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Rent Arrears, Food Shortages and Evacuees: How War Enters the Worcester Home in Two World Wars

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ABSTRACT

The strong military traditions of Worcester may mean the city's engagement in two world wars is often thought about in terms of the soldiers or even the ammunition produced at Blackpole Munitions Works. The ways in which both wars impacted the more mundane lives of the majority of women who were housewives have received less attention. As housewives, daughters, sisters or domestic servants, women undertook the lion's share of the domestic and emotional labours needed to maintain homes, communities and neighbourhoods. This was played out at a local level, shaped by the geographical, economic and cultural specificity of not only regions but towns and cities. There were as many different home fronts as there were battle fronts; thus, Worcester residents experienced the privations and problems of twentieth-century large-scale international warfare, through their local home front. This contextualized case study of Worcester explores the financial challenges housewives faced, their problems with food provisioning and the care of evacuees to argue that both wars entered the home in a multitude of ways. It provides evidence of how, the boundary between public and private spheres was blurred, as in wartime the state interfered in the domestic life to an unprecedented degree.

KEYWORDS

World wars; home front; women; children; consumption; Worcester

Introduction

Within a week of the outbreak of the First World War, a letter appeared in the *Worcester Daily Times* addressing the potential food crisis the hostilities would create. The writer's understanding of how food would become a weapon of war was perceptive, for Britain was heavily reliant on imported food in the early twentieth century.¹ The solutions offered were more problematic. Not only was it suggested the needy could be fed on gruel made from the outer layers of cabbages, bread crusts and other inviting leftovers from the wealthier classes' diet, it also proposed 'a few leaflets could be scattered, broadcast amongst the poor advising them to masticate their foods more

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¹See M. Barnett, *British Food Policy during the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); P. Dewey, *British Agriculture in the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

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thoroughly (and thus lessen the bulk needed).² There is no record of how readers responded to the recommendation, but the idea that food shortages could be addressed, by chewing food for longer, spasmodically resurfaced during the conflict. The suggestion that Worcester housewives could and should exert control over the way their families ate their food is, however, an early indication of the extent to which total mechanized war blurred the boundary between public and private spheres, and how the state increasingly interfered in the lives of those on the home front.

It was during the First World War, as Susan Grayzel has pointed out, that the term 'home front' entered the language in the wake of the shelling of Whitby, Hartlepool and Scarborough on 16 December 1914. The death and destruction that this brought about made it clear that homes, women and children could no longer be shielded from the impact of war.³ Over the next 4 years, war entered the home in a multitude of ways as the state and the 'war effort' interfered in the everyday lives of housewives to an unprecedented degree. As Adrian Gregory has argued, the Second World War home front has eclipsed the 1914–18 conflict in popular memory.⁴ Yet it was during the First World War that both local and national governments learnt how to mobilize a civilian population to engage in total war.⁵ The voluntary ethos which initially shaped many ordinary people's engagement with the conflict was steadily replaced first by cajoling and assumptions and then by multiple written and unwritten regulations, covering everything from blackouts to food preparation. The conduct of the First World War laid the foundations for compulsory state interference in the home at the outset of the second. It was also the First World War which shaped many of the hopes, fears and anxieties of the civilian population in the Second World War. This article therefore follows the recent trend amongst historians to study the interrelated histories of the two conflicts together.⁶

On the surface, it may seem life on the home front was a shared experience across the country, but each village, town or city had its own unique war to fight, something which was aptly demonstrated by the multiplicity of local studies carried out during the recent commemoration of the First World War.⁷ Likewise, many of the significant iconographical constituents of the Second World War had regionally diverse impacts. This was brought home to the author some 35 years ago, when I asked a group of students studying twentieth-century British History to interview an elderly member of the family over the Christmas break. Their remit was to record experiences of the Second World War home front and many returned with details of their relatives' stories of rationing, factory work, the blitz or evacuation. One, however, explained that his grandfather, who had lived in a rural Welsh village, had not noticed anything different during the conflict. He had not experienced bombing and had not encountered any

²Worcester Daily Times (WDT), 10 August 1914.

³S. Grayzell, *At Home Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 7.

⁵See Gregory, *The Last Great War*; B. Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain* (Abington: Routledge, 2014).

⁶See for example: Grayzell, *At Home Under Fire*; L. Noakes, C. Langhamer, and C. Siebrecht, *Total War: An Emotional History*. Vol. 227, no. 1st. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷This is demonstrated not only by numerous HLF funded local history projects but also through the regionally based publications on the Great War produced by History Press and Amberley books.

service personnel or evacuees, and his family had no shortage of food. Even allowing for the vagaries and quirks of oral history, it was an interesting lesson in the importance of local studies. For in both the First and Second World War, there were as many different home fronts as there were battle fronts.

This article brings a local focus to research I have undertaken previously around homes, housewives and domesticity at a regional or national level. It explores three themes: protecting and preserving homes, caring for and feeding families, and finally, the expansion of domestic and emotional labour beyond the home. These themes hardly touch the surface of the multifarious and complex relationship between home and war, but they do provide evidence of how, during both conflicts, the boundary between public and private spheres was blurred. Researching the home and the lives of domestic women in a specific location is never straightforward, although in both conflicts the majority of women were housewives.⁸ In histories of First World War Britain, as Karen Hunt has argued, housewives ‘remain opaque’.⁹ They are uniquely hidden from both the historiography and many of the sources and archival material utilized to study these conflicts. There were, for example, no Mass Observation or other diarists in Worcester. Research relies instead upon piecing together traces and snippets of domestic life found by trawling through local newspapers and directories, local histories, photographs and letters, and local and institutional archives, from organizations such as the Women’s Voluntary Service, and for the Second World War, oral histories and memories.¹⁰ Like all sources, these are partial, selective, mediated and subject to inaccuracy and problematic absences, but they also provide invaluable and unique glimpses of women’s domestic lives. Furthermore, they shed light on how Worcester’s particular geographical location, its cultural and economic specificity, shaped the ways in which both conflicts impacted upon the homes of city residents.

It would have been impossible to be unaware of either conflict in Worcester, which with its strong military tradition as the home of the Worcestershire Regiment thronged with military personnel. Many residents of the city were in the territorials, reservists or the yeomanry and quickly called up, whilst others from surrounding countryside, towns and cities who enlisted were soon directed to Norton barracks following the declaration of war in August 1914. The population soon discovered, as Adrian Gregory has argued, ‘the mass experience of Army life and of combat, and the human consequences of military operations were the main pillars of civilian existence during the First World War’.¹¹ Likewise, in the Second World War, as Doris Monk recalled, the city ‘was absolutely bulging at the seams with servicemen’.¹² Many were visiting from

⁸K. Hunt, ‘A Heroine at Home: The Housewife on the First World War Home Front’, in *The Home Front in Britain: Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914* ed. by M. Andrews and J. Lomas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 73–91; H. L. Smith, *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

⁹Hunt, ‘A Heroine at Home’, pp. 73–91, p. 78.

