s, and did not become 'common' until the 1990s. Although the term itself is not used in surviving Narrative Reports analysed for this article, evidence such as the above does suggest a strong sense that women in the locale felt themselves part of a 'people's war', and that volunteering for the WVS enabled members to feel that they were playing a role in this collective phenomenon.
44. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-WORC/OBRY, June–September 1942.
45. Andrews, *Women and Evacuation*, 264.
46. Angus Calder discusses how the public's morale and support for the war fluctuated at different points throughout the conflict, see: Calder, *The People's War*, especially Chapter 6.
47. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-WORC/OBRY, September 1943.
48. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-CB/WVH, October 1944.
49. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1945-CB/WBW, March 1945.
50. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-STAF/TPN, September 1940.
51. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-STAF/DLN, June 1941.
52. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-WORC/SBG, October 1940.
53. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WSL, December 1942.
54. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-CB/WVH, August 1944.
55. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-WORC/SBG, January and July 1941.
56. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-WORC/SBG, December 1943.
57. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-CB/WSL, October 1941.
58. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-WORC/OBRY, August 1944.
59. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-STAF/DLN, May 1942; WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/DDL, November 1942.
60. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-STAF/WNB, September 1943. For women's contested role within the Home Guard, see: Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, 'Women in the firing line: the home guard and the defence of gender boundaries in Britain in the second world war', *Women's History Review*, 9, (2000), 231–255.
61. Noakes, 'Serve to Save', 738. For more on gender and civil defence, see: Susan Grayzel, *At home and under fire: Air raids and culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Lucy Noakes and Susan Grayzel, 'Defending the home(land): gendering Civil Defence from the First World War to the 'War on Terror'', in: *Gender and Conflict since 1914 Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Ana Carden-Coyne, (London: Macmillan, 2012), 53–70.
62. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-CB/DDL, July 1941.
63. Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership*, 79–85.
64. Jessica Hammett, *Creating the People's War: Civil Defence Communities in Second World War Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 137.

65. James Hinton, *Nine wartime lives: Mass Observation and the making of the modern self*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joe Moran, 'Private Lives, Public Histories: The Diary in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 54, (2015), 138–162.
66. Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds.), *Nella Last's war: the Second World War diaries of 'Housewife, 49'*, (London: Profile, 2006).
67. Mrs Atkinson, 'Story of the Housewives' Service', WVS Internal Publication, 1942, p. 8, via: https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/About%20us/WVS_housewives_service_2013.pdf last accessed 26 September 2023.
68. Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership*, 80.
69. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-CB/DDL, July 1941.
70. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-STAF/RRS, June 1942.
71. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-CB/WBW, March 1943.
72. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-STAF/TPN, February 1941.
73. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WSL, October 1942.
74. For example, in March 1942, Smethwick WVS was given a talk by a representative from Dudley on the success of the HS there, but it appears to have been of no avail. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/SMW, March 1942.
75. Hammett, *Creating the People's War*, 137.
76. In Walsall in May 1942, for example, an internal survey found 27 HS members 'willing for their homes to be waste paper depots' while a 'list was being compiled of those willing to take into their homes minor gas casualties and allow them to have a bath'. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WSL, May 1942.
77. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*.
78. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-CB/DDL, July 1941.
79. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-CB/WVH, December 1940.
80. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-CB/DDL, September/October 1941.
81. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-WORC/OBRY, August 1942.
82. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-WORC/HSO, March 1943.
83. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-CB/WSL, February 1943.
84. There is a very extensive literature on attitudes towards women's sexuality in wartime, and in particular relations with servicemen. For a helpful overview, see: Penny Summerfield & Nicole Crockett, 'You weren't taught that with the welding': lessons in sexuality in the Second World War', *Women's History Review*, 1, (1992), 435–454; Rose, *Which People's War?*, 71–92; Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, (London: Palgrave, 2002); Claire Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England', *Historical Journal*, 50, (2007), 173–196; Alison Twells, 'Sex, gender and romantic intimacy in servicemen's letters during the Second World War', *Historical Journal*, 63, (2020), 732–753.
85. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-WORC/HSO, October 1940.
86. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1941-WORC/SBG, January 1941.
87. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1942-CB/WVH, April 1942.
88. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-CB/DDL, February 1944.
89. Rose, *Which People's War*, 81.
90. Eileen Yeo, 'Social motherhood and the sexual communion of labour in British Social Science, 1850-1950', *Women's History Review*, 1, (1992), 63–87; 'The creation of 'motherhood' and Women's responses in Britain and France, 1750–1914', *Women's History Review*, 8, (1999), 201–218.
91. Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); Carl Chinn, *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor, 1880-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of "Gossip" in Working-Class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960*, (London: Scholar Press, 1997).
92. Sue Bruley, 'The Politics of Food: Gender, Family, Community and Collective Feeding in South Wales in the General Strike and Miners' Lockout of 1926', *Twentieth Century British History*, 18, (2007), 54–77.

93. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1943-STAF/TPN, December 1943.
94. WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1944-CB/WSL, January 1944.
95. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the University of Worcester for funding the original doctorate upon which this research is based. The anonymous peer-review comments were extremely helpful in improving this original article and I thank the authors for their time. I would like to thank the other authors in this collection for working with us. Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas have gone above and beyond in providing support throughout the writing and editing process, and I extend my sincere thanks to them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Anna Muggeridge is Lecturer in History at the University of Worcester. Her work explores women's political activism at the local level. Her doctorate examined women's activism in the Black Country and she is currently researching a history of women in local government in interwar England and Wales.

ORCID

Anna Muggeridge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9722-649X>