



90,000 volunteers
One remarkable legacy

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE BRITISH RED CROSS DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Mobilisation

Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) comprised both male and female volunteers from 1909 until after World War II. However, the majority of detachments during the First World War were made up of women because many men joined the armed forces. Female VADs undertook a variety of work during the war, organising and supplying aid to naval, military and auxiliary hospitals alongside "general service" duties throughout the UK and overseas.

In 1914, 40,018 women were members of Red Cross detachments compared to 17,696 men. The Red Cross worked with The Order of St John during the war, which had a membership of 6,773 women and 5,865 men. Territorial force association membership was 2,415 women and 1,149 men.

Women in the medical profession

As men joined the armed forces and the number of injured patients rose, a call was made for women to join the medical profession. VADs worked under the auspices of the Joint Committee, and carried out duties that were less technical, but no less important, than trained nurses. They organised and managed local auxiliary hospitals throughout Britain, caring for the large number of sick and wounded soldiers. Women were also given training as physicians and dentists and many others worked in the convalescent homes that were set up to look after injured soldiers. There were also courses to train nurses to fill specific jobs left available by men.

Medical degrees were opened up to women so that they could gain the knowledge and training needed to work in the medical profession.

Women were also deployed abroad to help look after injured soldiers.

Hospitals

One of the many important services provided by the Red Cross provided during the war was auxiliary hospitals and convalescent homes for wounded servicemen. The Red Cross had made preparations during peacetime, finding some suitable properties that could be used as hospitals if war broke out. Women were predominantly in charge of the auxiliary hospitals, which were managed by female commandants, matrons, sisters and VAD nurses.

Some hospitals were set up abroad, including the Scottish Women's Hospital. Opening in Serbia in 1915, the hospital was managed by women. It cared for injured soldiers and provided aid to soldiers passing near the Front. From a diary written by Ishobel Ross it is clear that the hospital was entirely neutral, helping to ease the suffering of soldiers on all sides. Ishobel, who had been a member of the Red Cross, describes her work in the kitchens and the events at the hospital in her diary, which covers several years.

Women in the workforce

As men were fighting on the western Front, it fell to women to earn money for their families. They performed many jobs that had been previously considered “unladylike” and unsuitable for women, such as poultry farming and stock breeding. The most prevalent occupation for women during the war was working as a VAD.

The war saw women entering the workforce in all sorts of different roles, ranging from medics and farmers to teachers and bus conductors. As more men left to join the fighting, women were called upon to contribute to the war effort. The board of trade labour exchanges developed the register of women for war service, which allowed any woman to work.

Many women were given the opportunity to work in paid positions throughout the war, acting as dispensers, clerks, storekeepers, and cooks, in the hope that thousands of men could be released for active service. Under the ‘general service’ scheme in September 1915, women could apply for civic positions as well as any other jobs that might be suitable such as masseuses, motor-car drivers or vegetable maids.

Some examples of paid positions include:

- > Dispensers (who must be qualified), £1 10s a week
- > Head clerks, £1 15s
- > Clerks, £1 6s – not required to know shorthand or typewriting
- > Head cooks, £1 15s (and three meals a day)
- > Cooks, £1 (and three meals a day).

These positions did not include food (except for cooks) or accommodation.

The Women's Liberal Association/ Women's Liberal Federation

The Women's Liberal Association assisted the Red Cross in making items such as socks and blankets for the wounded. They helped to set up recreation rooms and other schemes to improve soldiers' general welfare. They also helped raise money for an ambulance that was sent out to the Front as a Christmas gift.

Perceptions and class divides

In The Red Cross magazine in December 1921, Mrs Marval states in her article, ‘What is Women's Sphere?’:

“I think it is a pity that women do not stick to the employment best suited to their constitutions: that is – domestic work, nursing, and the welfare of children...the proper preparation of food is of such vital importance to the health of the community at large, that it should not be classed as menial work; but rather as a profession which can be adopted by educated and intelligent women without loss of dignity or social standing. There is little difference between scouring saucepans and cleaning the dirt off motor-cars. Yet most of the women drivers during the war were drawn from a very superior class which would scorn to be cooks – let alone kitchen maids.”