¹⁰See for example: J. Purvis, ‘Using Primary Sources When Researching Women’s History from a Feminist Perspective’, *Women’s History Review*, 1, 2 (1992), 273–306; H. R. Sachs, ‘Reconstructing a Life: The Archival Challenges of Women’s History’, *Library Trends*, 56, 3 (2008), 650–66; D. Beddoe, *Discovering Women’s History: A Practical Guide to Researching the Lives of Women Since 1800* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). Unfortunately, there were no Mass Observation diarists in the city.

¹¹Gregory, *The Last Great War*, p. 7.

¹²Mrs Doris Monk, oral history recorded in Worcester for *WW2 People’s War*, article ID A4201165 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/65/a4201165.shtml>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

surrounding Air Force stations, such as Defford, Pershore and Honeybourne. They were supplemented by Polish Soldiers, Dutch Airmen and Free French who escaped to England as the German army advanced across Europe.

Worcester's industries did not make such a significant contribution to the war effort as many parts of the midlands – for example, the Black Country or Birmingham. They did, however, contribute to war production in the 1914–1918 conflict, which as Anne Spurgeon has pointed out, covered 'everything from mercury thermometers and bronzed field glasses to soldiers' boots and horses' nosebags'.¹³ The newly built munitions works at Blackpole created employment; images of munitionettes repeatedly adorned the pages of local papers. These young women helped the factory produce nearly 300 million cartridges a week for the fighting forces in 1918. The moral welfare of the young, single girls who chose to work in a munitions factory, rather than domestic service, concerned Worcester residents. The Worcester Baptist Women's League's alarm at the girls' use of colourful language paralleled anxieties charted by Deborah Thom's study of munitions workers in other regions.¹⁴ These concerns were precipitated by girls employed, alongside men, in large factories, who congregated at factory gates, laughing, joking and flirting with men. Their presence in the public sphere was a sharp contrast to those who worked in homes as domestic servants.

Blackpole munitions works also churned out shells in the Second World War, once again employing women to do so. Women worked in the many city firms which adapted to the demands of war. For example, the Meco Vital factory-made parts for aircraft and coal cutting machinery whilst portions of Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce factory were 'given over to the production of surgical dressing'.¹⁵ Likewise, the Royal Worcester Porcelain factory made electrical resistors and spark plugs. However, the city's industries were not considered sufficiently extensive to make Worcester a significant target for bombing and this was perhaps one of the most important factors in shaping the experience of war for the city's homes and housewives.

Protecting and Preserving the Home

In 1915, a Parliamentary Recruitment Committee encouraged men to enlist to protect their homes and families; for example, a poster in 1915 depicted a young British soldier in front of a thatched cottage and rolling hills exclaiming 'Isn't this worth fighting for'.¹⁶ Putting aside the degree to which these emblems of a selective version of Englishness marginalized the lives of those who lived in the slums of Worcester or other conurbations, the poster served to emphasize the ideological importance of the home.¹⁷ But it did so just at a point when many areas of the country were experiencing the impact of enemy fire on their homes, which led to approximately 1,500 civilian deaths in Britain during the First World War. The Zeppelins, which evoked both fear

¹³A. Spurgeon, 'Mortality or Morality? Keeping Workers Safe in the First World War', in *The Home Front in Britain*, pp. 57–72, p. 58.

¹⁴WDT, 3 November 1916. For a more detailed exploration of anxieties around munitionettes see – D. Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War 1* (London: IB Tauris, 2000).

¹⁵J. Carpenter, *Wartime Worcestershire* (Redditch: Brewin Books, 1995), p. 40.

¹⁶National Army Museum, NAM. 1977-06-81-22 <<https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1977-06-81-22>>.

¹⁷R. Colls and P. Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1986), p. 62; M. Andrews, 'Ideas and Ideals of Domesticity and Home in the First World War', in *The Home Front in Britain*, pp. 6–20.

and fascination between 1915 and 1917, did not, however, come near Worcester.¹⁸ Nor did the Gotha bombers which dropped their deadly cargo on London and south-east England between 1917 and 1918. This did not mean the residents of Worcester escaped an awareness of the dangers of bombing. The Zeppelin raid on Birmingham on the night of 31 January 1916 provided a signifier not only of German military power but also of the potential threat that aerial bombardment posed. Worcestershire County Council made a representation to the Home Office, arguing there was a need to 'extinguish all lights in case of Aircraft raids' in order 'to protect life and property'.¹⁹ A police notice announcing an *Order as to Lights* was duly produced and circulated in the city. Householders were entreated to keep the light in and the enemy out of their homes; domestic lighting in wartime was subject to surveillance both from the enemy and from those who sought to ensure law and order was maintained in the city.

Worcester was particularly assiduous in policing the blackout. Prosecutions for lighting offences in April 1916 resulted in fines of between 5 shillings and 2 pounds (the equivalent in 2023 of between £53 and £222.50). The magistrates and police sometimes showed leniency, for example, when Henry Webb, a fitter living in St Paul's Street, admitted that he had forgotten to draw a blind resulting in a bright light shining from two of his bedroom windows. The defendant explained his wife had had a brother killed recently and she could not cope without some light on. The Chief Constable agreed to withdraw the case given the defendant's difficult domestic circumstances; private personal circumstances which in wartime had become public issues.²⁰ As the war dragged on, with no sight in the city of the airborne enemy, many in Worcester began to find the blackout both tedious and unnecessary. In 1916, one exasperated resident of the city wrote to the local newspaper demanded to know why:

Worcester - one of the least likely towns in the country to be attacked by aircraft - is darkened far more than London, Birmingham, and other big towns? We have been assured that ample warning will be given of the approach of hostile aircraft, and yet the centre of the city, which could be plunged into total darkness in a second, is kept in a state of positive danger to all who have the misfortune to have to go out after seven o'clock, when the meagre lights from the shops are extinguished.²¹

This person's views were not necessarily shared by others in Worcester, or on the city council, which decided to take out insurance against damage from a Zeppelin raid on a number of prominent buildings.²² Given the difficulty of manoeuvring the huge crafts, which were liable to blow off course, the council may well have been wise in doing so.

