



## Barbara Davies

Barbara Davies remembers how eager her generation was to 'do their bit' for the war effort.

Although keen to become a nurse, as the eldest daughter of a widow, Barbara was expected to supplement the family income and could not support herself for the unpaid 10 - 12 weeks probationary training period for a trainee nurse.

When Barbara heard that an aircraft factory in Coventry was recruiting for staff she applied immediately. The wages were £5 a week, far more than she could earn in her hometown. She planned to work and save for a year so she could support herself as a trainee nurse. Barbara was unaware that her factory contract would keep her there until the end of the war.

As she was just 19, Barbara needed her mother's written permission. In late January 1942, she travelled by train from Sowerby Bridge to Coventry.

The Calderdale area had not suffered from any air raids. We had heard on the radio about the devastation of bomber raids on our cities but nothing prepared me for the shock of Coventry. The station was a pile of rubble with tarpaulins making temporary platforms.

A van was waiting to collect Barbara and other new recruits. After a long journey she and another girl were taken to stay with a family and the next morning they caught the bus at 7.00 am to the Armstrong Whitworths aircraft factory.

... I had never seen anything like it. The place was vast. The work sheds seemed to stretch for miles. Huge aircraft were parked on the hangar apron front ready to be flown away ... we were issued with green overalls and allocated to a work gang. We were called 'dilutees' ... The jobs we were given were menial. I had piles of screws to shorten.

I continued to serve in the St John's Ambulance Service. Here in Coventry I joined the Hospital Saturday Fund Division. The Ambulance Service was manned by volunteers each weekend - both day and night, with only one permanent member of staff.



Barbara Davies in St John's Ambulance Service Uniform.



Fire Appliance and de-contamination unit stationed at Green Lane, Coventry. Barbara is second from right.



Coventry city centre was a mass of huge craters and piles of rubble. Barbara felt very lonely and longed to go home. Her lodgings were clean but her work-mate, Jane, was living in a hovel and was being given so little food that she was becoming ill. Barbara and Jane found alternative accommodation for a while and were eventually given rooms in a workers' hostel. Barbara finally felt independent and the girls lived happily there.



'My friend Jane and myself dressed for a special dance at the hostel.'



Barbara Davies and her friend Jane.

The dilutees initially worked on the production of the old Whitley bomber. Later they assembled Lancasters, and many more girls were recruited. They usually worked in pairs, one man - one girl, but used the gang system. Jobs were priced, and when completed the money was shared amongst the gang. However, the girls took home half of what the men were paid.

Armstrong Whitworths was a closed shop - union membership was mandatory. When the war was coming to a close work began to slow down and after VJ Day, the dilutees who had worked so hard for long hours and little pay, were told they were no longer required.

Within a few weeks all the girls were made redundant. Had we been demobbed from the armed forces we would have been offered retraining or further education but for the dilutees there was nothing at all. The AEU were not helpful. They said their main priority was to give help to the men returning from the war... It was impossible for us to return to the days before 1942. We were not the same people. Our experiences had changed us forever. Our aspirations were higher.



'This was taken outside Block A. I am on the left and Jane is second from right. We made the garden, the plants were given to us by our workmates.'