Reflecting on women working during the war, a Lance Corporal is quoted in the “summary of work”, 22 January 1916, page 6: “I watched the ladies working on the wharf to provide us with comforts, and the thought struck me how many an Englishwoman is doing her bit, unpaid and ungrudgingly...all I can say is I am proud of my countrywomen, and I am sure so are all the boys.’ Lce-Cpl 2/10 Middx.Regt. ‘A Ward, Fort Ricasoli Hospital, 7/12/15.

Famous names and high-profile volunteers

Many famous women volunteered for service with the Red Cross.

- > Agatha Christie – During the First World War she served as a VAD nurse at a hospital in Torquay. She liked the role, calling it “one of the most rewarding professions that anyone can follow”. She went on to work in the dispensary where she enjoyed the work and completed the examination of the Society of Apothecaries.
- > Vera Brittain – Most famous for writing *Chronicle of youth: War diary 1913–1917* and *Testament of youth: an autobiographical study of the years 1900–1925*. She became a VAD in 1915 and was posted to the First London General Hospital at Camberwell. In 1917 she was posted to France.
- > Freya Stark – Travel writer. VAD nurse with the Trevelyan ambulance unit in a hospital housed in George Trevelyan’s villa in Italy. He was the commander of the Italian unit.
- > Getrude Bell – Travel writer. During the war she briefly administered the work of the Red Cross wounded and missing bureau in France and later in London. She then took up work in military intelligence.
- > Enid Bagnold – Author of *National Velvet* and *The Chalk Garden*, who served in London as a VAD during the war.
- > Clara Butt – Superstar singer of the Victorian era, Dame Clara Butt lived in Bristol and was a legend in her lifetime, performing to packed concert halls all over the world. She was made a Dame for raising thousands of pounds for the Red Cross during the First World War. Between 1914 and 1918 she was a tireless worker for war charities and helped to raise over

Women's involvement with the British Red Cross during the First World War

redcross.org.uk/WW1

£100,000, an enormous sum of money at the time. In May 1916 she arranged a whole week of performances of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* at the Queen's Hall, London, in aid of the Red Cross, repeating the occasion in Glasgow later that year.

- > Joyce Dennys – Author of *Henrietta's War*, she was an illustrator, painter, author and playwright. We have artwork by Dennys in our collection, including her familiar VAD recruitment poster. She was a VAD nurse during the war and served at Budleigh Salterton auxiliary hospital, No. 2 military hospital Exeter and Devonshire House, London.
 - > Margaret Huxley – Worked for the Red Cross during the war as matron of Dublin University Voluntary Aid Detachment hospital. Afterwards she became more involved in the professional side of nursing. She was a founder member of the British Nurses' Association (later the Royal British Nurses' Association) in 1887, of the Matrons' Council in 1894, and of the International Council of Nurses in 1899. In Ireland she was the key force behind the founding of the Irish Matrons' Association in 1903 and the Irish Nurses' Association in 1904.
 - > Angela Limerick – Angela Limerick became a Red Cross VAD in 1915 and following her training she worked in a Red Cross auxiliary hospital in London. From there she went on to work at Princess Christian's Military Hospital in Englefield Green before being posted to France in 1917. Following the war Angela worked at the Red Cross London branch where she became president in 1935. She later held many high-ranking positions within the Red Cross including deputy chairman of the British Red Cross executive committee, vice chairman of the league of Red Cross societies and she was the first non-Royal vice-president
 - > Georgina Ward, Countess of Dudley – Established a department for the assistance of convalescent officers and provided funds for their care. She had been involved in the Red Cross since the Boer War and received the award of the Royal Red Cross. Joint war committee reports p232 thepeerage.com/p281.htm#i2810
 - > Ishobel Ross –Volunteered with the Red Cross, and then for the Scottish Women's Hospitals in 1916. She served in Serbia during the war and kept an extensive diary detailing what went on and the various duties that she performed there.
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Cover photo

St Pauls, Newport. 3 V.A.D. Nurses December 1915. © British Red Cross.