This time, they embodied a far more tangible threat of aerial bombardment. The threat of aerial bombardment which this embodied was far more tangible. Political and popular discourses in the 1930s pointed to the technological advances in the

¹⁸A. Freedman, 'Zeppelin Fictions and the British Home Front', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27, 2 (2004), 47–62.

¹⁹Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service (WAAS), ref 200.01 BA 22/24, pp 4–6.

²⁰WDT, 7 April 1916.

²¹WDT, 3 March 1916.

²²Worcester Herald, 10 March 1916.

aeronautical industry and emphasized the threat of bombers.²³ Images in fiction or on newsreel of the bombing of Guernica and Madrid during the Spanish Civil War all meant there was a widespread fear of aerial warfare.²⁴ There was a more systematic organization of shelters, not just the Anderson Shelters which those who had gardens could erect, and 1941 Morrison Shelters which could be put together under the dining table, but also public shelters.²⁵ Dora Monk recalled there were:

three air raid shelters in Penbury Street but luckily we never had to use them, they were made of brick with a concrete roof, they would have been alright to shelter from fall out but no good for a direct hit.²⁶

Building shelters, carrying gas masks and pulling blackout curtains were shared experiences of the Second World War home front, but some geographical areas also had to live with the physical destruction and death the bombing of civilian populations entailed.²⁷

Worcester was rarely a target for German bombers although oral histories recall that aeroplanes could regularly be heard flying overhead on their way to other midland cities, or claim that they could hear the drone of bombers taking off from local aerodromes such as Pershore, Honeybourne or Defford, en route for Germany. Seeing and hearing bombers or the burning of a nearby town is recalled in many areas, even where it could not have occurred.²⁸ Such memories convey how people seek to work through and narrate the emotions attached to an era in their lives. Joe Latham who was a school boy in Worcester during the Second World War recalled that ‘Sirens were sounded night after night and it was essential that no lights were shown at any time’, indicating how intensely the threat of bombing was felt.²⁹ The fear of aerial bombardment solidified, as many memories of the conflict in the city do, on 3 October 1940, when a lone bomber came over the city in daylight and dropped six or seven bombs on the Mining and Engineering Company – or MECO – works; seven local residents were killed. Dora Monk recalled when one of the bombs ricocheted near her house:

It didn’t explode but it was bad enough that they had to evacuate six houses that day in Lambeth Road in St Johns. The railway line ran at the bottom of McIntyre Road by the cemetery and they were evacuated. I had to sleep on a friend’s floor for two to three weeks. My mum and dad went to my grandmother’s but there was no room for me.³⁰

As individually traumatic as such events were, they do not compare to the destruction of major midlands industrial towns such as Birmingham, Britain’s third most bombed

²³See for example Grayzell, *At Home Under Fire*.

²⁴See for example: B. Holman, ‘The Air Panic of 1935: British Press Opinion Between Disarmament and Rearmament’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46, 2 (2011), 288–307; M. Shapira, ‘The Psychological Study of Anxiety in the Era of the Second World War’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24, 1 (2013), 31–57; R. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation, 1919–1939* (London: Penguin UK, 2009).

²⁵P. Bartley, ‘Ellen Wilkinson and Home Security 1940–1945’, in *The Home Front in Britain*, pp.108–138.

²⁶Mrs Doris Monk, oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People’s War*.

²⁷M. Haapamäki, *The Coming of the Aerial War: Culture and the Fear of Airborne Attack in Inter-War Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

²⁸These ideas are explored further in M. Andrews, *Women and Evacuation in the Second World War: Femininity, Domesticity and Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), pp. 174–5.

²⁹Joe Latham, oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People’s War*, article ID AD 6,982,220. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/20/a6982220.shtml>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

³⁰Mrs Doris Monk, oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People’s War*.

city, or Coventry which lost 43,000 homes, half the city's housing stock, in the air raid of 14 November 1940.³¹ Almost all of the homes in the city of Worcester remained intact throughout the conflict; and as the city was considered a relatively safe haven, companies moved either headquarters or some of their production to the city. In 1940, plans were drawn up for large estates in the immediate surrounding area, such as Hindlip Hall, to house key government departments in the event of an invasion.³² Geographical location also contributed to the sense that Worcester was safer than many other locations. As a midland city, far from the coast, Worcester was not on constant alert for signs of invasion, as many areas of the south and east were. Nor was it a major centre for embarkation of troops and workers awaiting transit to the continent, as Folkestone was in the First World War or swathes of Sussex, Hampshire and Kent were in 1944. Instead, according to archaeologist Malcolm Atkin, there were plans for the city to be a site of 'resistance to give the British Army time to regroup'.³³ Plans prevented local doctors from joining the armed forces and arguably maintained the health care at a better level than in many parts of the country.³⁴

Homes in Worcester did not experience widescale destruction from aerial bombardment in either of the two world wars, but the stability of home life was threatened by the economic pressures experienced by soldiers' dependants in 1914 and 1915. Voluntary recruitment in the first months of war alongside the requirement for men in the territorials, reservists and yeomanry to report for active service resulted in an unprecedented number of married men joining the armed forces. As Janis Lomas has pointed out, prior to the First World War the armed forces were predominantly made up of single men with no dependents. Indeed, men needed their superior officer's permission to get married and their wives and widows often relied upon charities, such as the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association (SSFA), for financial assistance.³⁵ Consequently, in 1914 there was no systematic organization to guarantee the financial security of soldier's dependants, although the government speedily promised to fund separation allowances for wives.³⁶ The means of doing so, however, took time to establish and were initially administered somewhat clumsily by charities. A chasm existed between those administering financial relief and the working women who needed it. Suspicion towards and rumours about the working classes, amongst those who administered charities, did not improve the situation. There were, for example, rumours at least one woman had benefitted in the South African War by requesting assistance from two different charities for two different husbands.³⁷

Nevertheless, letters to local papers and reports of numerous meetings in the city indicate that Worcester, with its military traditions, had a strong awareness of the financial distress that men who went to war often caused those they left behind.

³¹'The Blitz Around Britain', *Imperial War Museum* <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-blitz-around-britain>> [Accessed 12 June 2022].

³²M. Wilks, *The Defence of Worcestershire and the Southern Approaches to Birmingham in World War II* (Wooton Almley: Logaston Press, 2007).

³³C. Mowbray, 'Secret War Plan Would Have Flattened Worcester', *Independent*, 3 June 2000 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/secret-war-plan-would-have-flattened-worcester-5370919.html>> [accessed 12 December 2022].

³⁴Frank Crompton, unrecorded oral history undertaken by author on 4 October 2012.

³⁵J. Lomas, 'War Widows in British society 1914–1990', (PhD diss., Staffordshire University, 1997).

³⁶See for example: J. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (New York: Springer, 2003); J. Winter, 'Blighty. British Society in the Era of the Great War', *The English Historical Review*, 114, 455 (1999), 238–39.

³⁷WDT, 11 August 1914.

Measures to alleviate distress were promptly put in place, including the fund set up by the Mayor of Worcester in August 1914 to help the wives and families of men who volunteered.³⁸ The MP for Bewdley, Stanley Baldwin, speaking at a meeting to launch a fund for the relief of dependents held in the Shirehall, Worcester, on 22 August 1914, admitted that ‘the war was going on probably for some time. There would be in many parts of the country and county a great deal of distress’.³⁹ Voluntary arrangements did not however assist all families, those euphemistically referred to as ‘unmarried wives’, for example, did not receive separation allowance or charity.

Any gap in income or delay in payments to dependents threatened the financial viability of households, particularly if the family already had rent arrears and had an antagonistic landlord. Local newspapers also noted that the council and local charities were compelled to step in to provide temporary relief in many cases.⁴⁰ The Dean of Worcester Cathedral brought to public attention the case the wife of a reservist living in one of the courts in the city who had been evicted. This mother of five children, the youngest of whom was a babe in arms, was behind with her rent but had apparently promised to pay the landlord the arrears she owed as soon as she received her separation allowance. Although this should have arrived, it was somehow delayed. When she returned home from a visit to the Guildhall, to try and ascertain what had gone wrong, a notice to quit possession of her tenement had been left for her.⁴¹ Newspapers suggested hers was by no means a solitary case, and some wives in financial penury were obliged to enter the workhouse.⁴²

Even when the allowance arrived, many women found it hard to make ends meet – especially if they already had debts. Women found war put an end to some of piecework they undertook to contribute to the household budget, such as glove making or sewing. The Worcester glove industry was already in decline in 1914 when the National War Savings Committee promoted the idea ‘to dress extravagantly in wartime was unpatriotic’.⁴³ Such sentiments discouraged women from spending money on ‘fripp-eries’ such as gloves and led to unemployment and poverty for many women and reduced outwork.⁴⁴ A letter to the editor of the *Worcester Daily Times* in October 1914 described the plight of a mother of ‘four boys and girls all at an age which signifies hearty appetites’.⁴⁵ She received a weekly separation allowance amounting to 22s (£1.10p and about half the average weekly wage) which after various expenses including rent allowed her approximately one penny per meal. Going on to point out that this was not an isolated case, the letter writer asked, ‘Is this a sample of the Faithful City’s much vaulted patriotism? What is going to be done about it?’⁴⁶ To this letter writer, the city’s military traditions should have ensured better financial support for soldiers’ families.

³⁸*Worcester Herald*, 8 August 1914.

³⁹*The Standard*, 22 August 1914.

⁴⁰*WDT*, 24 and 25 August 1914.

⁴¹*WDT*, 9 October 1914.

⁴²*WDT*, 15 January 1915.

⁴³Poster ‘To Dress Extravagantly in War Time’, *Imperial War Museum* <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/29736>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

⁴⁴For a more in-depth exploration of women and work during the conflict see G. Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain since 1840* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁴⁵*WDT*, 9 October 1915.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

Local charities and branches of national charities, such as SSFA, played a role in preserving the financial stability of family homes, even if such help was often accompanied by moral judgement and interference in the home by do-gooders.⁴⁷ New employment also began to emerge for women. The Earl of Coventry, from nearby Croome Court, keen to mitigate the crisis, had presided over a meeting at Worcester Guildhall in support of the Queen's Work for Women initiative which set up workshops for the unemployed.⁴⁸ Perhaps, the most significant changes happened at a national level as administrative structures to support dependents, wives and mothers developed. For example, the Ministry of Pensions was set up in 1916. Likewise, the Rent and Mortgage Interest Restriction Bill which gained Royal Assent in December 1915 sought to control rents and landlords' profiteering. Furthermore, the centralized, organized systems and regulatory frameworks established during this conflict provided some sort of an economic safety net for housewives, an alternative to charity or the workhouse. They also offered a model for payments to those in the armed forces during the Second World War.

Feeding and Caring

The problems for impoverished housewives were amplified by the increasing costs of food, which began in August 1914. Those who had precipitated this by panic buying and food hoarding, an option available only to wealthier women with larger houses and suitable storage facilities, were speedily ticked off by the local newspaper.⁴⁹ Food prices did continue to rise, but as Adrian Gregory has pointed out, in the first 2 years of the conflict, food shortages tended to be both local and short lived.⁵⁰ At a national and local level, housewives received a plethora of advice on food preparation and economy, which encouraged them to reduce their food consumption particularly of fats, meat and bread.⁵¹ Worcester newspapers were full of suggestions for economical and labour-intensive recipes which sat alongside reports of exhibitions, talks and demonstrations on the food economy. As national poster campaigns announced that the 'Key to Victory is in the Kitchen Cupboard', the domestic decisions that housewives made about what to feed their families took on a national significance.⁵² For Worcester housewives, the day-to-day struggle to feed their families became more intense as the war progressed. In 1916, submarine warfare against merchant shipping intensified, U-boats had destroyed approximately 30% of the world's merchant ships which disturbed the supply of imported food.⁵³ As the situation became more severe, there were reports of milk shortages in the city and food queues grew longer with descriptions of 600 people

⁴⁷S. Pedersen, 'Gender, Welfare, and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *The American Historical Review*, 95, 4 (1990), 983–1006.

⁴⁸*Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 7 October 1914.

⁴⁹*Worcester Herald*, 8 August 1914.

⁵⁰Gregory, *The Last Great War*, p. 196.

⁵¹*WDT*, 4 May 1917.

⁵²Poster: 'The Kitchen is the Key to Victory', *Imperial War Museum* <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/28676>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

⁵³P. Lyon, *Merchant Seafaring Through World War 1, 1914–1918*. (Kibworth: Book Guild Publishing, 2016); 'Unrestricted U-Boat Warfare', *The National WWI Museum and Memorial* <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/unrestricted-u-boat-warfare>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

patiently waiting in Worcester to buy half a pound of margarine.⁵⁴ The purchase of bread on which to spread the margarine was equally challenging.

In 1914, nearly 80% of the grain that Britain used to make bread, a staple food in the working-class diet, was imported from the United States.⁵⁵ At the outbreak of war, the *Worcester Daily Times* estimated there was a sufficient supply of wheat and flour to last the population of Britain a further 5 months.⁵⁶ In the months and years that followed, a number of different grains and ingredients were added to flour, which became steadily greyer in colour and less appetizing in taste; so much so that one of the delighted headlines which followed the 1918 armistice in the *Worcester Daily Times* announced 'White bread may soon become available again'.⁵⁷ Local newspapers indicate concern over the adulteration of bread and flour to keep prices down and one advertiser appealed to housewives to 'buy Lee's bread, because they make the best and purest only'.⁵⁸ Initially, Worcester residents were encouraged to restrict bread consumption and turn stale bread into another meal. Self-governance gave way to regulation and threat; there were fines for wasting bread, limits were put on the type and size of loaves sold by bakers and regulations brought in which prevented the city's bakers selling bread until it was at least 12-h old and could be cut thinly. Whilst no examples of these laws being enacted in Worcester have been found, local newspapers and Food Control Committees were quick to warn housewives about people in other parts of the country who had fallen foul of the authorities. Shortages continued to increase, and in May 1917 the 'King's Proclamation on the Food Supply' was read out in churches encouraging people to eat less food, particularly bread. A number of the local non-conformist clergy objected to the inclusion of this secular matter within a religious service. They felt, even though the war had entered the home, that it should not enter their churches.⁵⁹

The city's housewives sought to substitute potatoes and other root vegetables for wheat in their diets, laboriously learning to make potato scones, potato dumplings and potato pastry. However, by 1916 local papers articulated concerns that the price of potatoes had doubled as a result of disease and a poor harvest. There was anxiety about whether potatoes were being bought up by hotels or exported to allies. The better-off were asked to voluntarily restrain their consumption of potatoes 'so there may be a better supply for those for whom a sufficient supply of potatoes at a reasonable price is a very important part of their daily food'.⁶⁰ The potato crisis is an example of the impact of both individual and local factors in feeding families. Rural parts of the country fared rather better in the crisis. They, like Worcester residents with gardens, or one of the increasingly popular allotments, muddled through by growing their own.⁶¹ Alternatively, in 1916 Worcester benefited from the gift of 800 sacks of potatoes from Canada; each sack contained 80–90 pounds of potatoes. The Supply and Demands Subcommittee of the Worcester Relief Committee, with advice from local churches,

⁵⁴WAAS, ref. 899:1500 BA 14,526, Hagley Hall Scrapbook report of Worcester Jan 1918.

⁵⁵P. Dewey, *British Agriculture in the First World War* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁵⁶WDT, 9 August 1914.

⁵⁷WDT, 12 November 1918.

⁵⁸WDT, 16 October 1914.

⁵⁹I. Beckett, *Home Front 1914–18 How Britain Survived the Great War* (Richmond, Surrey: National Archives, 2006).

⁶⁰WDT, 3 November 1916.

⁶¹For more about rural food supplies see A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850–1925* (London: Routledge, 2021); A. Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003).

decided who was deemed deserving of a share of this precious commodity. The local newspaper reported ‘a continuous procession of women, armed with bags and baskets and tickets which entitled them to have these filled. Each one received 15lbs of potatoes and went away with a radiant face and well filled basket.’⁶² The distribution of the potatoes took place in the City Police Yard; an indication of the authorities’ anxiety to avoid, in Worcester, the potato riots which occurred in for example Maryport, Glasgow, Cumbria and Wrexham – where women fought over a cartload of potatoes.⁶³

Despite such gifts, food shortages increased and Worcester school log books in 1917 and 1918 record children’s frequent absences to assist their mother by taking her place in food queues. Finally, after trials of local rationing schemes in London and the Home Counties, in 1918, rationing was introduced in Britain. A weekly allowance of 15 ounces (425 g) of meat, 5 ounces (142 g) of bacon and 4 ounces (113 g) of butter or margarine was available for each person.⁶⁴ This seems to have ensured that between 1914 and 1918 an overall calorific intake was maintained for most people, despite bread not being included in the scheme.⁶⁵ Regulated food and even rationing only gives a partial history of food consumption. Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell’s research suggests there was a fall in consumption of unregulated products such as fruits and vegetables amongst the working-class by 1918. This may have led to deficiencies in essential vitamins and possible long-term health consequences – for example, rickets increased in wartime.⁶⁶ However, they also argue that local factors and ‘food distribution networks’ played a significant part in housewives’ access to food.⁶⁷ Worcester benefited from its proximity to highly productive agricultural and horticultural countryside. Access to produce was facilitated both by informal and family interaction with friends and relations in surrounding areas and also by the setting up in Worcester of a Women’s Institute market in 1917. This provided a space for surplus fresh produce from market gardens, smallholdings, allotments and hedgerows in the surrounding countryside to be sold to the city’s housewives.⁶⁸

Food rationing took nearly 4 years to enact in the First World War, and 4 months in the Second World War although it remained subject to constant adjustment according to the varying availability of particular food products during this conflict. The increased popularity of women’s magazines and the new medium of radio in most homes meant that advice to housewives was more often provided at a national level.⁶⁹ Economical, labour-intensive recipes abounded with Lord Woolton Potato Pie, an inviting mixture of potato, swede, cauliflower, spring onion and carrot flavoured with a little marmite, apparently first sampled by the Minister of Food on his a visit to the Worcester

⁶²WDT, 3 November 1916.

⁶³Maryport, Cumbria: Potato Riots’, World War One at Home, BBC <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02b0m0s>> [12 June 2022]; D. Beddoe, *Out of the Shadows: A History of Women in Twentieth Century Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 50.

⁶⁴Barnett, *British Food Policy during the First World War*.

⁶⁵I. Gazeley and A. Newell, ‘The First World War and Working-Class Food Consumption in Britain’, *European Review of Economic History*, 17, 1 (2013), 71–9.

⁶⁶Gazeley and Newell, ‘The First World War and working-class food consumption in Britain’.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸For more on Women’s Institute markets see M. Andrews, ‘The WI’s Rural Retailing and Markets 1915–1939: A First World War Legacy’, *History of Retailing and Consumption*, 1, 2 (2015), 89–104.

⁶⁹See M. Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London: A&C Black, 2012); S. Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

Grammar School.⁷⁰ The city did not experience the same level of food shortages and food queues as in the First World War although Doris Rickhuss recalled how collecting her rations:

from the city centre required a lot of patience and queuing. We had to queue regularly for over an hour to pick up our rations of meat and fish . . . we ate mainly spam, sausages (though who wanted to guess what was in them) and scrag ends at home. What I hated most was only having 2 oz of cheese a week.⁷¹

Once again individual and local circumstances, and family and friendship networks, had a significant impact on the challenges of provisioning for households. Family contacts and the proximity of Worcester to the productive countryside helped Doris Rickhuss and other Worcester housewives to feed their families. She remembered how ‘every weekend the family would take a country bus out to my Aunt’s farm near Ledbury in Herefordshire and would usually come back with some extras, including bacon, eggs and vegetables’.⁷²

National Kitchens were introduced briefly to alleviate food poverty in some places towards the end of the First World War, but the idea was more widespread and regulated in the 1939–1945 conflict.⁷³ A Civic Restaurant was opened in Worcester Guildhall, which Angie Rickhuss referred to as ‘the town hall’ and became a ‘popular and busy place’. She recalled:

There wasn’t a menu as such but a set meal and no pudding for 1/6 or 1/9d depending on what it was. There was cottage pie, mince, steak and kidney pie, faggots and mushy peas, sausage and mash or toad in the hole with lots of vegetables like cabbage, carrots, cauliflower and peas (often dried). Sometimes there was stew though not very often. You could also get a cup of tea. They were open all week and were also open for an evening meal on Saturdays.⁷⁴

The setting up of such establishments moved a domestic task, feeding the family, from the private space of the home into the public sphere, and emphasized how porous the boundaries between public and private were.

In women’s attempt to care for and feed their husbands, sons, brothers and sweethearts in the armed forces, boundaries between public and private also became blurred when food was sent to those serving in uniform. It was made or purchased to help men survive given ‘the miserable pittance’ they often had left after money towards their wives’ separation allowance was deducted from their pay’.⁷⁵ As Joanna Bourke has argued, ‘men’s identities remained lodged within their civilian environment’; home and fighting fronts were intimately linked.⁷⁶ Food parcels included the ubiquitous ‘trench

⁷⁰Carpenter, *Wartime Worcestershire*.

⁷¹Doris Rickhuss oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People’s War*, article ID A3311056 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/56/a3311056.shtml>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³B. Evans, ‘The National Kitchen in Britain, 1917–1919’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 10, 2 (2017), 115–29.

⁷⁴Angie Irvine oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People’s War*. ID A 3,310,723. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/23/a3310723.shtml>> [Accessed 12 June 2022].

⁷⁵WDT, 9 October 1915.

⁷⁶J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 170.

cake', Christmas puddings, jams, biscuits and other items which did not travel so well.⁷⁷ Soldiers serving in the Worcestershires reported parcels arriving with strawberries turned into a sludgy mess or that rats had nibbled at loaves of bread. Despite the pressures they placed on housewives' budgets, however impractical some of the contents, the provision of food was also symbolic, like letters it ensured men in the forces felt cared for, included and mothered.⁷⁸

Women wrote letters, sometimes daily, to their sons, husbands, brothers and sweethearts in the forces and received letters in reply. In 1916, for example, five million letters were sent each week from the British Expeditionary Force in France and Belgium to Britain. Studdert Kennedy, the Church of England vicar from Worcester who ministered to soldiers at the front, explained the significance of letters to a lad at the front who 'comes back to rest, drenched to the skin and shivering with cold and his first thought is always, so they tell me, letters from home'.⁷⁹ The post assured soldiers that they were not forgotten; it symbolized the caring and love of the homes they were fighting to protect. Just as importantly, it helped them source a range of items including socks, underwear, tobacco, cigarettes and writing materials not readily available.

William Brown from Lowesmoor, Worcester, joined up in February 1915 and wrote regularly to his mother, desperate to hear news of his seven siblings or his friends and to convey directions for the care of his pigeons. On 13 January 1916, he told her not 'to let the pigeons sit their first lots of eggs so you must take them away from them'.⁸⁰ Whilst the following month he requested that she sends him a handkerchief. The 17-year-old, who was stationed in Malta at the time, implored 'I want you to try and send me a handkerchief as we can't go out when we like, and I want a handkerchief bad'.⁸¹ He was of course sent a handkerchief, continuing to receive maternal care even when he was a distance from home, something which Michael Roper's work suggests was important for young lads until their very last breath.⁸² Wives, mothers, sisters and sweethearts were also expected to care for loved ones at a distance during the Second World War. Letters, parcels of luxuries and photos of family were sent to those in the forces, this was supplemented by occasional contact via phone or 'radio re-unions' as they were called – request shows whereby those in the forces or at home were contacted by messages read out by radio-show hosts.⁸³

Extending the Domestic Caring Role Beyond the Family

One of the ways in which the Second World War was fundamentally different for thousands of Worcester housewives was that they were legally compelled to care for strangers in their homes, further blurring the boundaries between the public and private spheres. It was a seemingly small step for women to move from caring for

⁷⁷Trench Cake was made from small amounts flour, margarine, currants, cocoa, baking soda, brown sugar, vinegar and milk all fairly cheaply available and had a long shelf life.

⁷⁸R. Duffet, *The Stomach for Fighting Food and the Soldiers of The Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

⁷⁹WAAS, ref. 705;948 BA 8763, Extracts from Dispatches, 3rd despatch printed 26 February 1916.

⁸⁰Letters and images in the private collection of Sean Brown by whose kind permission they are reproduced here.

⁸¹Letters and images in the private collection of Sean Brown by whose kind permission they are reproduced here.

⁸²M. Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

⁸³See Chapter 4, Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves*.

members of their own family at a distance in the First World War to extend their duty of care well beyond their family.⁸⁴ They did this both informally and through one or more of the eighteen thousand charities set-up in Britain during the conflict. Local papers in August 1914 carried descriptions of women learning first aid or making comforts and clothing for soldiers, whether or not they had the appropriate skills to do so. Such efforts were slowly co-ordinated and organized to avoid repetition and waste. Thus, on 11 December 1914, the Mayoress of Worcester arranged a ‘Comfort Day for the Soldiers’, with the intent of providing three thousand pairs of mittens and mufflers for the Worcestershire Regiment; women were encouraged to donate money for the purchase of mittens, presumably in the hope of both providing work for unemployed glove makers and to avoid some of the misshaped and useless items donated in the early days of the conflict.⁸⁵ The local newspapers were full of reports of pageants, concerts, fetes and whist drives to raise funds. Likewise, Vera Jauncey recalled how during her childhood, spent in Worcester during the Second World War, her mother organized a number of small girls into a concert party who performed in their front room to raise funds for the Red Cross and similar charities.⁸⁶

Academic interpretation of women’s wartime charitable work varies. Some, such as the Christmas party for children orphaned by the war and another for the wives and families of troops stationed at the Norton barracks organized by the Lady Mayoress of Worcester in 1916, can be seen as a continuation of the social motherhood performed by women of the wealthier classes in the Victorian and Edwardian era.⁸⁷ As such, Arthur Marwick was rather dismissive of its place in modern warfare.⁸⁸ Motivations may however be more complex. Charitable work offered a distraction from grief and loneliness, a chance to fulfil a patriotic duty or feel useful, socialize or even to feel more connected to loved ones in the armed forces. Volunteering for charities, for example selling flags for Red Cross weeks or fundraising for prisoners of war, was not restricted to the wealthier classes, particularly in the Second World War, when thousands of women joined the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS).⁸⁹ Set up in 1938, at the instigation of the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, the WVS sought to encourage ‘homely women’ to undertake civil defence activities to support the ‘war effort’.⁹⁰

⁸⁴See for example M. Andrews, ‘Worcestershire’s Women: Local Studies and the Gender Politics of the First World War and its Legacy’, *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*, 104, 363 (2020), 851–70; S. R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (London: UNC Press Books, 2014); S. R. Grayzel and T. M. Proctor, *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); S. Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁸⁵WDT, 11 December 1914.

⁸⁶Vera Jauncey oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People’s War*, article ID A1995924 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/24/a1995924.shtml>> [accessed 12 June 2022].

⁸⁷E. J. Yeo, ‘Social Motherhood and the Sexual Communion of Labour in British Social Science, 1850–1950’, *Women’s History Review*, 1, 1 (1992), 63–87.

⁸⁸A. Marwick, *The Deluge: British society and the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

⁸⁹S. Fowler, ‘War Charity Begins at Home’, *History Today*, 49, 9 (1999), 17–23; P. Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War: Mobilizing Charity* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁹⁰Matthew McMurray, *The Formation and Founding of the Women’s Voluntary Services for ARP* (Royal Voluntary Service, 2008) <https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/media/e40b2mzx/origins_of_wvs_2021.pdf>; *The Evening News*, July 25 1940.

A WVS office opened in Worcester in October 1938, at the request of the Chief Constable and the Air Raid Precautions Committee. In January 1939, a meeting was attended by over a thousand women in Worcester to recruit volunteers for the service.⁹¹ The women's activities were diverse. They knitted and collected comforts for soldiers, provided canteens for those in the services and in transit, ran first aid posts, collected hospital supplies, organized make-do-and-mend campaigns, collected scrap salvage, eggs for hospitals and clothes for air raid victims.⁹² By 1943, the Guildhall was apparently 'overflowing with aluminium scrap' salvaged by housewives who had also collected 28 tons of bones to be turned into highly explosive glycerine.⁹³ For some, this may have been an extension of 'a newly calibrated ideal of service that emphasized the mutuality of self-fulfilment and community development' that Eve Colpus identifies in the inter-war period.⁹⁴ However, mass observational diaries from other parts of the country indicate that a number of housewives found the pressure to engage in all these small-scale campaigns both depressing and futile.⁹⁵

WVS members were encouraged to offer occasional hospitality to service personnel, stationed nearby at military bases.⁹⁶ In the First World War, adverts seeking Worcester housewives 'desirous of having officers or men of the territorial forces billeted in their homes' had repeatedly appeared in local newspapers and one woman praised the conduct of the men billeted with her.⁹⁷ For some housewives billeting provided much needed extra cash, others were less willing to welcome a stranger into their homes, but at least they had a choice. In the Second World War compulsory billeting of military personnel, war workers and evacuees became one of the most insidious examples of what Geoffrey Field has referred to as 'state intervention in family life'.⁹⁸ Servicemen stationed at Royal Air Force Worcester in the Perdiswell district, such as the aircrew cadet John Taylor, were accommodated by families in houses near the base.⁹⁹ Housewives also undertook extensive domestic labour feeding and caring for workers conscripted from other parts of the country to work in local factories. Doris Monk recalled that her mother had two war workers from Nottingham billeted on her. 'They were only 20 and had never been away from home before. My mum had plenty on her plate with five of us, but I had to share my bed with one of the girls and the other had the box room'.¹⁰⁰ For many housewives, billeted workers were preferable to caring for the many evacuees who poured into Worcester during the conflict.

Evacuation is often associated with the countryside, but many children were sent to towns and cities. In 1938, the government drew up plans to evacuate children, mothers

⁹¹WVS Narrative Reports, Worcester 1939, *Royal Voluntary Service* <WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1939-CB/WCT> [accessed 1 November 2022].

⁹²WVS Narrative Reports, Worcester 1940, *Royal Voluntary Service* <WRVSA&HC/WRVS/HQ/NR/R9/1940-CB/WCT> [accessed 1 November 2022].

⁹³Carpenter, *Worcestershire' War*, p. 45.

⁹⁴E. Colpus, 'Women, Service and Self-Actualization in Inter-War Britain', *Past and Present*, 238, 1 (2018), 197–232, 199.

⁹⁵J. Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers: Six Women's Lives in the Second World War* (London: Hachette UK, 2010).

⁹⁶Mrs Creswick-Atkinson, *The Story of the WVS Housewives' Service* (a transcript first published by Royal Voluntary Service in 2013) <https://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/media/yylpd4e2/housewives_service_2021.pdf> [accessed 12 December 2022].

⁹⁷WDT, 11 August 1914 and 2 October 1914.

⁹⁸G. Field, 'Perspectives on the Working-Class Family in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 38 (1990), 3–28, 5.

⁹⁹R. J. Brooks, *Herefordshire and Worcestershire Airfields* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2006).

¹⁰⁰Mrs Doris Monk, oral history recorded in Worcester for BBC *WW2 People's War*.

of under-fives, the sick and vulnerable to places of safety. The country was divided into areas considered at risk from bombing or an invasion, those thought to be neutral and those like Worcester deemed to be safe and designated as reception areas for evacuees. On 1 September 1939, the city anticipated the arrival of eight hundred children on three trains, at 10.51, 11.49 and 1.13. A further two thousand mothers and children under five were expected to arrive the following day.¹⁰¹ The WVS, which spent much of the conflict plugging gaps in the government evacuation scheme, was called upon to assist with preparations by the local education authority. Worcester's Guildhall saw relays of working parties of WVS members make nine hundred paillasse covers to be filled with straw to provide extra mattresses for evacuees.¹⁰² They also undertook an appeal from the public for blankets, as those promised by central government had not materialized. Their caring skills stood at the ready to assist evacuees coming off the trains by giving them refreshments, tea, temporary accommodation in halls and guiding or transporting them to their new billets or foster homes.¹⁰³

The immense challenge of such tasks was exacerbated by the chaos of the early days of evacuation, when the number participating in the government scheme turned out to be much lower than expected and civil servants set about rearranging carefully planned timetables with limited communication with host areas such as Worcester. The city did not receive the numbers, and groups of children expected but a positive spin was placed on everything by the *Worcester Evening News and Times* which interviewed Birmingham mothers. Under the headline 'More Children Welcomed to Worcester: Everyone has been so Kind', it was explained that:

there were tears of course, as one mother thought of her husband in the services, her other small children evacuated to other places, her home for the moment shut and empty ... There were smiles too, far more of those than frowns, for the Birmingham woman like her menfolk is gay and of perky humour. 'It will do my old man good to have to get the dinner for himself said one.'¹⁰⁴

Such good humour did not last as women faced the practical, financial and emotional difficulties of an unfamiliar environment, cramped and uncomfortable billets, and resentful local women who did not appreciate being forced to share their homes with strangers.

The original plans for the government evacuation scheme had mooted the idea of women volunteering to host the visitors or to become foster mothers, but this was abandoned. Those who refused to look after evacuees were taken to court and fined. As early as 1939, the full force of the law was used against a couple in the North Claines area of the city. It seems that the authorities were keen to make 'an example of someone in order that a similar attitude might not be adopted in future'.¹⁰⁵ Local newspapers reported that the couple had to issue an apology to the billeting officer and the parish and to admit that their action in refusing to care for evacuees 'was entirely unwarranted and that there could be no excuse for it'.¹⁰⁶ The evacuation was soon described by the

¹⁰¹ *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 2 September 1939.

¹⁰² WVS Narrative Reports, Worcester 1939.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, 2 September 1939.

¹⁰⁵ *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 9 September 1939.

¹⁰⁶ *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 9 September 1939.

Fabian social scientist, Margaret Cole, as akin to ‘nationalising of hundreds of thousands of women’ for she pointed out that women no longer had the right to say who would live in their houses.¹⁰⁷ Resentment surfaced in criticism of the cleanliness and behaviour of some evacuee children from industrial areas such as the Black Country who were billeted in the city.¹⁰⁸

The tensions created by the enforced domestic intimacy of the evacuation scheme were exacerbated by the absence of bombing in the period known as the ‘phoney war’, and by Christmas 1939 very many evacuees – particularly mothers with under fives – had returned home. Housewives who continued to look after evacuees for what was an indeterminate period of time faced a tough challenge. They cooked, cleaned and cared for children who were often traumatized by their experiences, unused to the food, local dialect or ways of doing things that were normal to their hosts. The foster mothers also came in for guidance, criticism and surveillance from the children’s birth parents, teachers, billeting officers, social workers and psychologists. Little wonder that so many tried to find ways to avoid taking in evacuees as the war progressed.

Invasion fears and increasing bombing, however, led to a new wave of evacuations in 1940, when the Blitz began and as ‘the people’s unorganised evacuation’ occurred as mothers, with their children in tow, fled from cities being bombed to anywhere the trains could take them.¹⁰⁹ Between 9 and 28 November 1940, approximately eight hundred people were killed and 2,345 injured in Birmingham.¹¹⁰ Civilians, twenty thousand of whom had been rendered homeless, sought refuge in neighbouring towns, including Worcester, which was on a direct train line from Birmingham. By mid-November 1940, the mayor announced that ‘the city had practically reached the limit’ of evacuees that it could accommodate. Food supplies were running short, with eggs a particular problem. Water and sewage were issues.¹¹¹ Schools were full to the brim, class sizes had gone up from the 40s to the 50s. Whilst he sought suggestions of ways to limit any more people coming into the city, and there were reports of the unofficial evacuees living in conditions which were below minimum hygiene standards, a number of communal facilities were developed.¹¹²

A meal service was provided at the St Paul’s Centre, where mothers and children were received and fed at a cost of 3d per meal for children and 4d per meal for adults. Saturday clubs were set up for evacuees in the city. The WVS helped to supply evacuees with clothes, Christmas presents and a party, and also organized a centre where mothers could meet and make and mend garments. When the immediate danger dissipated, mothers returned to their homes, mostly in Birmingham, but many unaccompanied children remained in the city – some for several years. They were joined by another wave of evacuees in summer 1944 when V1 and V2 flying bombs, doodlebugs as they were known, began to land on London and the bomb alley of Sussex and Kent necessitated further evacuation. On 11 July 1944, a trainload of eight hundred mothers and children arrived in the

¹⁰⁷R. Padley and M. Cole, eds., *Evacuation Survey: A Report to the Fabian Society* (London: Routledge, 1940), p.3.

¹⁰⁸*Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 23 September 1939.

¹⁰⁹For further discussion see: Andrews, *Women and Evacuation in the Second World War*, pp. 24–30.

¹¹⁰J. Ray, *Night Blitz 1940–41* (eBook Partnership, 2012).

¹¹¹Many houses and halls in which evacuees were billeted had inadequate or no internal water or drainage, overcrowding created horrendous hygiene issues, and overflowing sewage.

¹¹²*Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 16 November 1940.

city, and were initially accommodated in eight WVS rest centres.¹¹³ Once again informal evacuation took place, and some women opened their homes to evacuees via networks of family and friends, but at least on this occasion their stay was for a few weeks not months or years.

Conclusion

Homes came under threat from enemy fire in both the First and Second World War, protecting and preserving the domestic space became both an individual and a national endeavour. For the majority of women in Britain, who were housewives during these two total, mechanized wars, feeding and caring for families was a struggle. A struggle coloured by the precise cultural and geographical specificity of the locations in which they lived. By turning the spotlight on Worcester in the First and Second World wars, it has been possible to see examples of how, from blackout curtains to rationing, billeting and regulations on wasting bread, war entered the domestic space and exercised governance. During both conflicts, the divisions between public and private became blurred, and women's war effort expanded to involve caring both for their men at a distance and for others. The Second World War evacuation scheme combined assumptions about women's caring role with an unparcelled level of interference in the home. The areas that have been examined here, however, only touch the surface of the experiences and complex inter-relationships which surrounded homes and housewives in wartime. Hopefully others will undertake further local studies and expand these areas of research.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

Maggie Andrews is an emeritus professor of Cultural History at the University of Worcester, whose recent research and publications focus on women, war and domesticity in twentieth-century Britain. These include *Women and Evacuation in the Second World War: Femininity, Domesticity and Motherhood* (2019) and *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute Movement 1915–1960* (2015).

¹¹³R. and P. Malcolmson, *Women at the Ready: The Remarkable Story of the Women's Voluntary Services on the Home Front* (London: Hachette UK, 2013).